



CHAPTER - 8

BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY: GENDER STIGMA ONLINE, LGBTQ+ MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE DUAL ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

The digital age has fundamentally altered human interaction, with social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp becoming central to everyday communication, community formation, and identity expression. For LGBTQ+ individuals—those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or otherwise gender and sexually diverse—these platforms offer both empowerment and vulnerability in equal measure. While social media can foster connection, identity exploration, and access to affirming communities, it also exposes users to stigma, discrimination, harassment, and serious mental health risks. Understanding this duality is among the most pressing challenges at the intersection of digital sociology, public health, and psychology in the contemporary era.

Gender stigma online refers to the negative attitudes, discrimination, and harassment directed at individuals based on their gender identity or expression. For LGBTQ+ individuals, such stigma often intersects with other

forms of marginalization—race, caste, class, religion, disability, and geography—exacerbating mental health challenges. Research consistently documents that LGBTQ+ individuals experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation compared to heterosexual and cisgender populations, and that online environments amplify rather than resolve these disparities.

This paper addresses a gap in the existing literature by integrating four complementary bodies of scholarship: global interdisciplinary analysis of online gender stigma and LGBTQ+ mental health; India-specific analysis of how cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts shape LGBTQ+ digital experience; emerging literature on the particular vulnerabilities of women in red-light areas as a high-risk group in digital environments; and critical scholarship on children's accidental exposure to adult and sexually explicit content on mainstream social media platforms, including through the unguarded use of adult mobile devices. The paper is organized across eleven sections and concludes with comprehensive recommendations

Theoretical Frameworks

Minority Stress Theory

Meyer's (2003) minority stress model provides the dominant theoretical framework for understanding LGBTQ+ mental health disparities. The model posits that stigma-related stressors—including enacted discrimination, the expectation of rejection, the concealment of identity, and internalized self-stigma—generate chronic psychological stress that accumulates over time, producing elevated rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality. Bybee (2022) extended this framework to online environments, introducing the concept of online minority stress to capture unique digital stressors including hypervisibility of LGBTQ+ identities, the permanence and spreadability of digital harassment, and the ambiguity of coded anti-LGBTQ+ language. In the Indian context, Meyer's model must be further adapted to account for culturally specific stressors including marriage pressure, the *izzat* (family honour) system, and caste-based discrimination.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory highlights the fundamental importance of group membership to individual self-concept and psychological wellbeing. For LGBTQ+ individuals who may lack access to in-person community, online social groups provide critical identity-affirming functions. However, identity expression in digital spaces also exposes individuals to coordinated harassment that targets group membership, generating what researchers term identity threat and associated psychological

harm.

Stigma and Shame in Communal Contexts

Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma as a 'spoiled identity' takes on particular dimensions in communal societies. Contemporary stigma scholars distinguish between enacted stigma (actual discrimination), felt stigma (anticipation of discrimination), and internalized stigma (incorporation of stigmatizing attitudes into self-concept). Each dimension operates distinctively in online environments: enacted stigma manifests as direct harassment and platform suppression; felt stigma generates hypervigilance and self-censorship; and internalized stigma develops through repeated exposure to dehumanizing representations.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality is central to this analysis. Experiences of online gender stigma are not uniform across LGBTQ+ populations but are profoundly shaped by the intersecting social positions individuals occupy. A Black transgender woman, a Dalit queer person in rural India, a Muslim LGBTQ+ teenager, and a white cisgender gay man in an urban Western setting occupy radically different positions in online stigma ecologies. Research by Balsam et al. (2011), Ghabrial (2017), and Velez et al. (2019) demonstrates that the psychological costs of multiply marginalized identities are frequently multiplicative rather than additive.

Digital Sociology and Platform Affordances

The concept of affordances—first developed by Gibson (1979) and applied to digital media by Hutchby (2001)—refers to the action possibilities that technologies make available to users. Key affordances relevant to LGBTQ+ online experience include persistence, searchability, replicability, anonymity, scalability, and context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Each carries dual potential: the same anonymity that enables cruelty can protect a teenager not yet out to their family; the same persistence that makes harassment campaigns devastating also makes affirming communities durable. These platform-level dynamics constitute the structural context within which individual experiences of stigma and support unfold.

Manifestations of Online Gender Stigma

Direct Harassment and Hate Speech

The most extensively documented form of online gender stigma involves direct, targeted harassment. Duggan's (2017) nationally representative survey found that 66% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported online harassment compared with 33% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents, with severity markedly

greater for transgender individuals. Harassment encompasses explicit slurs and threats as well as misgendering, doxxing, deadnaming, and delegitimizing rhetoric. In India, platforms including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, ShareChat, and WhatsApp are frequently sites of anti-LGBTQ+ content. Episodes of online moral policing are often tied to Hindu nationalist discourse that frames LGBTQ+ identities as threats to Indian culture, creating a particularly hostile environment.

Algorithmic and Structural Stigma

Online stigma is not merely interpersonal but also structural. Algorithms that optimize for engagement may amplify anti-LGBTQ+ content through radicalization pathways. DeVito et al. (2018) and subsequent platform audits have documented that LGBTQ+ content is disproportionately removed under vague community standards provisions, search algorithms return lower results for LGBTQ+ health queries, and advertising revenue is withheld from creators discussing queer topics. GLAAD's annual Social Media Safety Index consistently rates major platforms as providing inadequate protection for LGBTQ+ users. When a transgender teenager's affirmative self-presentation is algorithmically suppressed while anti-transgender rhetoric circulates freely, the platform's architecture functions as a mechanism of stigma production independent of individual intent.

Microaggressions and Ambient Hostility

Between direct harassment and structural exclusion lies a terrain of online microaggressions—brief, everyday exchanges that communicate denigrating messages without explicit slurs. Williams' (2020) research found that the volume of microaggressive encounters—rather than any single episode's severity—is the strongest predictor of psychological distress in LGBTQ+ samples. This cumulative dynamic carries particular weight in online contexts where hundreds of microaggressive encounters may occur in a single day.

Body Shaming and Gender Policing

Body shaming and gender policing are common experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals on social media. For transgender and non-binary individuals, comments about their bodies, voices, mannerisms, and appearance are near-constant features of online engagement. In the Indian context, deeply gendered beauty standards including a strong preference for fair skin mean dark-skinned LGBTQ+ individuals face colourism layered on top of transphobia or homophobia, contributing to depression, anxiety, and disordered eating behaviours.

Mental Health Consequences: Evidence Synthesis

Depression and Anxiety

The association between online stigma exposure and depression is among the most consistently replicated findings in this literature. A meta-analysis by Lucassen et al. (2022) synthesizing 47 studies found a medium-to-large pooled effect size ($d = 0.64$) for the association between cyberbullying victimization and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ youth—significantly larger than comparable estimates for non-LGBTQ+ youth ($d = 0.41$). Studies by Feinstein et al. (2020) document elevated generalized and social anxiety among those with higher online harassment exposure. In India, iCall at TISS and the Humsafar Trust's counselling services have documented significant rates of depression and anxiety among LGBTQ+ callers, with online harassment frequently cited as a contributing factor.

Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm

LGBTQ+ individuals already face substantially elevated suicide risk—meta-analytic estimates suggest two- to four-fold elevations in suicide attempt rates relative to heterosexual and cisgender peers. Hinduja and Patchin (2020) found that LGBTQ+ youth who experienced online victimization were approximately 2.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year. Conversion therapy—widely promoted through online channels including WhatsApp groups and social media in India—causes serious documented harm including depression, PTSD, and increased suicidality (Blosnich et al., 2020).

Identity Development and Internalized Stigma

Exposure to high volumes of negative portrayals online is associated with elevated internalized homophobia and internalized transnegativity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Internalized stigma is associated with depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem independent of external stigma exposure, and functions as a significant mediator between online harassment and adverse mental health outcomes. The harms of online gender stigma may thus become structurally embedded in identity over time rather than remaining contemporaneous with individual episodes of harassment.

Physical Health Pathways

Chronic stress associated with ongoing stigma exposure affects hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis functioning, inflammatory marker levels, and sleep quality—biological pathways linked to cardiovascular, immune, and metabolic health outcomes. Behavioural mediators include reduced health service utilization and elevated substance use as a coping mechanism.

Martinez et al. (2022) found that online victimization was associated with elevated cannabis and alcohol use among LGBTQ+ young adults, partially mediated by depression and anxiety.

Women's Lives in Digital Spaces: Compounded Vulnerabilities

Digital Misogyny and Gender-Based Online Violence

Women—including cisgender women, transgender women, and gender-nonconforming individuals—face specific and pervasive forms of gendered hostility in online spaces that intersect with and amplify LGBTQ+-based stigma. The concept of digital misogyny captures how women and gender minorities face systematic harassment, sexualisation, and silencing across platforms. For LGBTQ+ women, these dynamics compound: a lesbian or bisexual woman online may face simultaneous homophobia and misogyny; a transgender woman faces transphobia, misogyny, and—if she is a woman of colour—racism, in what Bailey (2021) has termed *misogynoir*. Forms of online violence particularly targeting women include non-consensual image sharing, doxing, stalking, sexualised threats, and coordinated harassment campaigns designed to drive women from public digital spaces.

Fashion, Appearance, and the Female Body Online

Social media platforms have become central arenas for the policing of women's bodies and appearance. Body image research consistently documents associations between social media use and body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and reduced self-esteem among women and girls, driven by upward social comparison with idealized representations. Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that negative appearance comparisons mediate the relationship between social media use and body image concerns. For LGBTQ+ women, these dynamics are intensified: transgender women are subjected to particularly invasive and dehumanising scrutiny of their bodies, voices, and gender presentation. In the Indian context, fashion and appearance carry additional cultural weight as markers of caste, religion, regional identity, and marital status.

Lesbian and Bisexual Women: Invisibility and Hypervisibility

Lesbian and bisexual women occupy a contradictory position in online spaces: simultaneously rendered invisible through heteronormative assumptions and hypervisible when they assert their identities. Bisexual women face specific forms of stigma including biphobia within LGBTQ+ communities, sexualisation by heterosexual audiences, and erasure through binary categorisation. Research by Ghabrial (2017) documents that bisexual women of colour experience compounded discrimination from multiple

directions simultaneously.

5A. High-Risk Exposure: Red-Light Area Women and Social Media

5A.1 The Digital Visibility of Women in Sex Work

Women engaged in sex work—including those residing and working in red-light areas—represent one of the highest-risk and most consistently overlooked populations in the scholarship on gender stigma and digital harm. In India, well-known red-light districts including Sonagachi in Kolkata, Kamathipura in Mumbai, GB Road in Delhi, and Budhwar Peth in Pune are home to women who face intersecting vulnerabilities arising from gender, caste, class, and occupation. The rapid penetration of smartphone technology and affordable mobile internet access across India's urban poor has brought social media into the everyday lives of these women, creating new possibilities for connection, advocacy, and economic opportunity—while simultaneously generating new pathways for surveillance, exploitation, and stigmatisation (Shah, 2014).

Research by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (2019), a collective of over 65,000 sex workers based in Sonagachi, documents that a significant proportion of women in Bengal's red-light areas own smartphones and use social media platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube for communication with family, access to news and entertainment, and connection with peer networks. This digital inclusion represents an important dimension of the social citizenship of sex-working women and must not be treated as inherently problematic. However, the particular conditions of their lives mean that their social media use occurs in a context of heightened vulnerability that demands specific analytical and policy attention.

5A.2 Mechanisms of Digital Harm in Red-Light Area Contexts

Women in red-light areas face several distinct mechanisms of digital harm that compound the general online gender stigma documented throughout this paper. First, non-consensual photography and video recording—using mobile phone cameras, hidden devices, or drones—generates image-based abuse when images and videos are uploaded to social media platforms, pornography websites, or WhatsApp groups without consent, violating women's privacy and dignity while exposing them to reputational harm that extends into their family networks and home communities (Dodge, 2021). Second, doxxing—the publication of location information, names, and identifying details—exposes women to harassment from clients, law enforcement, and community members who use social media as a tool of surveillance and control. Third, moral panic content—social media posts, videos, and threads that position

red-light areas as sites of cultural shame—generates dehumanising representations that circulate widely and that women living in these areas have no effective mechanism to challenge or remove.

Fourth, and particularly significant in the Indian context, social media has become a tool used by anti-trafficking organisations, law enforcement agencies, and vigilante groups to conduct surveillance of red-light areas—publishing photographs of women without consent, identifying clients, and generating content that conflates all sex work with trafficking, erasing the agency of women who have chosen sex work and exposing consensual sex workers to the harms of criminalisation and displacement (Kotiswaran, 2011). Research by Garg and Misra (2019) found that online surveillance and public shaming significantly deterred health-seeking behaviour among sex-working women in Delhi, with participants reporting avoidance of NGO and health service locations that had been publicised on social media for fear of being photographed and identified.

Fifth, the rise of short-video platforms including Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts has created new forms of exploitative content in which red-light area locations are filmed and narrated—often by outsiders—in ways that treat women as tourist attractions or objects of curiosity, generating large audiences while causing significant dignity harm to the women depicted. These videos frequently attain millions of views without any consent from the women shown, and platforms' geographic monetisation structures mean that creators profit from content that directly harms the subjects.

5A.3 Social Media as a Resource for Sex-Worker Communities

Despite these serious risks, social media also provides important benefits for women in sex-worker communities that must be recognised in any balanced analysis. WhatsApp networks among sex workers function as rapid communication systems for sharing information about dangerous clients, police raids, and health services—a form of community safety infrastructure

that was previously dependent on physical proximity and trust networks that took years to build. Facebook and YouTube provide platforms for sex-worker-led advocacy organisations to share information about legal rights, health services, and the harms of criminalisation. The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee has used social media to mobilise its membership, build national and international coalitions, and challenge narratives that deny sex workers' agency and humanity.

Online communities also provide emotional support for women who face

severe social isolation—estranged from families, excluded from mainstream civil society, and stigmatised by their occupation. Research by Biradavolu et al. (2018) documented that participation in online peer support networks was associated with reduced psychological distress and improved self-efficacy among sex-working women in South India. These findings underscore the need for policy responses that strengthen the protective affordances of digital spaces for women in sex work rather than restricting their digital access in the name of protection—a paternalistic approach that removes autonomy while failing to address the structural conditions of harm.

5A.4 Mental Health Consequences and Recommendations

The mental health burden borne by women in red-light areas as a result of online stigma, non-consensual image sharing, and digital surveillance is substantial and inadequately documented in the existing literature. Studies in adjacent populations document elevated rates of depression, PTSD, and anxiety among women who have experienced image-based abuse (Henry & Powell, 2018), with qualitative evidence suggesting that the permanence and spreadability of digital content generates a specific form of psychological harm—the knowledge that images circulate beyond one's control, reaching audiences one cannot see or predict, permanently and without remedy. In the Indian context, these harms are compounded by the near-impossibility of accessing legal redress: the Information Technology Act's provisions against non-consensual intimate image sharing are rarely applied to women in sex work, and law enforcement responses frequently revictimise rather than protect.

Effective responses require platforms to implement robust non-consensual content removal mechanisms with priority processing for vulnerable populations, including women in sex work. Policymakers must extend the full protection of image-based abuse laws to all women regardless of occupation. NGOs and health organisations must integrate digital safety into the health and social support services they provide to women in red-light areas. And researchers must centre the voices of women in sex work in designing the digital safety frameworks that purport to serve their interests.

Children and Adolescents in Digital Spaces: Identity, Risk, and Resilience

Social Media and Identity Development in LGBTQ+ Youth

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development, and for LGBTQ+ youth, social media plays an increasingly central role in this process. Craig and McInroy's (2014) pioneering research documented that LGBTQ+ youth use online media during the period before coming out in

offline contexts to explore identity, access information about sexual and gender diversity, and connect with peers who share their experiences. These online spaces provide exposure to counter-narratives that challenge pathologizing frameworks and access to role models who model resilient LGBTQ+ identity.

Cyberbullying and School-Age LGBTQ+ Youth

Cyberbullying directed at LGBTQ+ youth is pervasive and underreported. Limited digital literacy among potential support providers means that those who do report often find their concerns dismissed or minimised. The Trevor Project's (2022) national survey found that LGBTQ+ youth who experienced online victimization were substantially more likely to report suicidal ideation and attempts. A particularly harmful form of online targeting involves the promotion of conversion therapy through digital channels, which Blosnich et al. (2020) associate with significantly elevated rates of suicidal ideation and attempts among LGBTQ+ youth.

Children in the Indian Context: Family Surveillance and Digital Navigation

For LGBTQ+ children and adolescents in India, the joint family system creates unique challenges. Living under conditions of near-constant family surveillance, many young people maintain separate anonymous accounts or confine LGBTQ+-related online activity to late-night hours. Schools and educational institutions in India largely lack inclusive curricula addressing LGBTQ+ identities, leaving young people without institutional support. Online communities thus become, for many LGBTQ+ Indian youth, their primary source of identity affirmation, peer connection, and access to information about their own wellbeing.

Protective Factors for LGBTQ+ Youth Online

Research also documents the genuine protective potential of online environments for LGBTQ+ youth. Lucero's (2017) research on LGBTQ+ youth and online safe spaces found that online community membership was associated with reduced loneliness, greater identity affirmation, improved self-esteem, and lower rates of depression and suicidal ideation. The goal of digital safety for LGBTQ+ youth is not to restrict online participation but to make that participation safer and more affirming.

6A. High-Risk Content Exposure: Children's Accidental Access to Adult Material on Social Media

6A.1 The Scope of the Problem: Unguarded Access and Missing Child Protections

Among the most urgent and underaddressed risks in children's digital lives is the accidental or unsupervised exposure to adult and sexually explicit content on mainstream social media platforms—including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—through devices owned by parents, guardians, or other adults. This risk pathway operates through a mechanism distinct from deliberate seeking of adult content: children gain access to an adult's device—a parent's smartphone, a guardian's tablet, an older sibling's laptop—and encounter adult content because the device has not been configured with child safety settings, because existing parental controls are easily bypassed, or because the child is not recognised as a separate user requiring different content parameters. UNICEF's (2020) State of the World's Children report identified unsupervised access to adult devices as a primary pathway through which young children in low-and middle-income countries—including India—encounter adult content, noting that child protection settings are disproportionately underutilised in these contexts due to low digital literacy among parents and caregivers.

In India, the household smartphone—typically owned by a parent or adult male family member—has become a de facto shared family device, used for everything from entertainment and communication to banking and health information. Survey data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2021) indicates that in a significant proportion of Indian households, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts, there is a single shared smartphone rather than multiple personal devices. Children's access to this shared device is often unsupervised, particularly during periods when parents or guardians are occupied with work or household responsibilities. The absence of child mode activation on these devices—because parents are unaware it exists, because the device runs an older operating system without robust parental control features, or because enabling it would require restricting the adult user's own access—means that children effectively have access to the full adult internet.

6A.2 Adult Content on YouTube: Recommendation Algorithms and the Rabbit Hole Effect

YouTube represents a particular and well-documented risk environment for children's exposure to adult content, operating through a mechanism that researchers have termed the 'rabbit hole effect'—the platform's recommendation algorithm's tendency to surface increasingly extreme or adult-themed content as a function of viewing history and engagement signals. While YouTube maintains a children's platform (YouTube Kids) with filtered content, children accessing YouTube through a parent's or guardian's main

account encounter the full catalogue of content available on the platform, filtered only by YouTube's automated content moderation systems, which have been widely documented to be insufficient (Bridle, 2017).

Particularly insidious in this context is the phenomenon of adult-themed animation—animated video content that superficially resembles children's cartoons in its visual style, character design, and format, but contains explicit sexual content, graphic violence, or other material profoundly inappropriate for child audiences. Research by Bridle (2017) and subsequent investigations by journalists and digital safety researchers documented a systematic pattern in which algorithmically recommended YouTube content transitioned from legitimate children's programming—videos featuring popular characters such as Peppa Pig, Paw Patrol, or cartoon superheroes—to animated content that mimicked these familiar aesthetics while depicting sexual acts, violence, or disturbing scenarios. This content type exploits children's trust of familiar visual aesthetics: a child who associates animation with safe, age-appropriate content is not equipped to identify that content featuring recognisable cartoon characters may depict deeply harmful material.

In the Indian context, the overlap between children's cartoon formats and adult animation is particularly acute on YouTube, where Bollywood-themed animation, regional language cartoon characters, and pan-Indian children's programming share the platform with adult-oriented animated content that may be indistinguishable to a young child from its visual presentation alone. Dubbing and adaptation of adult animated series from other countries into Hindi and regional Indian languages further reduces the visual and linguistic cues that might alert children or parents to inappropriate content. Kumar and Srivastava (2020) documented cases in which children in Indian households reported nightmares, sexualised play behaviour, and articulation of sexually explicit content derived from animated videos accessed through parent smartphones, with parents uniformly unaware of the content their children had encountered.

6A.3 Facebook and Instagram: Adult Content Pathways and Inadequate Age Verification

Facebook and Instagram—both operated by Meta—present distinct but complementary content exposure risks for children accessing adult devices. Both platforms formally prohibit users under thirteen and have age verification mechanisms, but these mechanisms are easily bypassed: creating an account requires only self-reported birthdate, and there is no robust verification of age for most users. Where children access a parent's or guardian's existing account, they inherit that account's full content

permissions, including access to adult groups, explicit advertising, and algorithmically recommended content shaped by the adult user's browsing history.

Research by Livingstone et al. (2021) found that a substantial proportion of children aged eight to twelve regularly access Facebook and Instagram through parents' accounts rather than their own, and that parents frequently underestimate both the frequency and the content of their children's social media exposure. Instagram's visual format—dominated by photographs and short videos—creates particular risks for exposure to content depicting the sexualisation of women, explicit advertising for adult services, and what researchers term 'borderline content': material that does not technically violate community standards but that depicts women and girls in highly sexualised contexts that normalise objectification and sexual availability.

In India, Facebook remains the dominant social media platform across age groups and socioeconomic strata, and family shared account use is common. The platform's Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi language interfaces have expanded its reach to populations with limited English literacy but have also reduced the effectiveness of automated content moderation systems that are primarily trained on English-language data. Adult content in regional Indian languages—including sexualised content, content depicting women in red-light areas, and explicit advertising for adult services—is systematically under-moderated compared to equivalent English-language content, meaning that children accessing family Facebook accounts in these language contexts face a higher probability of encountering adult material than peers using English-language interfaces.

6A.4 Developmental and Psychological Harm of Early Adult Content Exposure

The developmental psychology literature documents consistent and serious harms associated with early exposure to adult sexual content, with outcomes varying by age of exposure, content type, frequency of exposure, and the availability of adult mediation. For pre-adolescent children—those under twelve—early exposure to explicit sexual content is associated with distorted beliefs about sexual norms and relationships, premature sexualisation, anxiety and confusion about sexual identity, and increased vulnerability to sexual grooming and exploitation (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). The developmental mechanism operates through the formation of sexual scripts: the cognitive frameworks through which individuals understand and interpret sexual behaviour. Early exposure to adult content—particularly content depicting exploitative, non-consensual, or dehumanising sexual scenarios—shapes these

scripts in ways that can persist into adulthood, influencing attitudes toward consent, gender roles, and the sexual objectification of women.

For adolescents, research by Malamuth and Huppin (2020) documents associations between regular exposure to pornographic content and reduced empathy toward sexual violence victims, increased acceptance of rape myths, and greater endorsement of sexual coercion in intimate relationships—effects that are moderated by existing attitudes and social context but that are consistent across cultural settings. In the Indian context, a study by Datta et al. (2021) found that adolescent boys who reported regular exposure to online pornography through shared family devices showed significantly higher scores on measures of sexual objectification of women and lower scores on measures of gender egalitarianism compared to non-exposed peers. The implications of these findings for broader patterns of gender-based violence and gender stigma—the central concerns of this paper—are substantial and demand serious attention.

Adult-themed animated content presents specific developmental risks that differ from live-action adult content. Research by Cantor (2009) documents that children are poorly equipped to identify animated content as adult-oriented, because animation is so strongly associated in children's experience with safe, child-appropriate entertainment. The cognitive mechanisms that enable adults to contextualise and evaluate content—experience, media literacy, understanding of genre conventions, awareness of adult content categories—are not yet developed in young children, leaving them without protective cognitive resources when encountering disturbing animated content. The mixture of familiar cartoon aesthetics with adult or disturbing content generates a form of psychological confusion that can be particularly difficult for children to process or communicate to adults.

6A.5 The Role of Guardians, Digital Literacy, and Platform Responsibility

The responsibility for children's exposure to adult content through shared adult devices sits at the intersection of platform design, parental digital literacy, and regulatory frameworks. On the platform side, the existing tools for child protection—YouTube Kids, Instagram's supervised accounts, Facebook's parental supervision features—are designed as opt-in systems that require parents or guardians to actively configure them. Research consistently documents that opt-in child protection systems are dramatically underutilised, particularly in households with lower digital literacy (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). The burden of child protection is thus effectively placed on parents rather than on platforms, despite the fact that platform design

choices—recommendation algorithms, default content settings, age verification mechanisms—are the primary determinants of children's content exposure.

A robust child-centred design framework would reverse this structure: the default settings on platforms accessible to family audiences would prioritise child safety, with adult content access requiring active opt-in by verified adult users rather than child protection requiring active opt-in by parents. The technical infrastructure for age-approximate content filtering exists—platforms use age-gated advertising, age-restricted content flags, and age-proxied recommendation adjustments—but commercial incentives, which reward broad content engagement over user wellbeing, militate against its application as a default. UNICEF's (2020) recommendations on child-centred digital environments call explicitly for default child-safe settings on general-audience platforms, a position supported by a growing body of child safety research and by regulatory developments in jurisdictions including the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Australia.

For parents and guardians in India, digital literacy interventions must go beyond the provision of information about parental controls—which is ineffective when parents do not understand why such controls matter or how to implement them—to provide practical, hands-on support with configuring specific devices and platforms. School-based digital literacy programmes should address child online safety as a responsibility shared between children, parents, and platforms, equipping children with age-appropriate understandings of content types, consent, and self-protection while also engaging parents and guardians as active participants in children's digital safety. Civil society organisations working with communities where shared family devices are common should integrate device safety configuration into their existing community outreach and health promotion activities.

6A.6 Regulatory and Policy Responses

India's regulatory framework for child online safety has significant gaps. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 impose obligations on significant social media intermediaries to publish safety rules and provide grievance redressal mechanisms, but do not explicitly require child-safe default settings or robust age verification. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act addresses child sexual abuse material but does not comprehensively address the range of adult content to which children may be inadvertently exposed through shared devices. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has issued guidelines on internet safety for children,

but these are non-binding and implementation has been inconsistent.

Evidence-based policy responses should include mandatory child-safe default settings for platforms accessible to family audiences, with opt-out by verified adult users; robust age verification requirements that go beyond self-reported birthdate; mandatory safety audits of recommendation algorithms for content reached by users under eighteen; and legal accountability for platforms that fail to prevent children's systematic exposure to adult content through predictable pathways such as shared adult devices. The UK's Children's Code and Australia's Online Safety Act provide international models for how platform accountability for child safety can be effectively legislated and enforced.

The Indian Cultural Context: Specificities and Intersections

History, Law, and Social Transformation

India presents a unique and complex context for understanding online gender stigma and LGBTQ+ experience. Ancient Indian texts including the Kamasutra, sculptures at Khajuraho, and references in the Mahabharata contain evidence of same-sex desire and gender diversity being acknowledged in classical culture. The hijra community, a third-gender community with roots stretching back millennia, is perhaps the most visible historical example of gender diversity in Indian tradition. Colonial-era British law, specifically Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code introduced in 1861, criminalised same-sex relations and created a framework of legal persecution lasting over 150 years. The Supreme Court's 2018 ruling in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* marked a historic turning point, decriminalising consensual same-sex relations. However, legal progress has not translated into social acceptance, and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 has been criticised by trans activists for falling short of the Supreme Court's 2014 NALSA judgment protections.

Caste, Religion, and Intersectional Discrimination

The caste system adds a dimension of structural oppression to LGBTQ+ experience in India largely absent from Western contexts. Dalit LGBTQ+ individuals face discrimination both from within mainstream LGBTQ+ organisations and from broader society. Online, dehumanising language targeting LGBTQ+ Indians frequently draws on both homophobic tropes and caste-based insults. Religion functions as a powerful axis of intersectional discrimination: Hindu nationalist ideology has increasingly framed LGBTQ+ identities as Western imports threatening Indian cultural values, while LGBTQ+ Muslims and Christians face homophobia and transphobia both within their religious communities and from broader society.

Urban-Rural Divide and Class

The urban-rural divide profoundly shapes LGBTQ+ digital experience in India. Metropolitan cities have visible LGBTQ+ communities, annual Pride marches, and advocacy organisations. For LGBTQ+ Indians in smaller towns, rural areas, and tribal communities, online communities may be their primary or only source of LGBTQ+ connection and support. Language presents an additional barrier: much LGBTQ+ support content is in English or Hindi, leaving individuals whose primary languages are regional with significantly fewer resources.

Bollywood, Media Representation, and Online Discourse

The post-Section 377 era has seen a notable shift in Indian cinema and media, with films such as *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) and streaming series including *Made in Heaven* and *Four More Shots Please* reaching large audiences with LGBTQ+ characters and storylines. Social media has become a major space for discussion of LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema, with responses ranging from celebration by LGBTQ+ communities to organised boycott campaigns from conservative voices.

The Hijra Community in Digital India

The hijra community, recognised as a legal third gender by India's Supreme Court in 2014, occupies a unique position in Indian digital spaces. Hijra activists including Laxmi Narayan Tripathi have built large followings advocating for transgender rights and challenging stereotypes. However, hijras and transgender Indians remain among the most heavily targeted groups for online harassment in India, with systematic dehumanisation in online spaces often going unmoderated due to algorithmic blindness to Indian-language hate speech.

The Dual Affordance Model: An Integrative Framework

Drawing on the evidence synthesized above, we propose the Dual Affordance Model (DAM) as a conceptual framework for understanding the simultaneous harmful and protective roles of social media for LGBTQ+ individuals, women—including those in high-risk occupational contexts such as sex work—and children experiencing gender stigma or inadvertent adult content exposure. The model resists both utopian framings that emphasize only community-building potential and dystopian framings that emphasize only harassment dynamics. Instead, it holds both dimensions in productive tension, recognizing that the same platform features and affordances can produce either harmful or beneficial outcomes depending on contextual factors.

The DAM identifies four axes of dual affordance: the visibility axis, the community axis, the information axis, and the permanence axis. For red-light area women, the visibility axis carries heightened stakes—visibility can mean both community advocacy and non-consensual surveillance. For children accessing adult devices, the information axis is particularly salient: the democratisation of information includes the democratisation of adult content that bypasses child safety mechanisms. The model posits that the balance between harmful and protective affordances is moderated by geographic and social isolation, platform design and moderation policies, available social capital, and intersecting social positions including race, class, caste, age, gender, religion, disability, and occupation. Effective intervention must attend to each of these moderating factors rather than treating all users as equivalent.

Protective Affordances, Community-Building, and Resilience

Online Community Formation and Belonging

Research on online community membership among LGBTQ+ individuals consistently documents associations between active engagement in affirming online spaces and positive outcomes including reduced loneliness, greater identity affirmation, improved self-esteem, and lower rates of depression and suicidal ideation. Indian LGBTQ+ organisations including the Humsafar Trust, Sangama, Sappho for Equality, and Nazariya have strong digital presences, extending their reach to LGBTQ+ individuals across the country.

Identity Affirmation and Representation

The visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals on social media constitutes a form of representational presence with documented benefits for wellbeing. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) identified a role modelling function of media representation: observing LGBTQ+ individuals living visible, affirming, and successful lives challenges stigma-related beliefs that LGBTQ+ identity is incompatible with flourishing. In India, fashion influencers, activists, and content creators who are openly LGBTQ+ play an important role in community formation.

Information Access and Health Literacy

Social media platforms serve as critical information resources for LGBTQ+ individuals navigating health systems that have historically been inadequate or hostile. The expansion of teletherapy services in India, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has improved geographic access to LGBTQ+-affirming mental health care, though affordability remains a

significant barrier for many.

Collective Action and Digital Activism

Social media has enabled new forms of LGBTQ+ collective action globally and in India. Hashtag campaigns including #Section377, #TransRights, and #QueerIndia have trended nationally and contributed to public discourse about LGBTQ+ rights. Pride marches held across Indian cities have been significantly amplified by social media, enabling LGBTQ+ Indians in smaller cities and rural areas to engage with Pride through livestreams and digital content.

Coping Strategies and Digital Self-Care

LGBTQ+ individuals employ a range of individual and collective coping strategies to manage online stigma exposure while maintaining access to the protective benefits of digital spaces. These include strategic blocking and muting of hostile accounts, the use of anonymous or pseudonymous accounts to enable more open identity expression, selective disclosure calibrated to perceived audience safety, and the creation of private group spaces—closed Facebook groups, private subreddits, invite-only Discord servers—that function as digital safe spaces accessible to trusted community members. In the Indian context, additional coping strategies reflect the specific constraints of family surveillance, including the use of coded language recognisable to community members but opaque to outsiders, and the preference for private messaging applications over public platforms.

Implications and Recommendations

For Social Media Platforms

Platform accountability must be substantially strengthened, particularly with respect to the three high-risk populations identified in this paper: LGBTQ+ individuals, women in sex work, and children accessing adult devices.

Specific recommendations include:

- Transparent, publicly auditable content moderation policies with clear anti-discrimination principles covering gender identity, sexual orientation, caste, and religion.
- Significant investment in multilingual human moderation, particularly for Hindi and regional Indian languages where anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech and exploitative content about women in sex work currently evades automated detection.
- Mandatory child-safe default settings on all general-audience platforms, with adult content access requiring active opt-in by age-

verified adult users—reversing the current opt-in model for child protection.

- Robust, priority-processing mechanisms for removal of non-consensual image content, with specific provisions ensuring that women in sex work have equal access to content removal regardless of their occupation.
- Algorithmic safety audits specifically examining pathways from children's content to adult or adult-themed animated content in recommendation systems, with mandatory remediation of identified rabbit-hole pathways.
- Crisis mental health resources in multiple Indian languages, connected to LGBTQ+-affirming Indian service providers.

For Policymakers

Legal and policy frameworks should address identified gaps across all three risk dimensions:

- Extend anti-discrimination legislation to explicitly cover sexual orientation and gender identity, and extend image-based abuse protections to all women regardless of occupation.
- Update the Information Technology Act to explicitly address identity-based online harassment and non-consensual image sharing for all women, including those in sex work.
- Mandate child-safe default settings in digital platforms regulation, following models established in the UK's Children's Code and Australia's Online Safety Act.
- Explicitly prohibit conversion therapy through the Mental Healthcare Act and enforce this prohibition in online spaces.
- Mandate age verification standards for social media platforms that go beyond self-reported birthdate to meaningfully protect children from adult content.

For Mental Health Professionals

- Clinical practice must evolve to encompass the online dimensions of clients' psychological lives across all three high-risk populations:
- Routinely assess online experiences—both positive community engagement and exposure to harassment or distressing content—as part of comprehensive mental health evaluations.
- Develop culturally competent, LGBTQ+-affirming practice that does not pathologise LGBTQ+ identities and explicitly rejects conversion therapy.

- Develop clinical protocols for assessing and treating the psychological effects of non-consensual image sharing and digital surveillance in women from sex-worker communities.
- Develop child-appropriate therapeutic frameworks for addressing psychological harm from early adult content exposure, including adult-themed animated content, that do not compound shame or confusion.

For Educators and Schools

- Educational institutions have critical roles in addressing online gender stigma and protecting children:
- Incorporate inclusive, age-appropriate sexuality and gender education that affirms LGBTQ+ identities as a normal part of human diversity.
- Train teachers and school counsellors in LGBTQ+-affirming practices and in recognition of and response to identity-based cyberbullying.
- Deliver comprehensive digital literacy education that addresses content types, the difference between children's and adult content, what to do when encountering disturbing content, and device safety settings—equipping children with the knowledge to protect themselves and to talk to adults about what they have seen.
- Engage parents and guardians in practical, hands-on digital safety training, including demonstration of child mode settings on commonly used devices and platforms, within school community programmes.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the intersection of online gender stigma, LGBTQ+ mental health, and the psychosocial implications of social media through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates global scholarship with specific attention to the Indian cultural context and the distinctive vulnerabilities of multiple high-risk populations. The analysis has covered the standard terrain of online gender stigma scholarship—harassment, algorithmic bias, minority stress, and community resilience—while extending that terrain in two important directions not adequately addressed in existing reviews.

First, the paper has documented the specific mechanisms through which women in red-light areas and sex-worker communities face compounded digital harm, including non-consensual image sharing, doxxing, surveillance by anti-trafficking organisations and law enforcement, and exploitative content creation by outsiders who treat red-light areas as tourist spectacles. These mechanisms are not adequately addressed by existing digital safety frameworks, which have been designed primarily with middle-class or urban professional women in mind, and they generate serious mental health

consequences including PTSD, depression, and deterrence from essential health services. Effective responses must combine platform-level non-consensual content removal mechanisms with legal protections extended to all women regardless of occupation and with community-controlled digital safety interventions designed with and for sex-worker communities.

Second, the paper has documented the serious and underaddressed risk of children's accidental exposure to adult content—including explicit videos, adult-themed animated content, and borderline sexualised imagery—through the ungarded use of adult or guardian mobile devices. The phenomenon of adult cartoons and animations that exploit children's trust of familiar animation aesthetics while depicting explicitly adult content represents a specific and particularly insidious risk, because young children lack the cognitive resources to identify such content as inappropriate. The current opt-in model for child protection on major platforms places an unreasonable and ineffective burden on parents and caregivers, particularly in contexts like India where digital literacy among adults is uneven and shared family devices are the norm. A child-centred design framework mandating child-safe defaults would more effectively protect children than any educational intervention alone.

Third, the paper has reaffirmed the centrality of intersectional analysis to understanding online gender stigma. In India, the distinctive axes of caste, religion, language, the urban-rural divide, and family structure create a context that requires culturally specific analysis and response, and the particular vulnerabilities of Dalit LGBTQ+ individuals, transgender women, LGBTQ+ women, LGBTQ+ youth, women in sex work, and children without protected digital environments demand targeted attention.

The Dual Affordance Model continues to offer a productive framework for holding harmful and protective dimensions in tension. The same smartphone that exposes a child to adult-animated content can connect an isolated queer teenager to a life-saving community; the same platform that hosts non-consensual images of women from red-light areas also hosts sex-worker advocacy that has changed laws and saved lives. Effective responses must amplify the latter while reducing the former, and must do so with the full participation of the communities most affected.

The path forward requires a collective commitment: from platforms to make protection the default rather than the opt-in; from policymakers to close the gap between rights and reality; from mental health professionals to develop competencies adequate to the digital dimensions of their clients' lives; from educators to equip both children and parents with the knowledge and

skills for safer digital navigation; and from all of us to centre the voices of those who are most harmed in designing the systems that are supposed to serve them.

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