Navigating the Dichotomy of social media for Women's Economic Empowerment: A Multiple Case study design

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Abstract

This paper uses a multi-case study approach to explore the intricate relationship between social media technology, women's economic empowerment, and the perpetuation of disempowerment through objectification. It focuses on influential female figures in the social media sphere, utilising media reports like news articles, blogs, and social media posts for data collection. This information is then coded and analysed to uncover patterns, themes, and relationships regarding economic empowerment opportunities, challenges, and barriers. On one hand, women utilise social media to advance their economic empowerment by showcasing products, sharing success stories, and connecting with a global audience, leading to collaborations and promoting women-owned businesses. Despite facing adversity such as broken marriages, socioeconomic constraints, and gender inequalities, women demonstrate resilience through social media platforms. However, the pursuit of economic empowerment also presents challenges, including the perpetuation of disempowerment through exploitative content creation, the normalisation of harmful practices like unrealistic beauty standards, and exposure to exploitative opportunities like pyramid schemes targeting vulnerable women. Social media also normalises unethical behaviours such as deceptive advertising and reinforces gender stereotypes by objectifying and sexualising women, reducing them to their physical attributes and undermining their credibility in professional contexts. Ultimately, this study highlights the complexities of social media's role in both empowering and disempowering women in their pursuit of financial freedom. Women's empowerment initiatives should prioritise economic progress while safeguarding the dignity of women in the digital age.

Keywords: Dichotomy, social media, women's empowerment, disempowerment, objectification, dignity.

Introduction

Social media can collectively be defined as web-based tools that enable people to communicate by sharing and consuming information (Ofcom, 2020). Some features of social media platforms include the need for personal user accounts, profile pages that can be customised, friends and followers, like and share buttons, notifications and comment sections. In today's digital era, social media has become an influential force in shaping economic opportunities for women. A study by the United Nations (2021) highlights the role of social media in economic empowerment, noting that platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn are transforming the ways in which women entrepreneurs are able to start and grow businesses, connect with professional networks, and reach global audiences through access to information and resources which were previously out of reach. These digital avenues provide women with unprecedented opportunities and have the potential to dismantle long-standing barriers such as limited mobility, lack of financial resources and socio-cultural restrictions and facilitate greater economic participation and growth for women. However, alongside these opportunities, social media also presents substantial challenges. Issues such as online harassment (cyber-bullying), privacy concerns, the relentless demand for maintaining an active digital presence, and the objectification of women can detract from these potential benefits and negatively impact women's professional and personal lives (Davis, 2018). Objectification reduces women to their physical attributes and commodifies their bodies, which can undermine their professional identities and economic opportunities. This phenomenon contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and hinders women's ability to be taken seriously as entrepreneurs and professionals, therefore exacerbating existing gender inequalities.

The dual nature of social media as an enabler and a barrier emphasises the need for a comprehensive exploration of its impact on women's economic empowerment. On one hand, social media facilitates access to new markets, networking opportunities, and platforms for self-promotion, enabling women entrepreneurs to enhance their visibility and engage in the digital economy (Baker & McKenzie, 2020). On the other hand, it can pose significant barriers, such as online harassment, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns, which disproportionately affect women and may discourage their full participation (Himelboim et al., 2017). Additionally, societal expectations and gender stereotypes perpetuated on social media can limit women's professional opportunities. A nuanced examination of these dynamics is therefore essential for developing effective strategies that maximise social media's benefits while mitigating its risks (Gupta, 2021).

Thematic area/ objectives of the study

I. To investigate the role of social media in women’s economic empowerment
II. To analyse the dual role played by social media
III. To assess the impact of social media engagement on women’s financial and sociocultural outcomes

Theoretical framework

The theoretical orientation of this study integrates the Dragonfly Effect, Muted Group Theory, Postdigital feminism, and the concept of patriarchal hegemony to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics (Hurley, 2023). The Dragonfly Effect (Aaker & Smith, 2010) emphasises the power of social media to drive social change through focused and coordinated efforts. This theory shows how social media can be leveraged for positive economic empowerment by enabling women to create impactful campaigns, build supportive networks, and mobilise resources effectively for social and economic change.

In contrast, Muted Group Theory offers a critical lens to examine how dominant social structures can marginalise women's voices and experiences on social media. In revisiting this theory, wall and Gannon-Leary (1999) highlight the challenges women face in making their voices heard and respected in digital spaces often dominated by male-centric narratives and norms. It also alludes to the presence of women on social media being solely for the benefit of the male audience, especially in the use of women in advertisements for products and services targeted at men. Applying Muted Group Theory (MGT) to the study can highlight how women encounter both empowerment and silencing within digital spaces. MGT suggests that marginalised groups, like women, are often restricted in accessing dominant modes of expression, leading to "muted" voices (Ardener, 1975). Social media, while offering opportunities for networking and self-promotion, can also present challenges, such as harassment and gender-biased algorithms that limit women's economic activities. This study can explore how women develop unique strategies to bypass these barriers, creating alternative spaces for self-empowerment and reshaping economic roles online (Kramarae, 1981). By examining these dynamics, MGT provides insight into the structural and societal factors that influence women’s digital economic empowerment.

Linabary et al. (2020) examine how digital technologies both perpetuate and disrupt traditional gender inequalities. Their reference to the contradictions of Postdigital feminism critiques the underlying power dynamics within digital spaces and advocates for more inclusive and equitable practices (Kamei, 2022). By incorporating post-digital feminism, this study delves into the complexities of how digital platforms can both reinforce and challenge existing gender norms and power structures (Kamei, 2022; Hurley, 2021).

Central to this discussion is the recognition of gender as a social construct. Gender roles and expectations are not biologically predetermined but are created and perpetuated by societal norms and cultural practices. According to Banet-Weiser, S. (2018), social media plays a critical role in both reflecting and shaping gender constructs, often reinforcing traditional norms that align with patriarchal perspectives. This influence is evident in portraying femininity and stereotypical roles, which can impact women's societal values and economic opportunities (Hurley, 2021). Patriarchal hegemony, which underlies many social structures, frames how gender roles are presented and perpetuated online. However, social media also offers a space to challenge these stereotypes, potentially empowering women and enabling narratives that support their economic and social empowerment. This understanding is crucial for analysing how social media both reflects and shapes these gender constructs, influencing women's economic opportunities and empowerment. Furthermore, the concept of patriarchal hegemony is critical in understanding the broader socio-cultural context within which social media operates (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Rawat, 2014). Patriarchal hegemony refers to the dominance of patriarchal values and norms that perpetuate gender inequalities. This concept helps to explain the persistence of male-dominated power structures and their impact on women's participation in the digital economy (Rawat, 2014; He et al., 2024). By examining patriarchal hegemony, this study seeks to uncover the deep-rooted biases and power imbalances that women must navigate in their pursuit of economic empowerment through social media.

Additionally, moral values significantly shape the digital landscape and influence women's experiences on social media. Ethical considerations like respect, equity, and justice are crucial for creating supportive and inclusive digital environments (Neumann & Rhodes, 2024). Addressing issues of online harassment, data privacy, and digital literacy involves technical solutions and a commitment to upholding these moral values (Hupfer et al., 2022). This study advocates for a more ethical approach to social media design and governance by emphasising the importance of moral values.

Methodology

The study employed a multiple case study design to provide an in-depth, holistic analysis of women's experiences with social media across various sectors and geographical contexts. A multiple case study design is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, for example, observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design allows researchers to explore differences and similarities between cases, providing a richer understanding of the phenomena under study. Each case was studied in its own right, and the findings from all cases were compared to draw broader conclusions. A multiple case study design involved identifying several women or groups of women who use social media for economic empowerment. These cases varied in demographics, geographical locations, types of economic activities, and levels of social media engagement. Data was collected on how each woman or group uses social media, the types of platforms used, the nature of economic activities conducted, and the outcomes achieved. Creswell and Poth's guidelines for qualitative case studies involved using media reports like news articles, blogs, and social media posts for data collection, analytics, and observations. Each case was then analysed within its specific context, considering the local economic conditions, cultural attitudes towards women in business, and the specific challenges and opportunities presented by social media in each case. Findings from each case were compared and contrasted to identify common themes and differences, paying attention to patterns in how social media contributes to or hinders economic empowerment and how different factors impact outcomes. Findings were synthesised to draw broader conclusions about the dichotomy of social media for women's economic empowerment. These cases provide a diverse representation of women's economic activities, showcasing the versatility of social media across sectors. They highlight different challenges and opportunities, from financial independence to advocacy. Together, they offer a balanced view of how social media empowers women economically and socially.

By drawing from multiple case studies, it was possible to identify common themes, strategies, and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of social media as a tool for economic empowerment. The study focused on case studies in three main areas: women entrepreneurs in developing countries, female freelancers and gig economy workers, and women in the creative industries. It involved analysis of articles, blogs and other online sources to capture the multifaceted experiences of women entrepreneurs on social media. By understanding how these women navigate the complex landscape of social media, we can better appreciate the delicate balance they must maintain to leverage its benefits while mitigating its risks.

The findings of this study will offer critical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and platform designers, highlighting the need for supportive digital environments that can enhance women's economic opportunities while safeguarding their well-being. This paper sought to contribute to the academic discourse by presenting a balanced view of social media's role in women's economic empowerment, advocating for informed and effective interventions to support women in the digital economy.

Key findings from the selected case studies.

The cases were drawn from Nairobi, Kenya, and discussed under three broad categories, aimed at highlighting both the benefits and the setbacks of social media as a tool for women's economic empowerment. The categories are women entrepreneurs- Caroline Mutoko and Wandia Gichuru, female social media influencers or socialites- Vera Sidika and Amber Ray and women in the creative industry- Esther Akoth (Akothee) and Diana Marua (Diana B).

1. **Women Entrepreneurs**

Caroline Mutoko is a well-known media personality in Kenya. She has a strong presence on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. She shares a mix of professional insights, personal opinions, motivational content, and societal issues. Caroline has a large following, and her posts often generate significant engagement in the form of likes, comments, shares, and retweets. Her opinions and endorsements carry weight, often sparking discussions and influencing public opinion on various matters. Caroline uses her platform to address critical societal issues, including gender equality, leadership, and education. She collaborates with brands for endorsements, leveraging her influence to promote products and services.

Wandia Gichuru is the co-founder and CEO of Vivo Activewear, a popular Kenyan fashion brand. She is active on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Her posts focus on business insights, entrepreneurial journeys, fashion, and women's empowerment. Wandia's content engages a community of entrepreneurs, fashion enthusiasts, and professionals. Her posts receive likes, comments, and shares, though the volume might be more than Caroline Mutoko's. As a successful entrepreneur, her opinions and business advice are respected and often shared within the entrepreneurial circle. Wandia promotes Vivo Activewear through social media, contributing to its brand visibility and customer engagement. She uses her platform to mentor aspiring entrepreneurs, especially women, and to discuss the challenges and successes in the business world.

Caroline Mutoko has a broader reach due to her established career in media, resulting in high engagement across a diverse audience. Wandia Gichuru, while influential within entrepreneurial and fashion communities, has a more specialized following. Caroline’s content is varied, touching on societal issues, personal development, and commentary on current events. Wandia’s content is more focused on business growth, fashion, and women's empowerment. Caroline has a significant impact on public opinion and societal issues, often initiating important conversations. Wandia's impact is seen in her contributions to the entrepreneurial ecosystem and the fashion industry in Kenya, as well as in her role as a mentor and business leader. Both Caroline Mutoko and Wandia Gichuru effectively use social media to influence their respective fields, engage with their audiences, and promote their personal brands and interests. Their impact is significant, albeit in different ways and within different scopes of influence.

2. Female social media influencers or socialites

Amber Ray and Vera Sidika are prominent Kenyan social media influencers known for their glamorous lifestyles and bold personalities (Olage, 2024). Both have garnered significant attention and influence through their social media activities. Here's a detailed analysis of their positive and negative impacts:

Amber Ray has leveraged her social media following to build and promote her businesses, inspiring other young entrepreneurs. She is known for her fashion sense and lifestyle, providing inspiration to her followers on trends and personal style. Amber actively engages with her followers, creating a sense of community and relatability. This engagement helps her connect deeply with her audience. By collaborating with brands, she helps increase their visibility and reach, benefiting local businesses and products. Amber Ray has been involved in various controversies that can sometimes overshadow her positive contributions. These controversies can lead to negative perceptions and backlash. The emphasis on a luxurious lifestyle can sometimes promote materialism, which might not be a realistic or healthy aspiration for all her followers. Sharing intimate details of her life can sometimes lead to privacy concerns and scrutiny from the public (Hupfer et al., 2022).

Vera Sidika has successfully ventured into businesses such as beauty parlours and detox tea products, serving as an entrepreneurial role model. Vera has openly discussed her body transformations, contributing to conversations about body image and self-acceptance. Vera is a trendsetter in fashion and beauty, influencing many young women and men in Kenya and beyond (Olage, 2024). Like Amber, Vera's collaborations with brands provide them with substantial visibility and marketing opportunities. Vera's lifestyle and some of her choices have sparked controversies, which can sometimes create negative impressions among certain segments of her audience. Heavy emphasis on physical appearance and cosmetic procedures can sometimes set unrealistic beauty standards for her followers. Public disputes and feuds with other celebrities can contribute to a toxic online environment, potentially influencing followers to behave in a similar manner.

Both Amber Ray and Vera Sidika have successfully used their social media platforms to promote their entrepreneurial ventures. They serve as examples of how personal brands can be monetised effectively. They both have a significant influence on fashion and lifestyle. However, their emphasis on luxury and high-end fashion may not be accessible to all their followers, potentially leading to unrealistic expectations. Both personalities have been involved in controversies that have impacted their public perception. While this can generate engagement and keep them in the public eye, it can also lead to negative backlash and affect their credibility. Both influencers engage actively with their followers, creating strong communities. This engagement helps them maintain a loyal fan base and makes them relatable to their audiences.

Amber Ray and Vera Sidika have made significant impacts through their social media presence, both positively and negatively. They have shown that social media can be a powerful tool for personal branding and business promotion. However, the controversies and emphasis on luxury lifestyles highlight the complexities and responsibilities of being a public figure in the digital age. Balancing their influence with positive and realistic messaging could enhance their contributions to society.

3. Women in the creative industries.

Esther Akoth (Akothee) and Diana Marua (Diana B) are prominent figures in the Kenyan entertainment industry and have substantial social media followings. Both have made significant impacts through their online presence. Akothee is a successful entrepreneur with ventures in music, real estate, and travel (Kinja, 2024). She inspires many young people with her business acumen and resilience. She is also known for her philanthropic efforts, including supporting children's homes and helping needy families. Her charitable activities have positively impacted many lives. Akothee often speaks about women's empowerment, encouraging women to be independent and self-sufficient. She uses her platform to advocate for gender equality and women's rights. Her candid and straightforward nature makes her relatable to many. She openly shares her life experiences, including her struggles and successes, which resonates with her audience. Akothee has been involved in several controversies, including public spats and provocative social media posts. Such incidents have attracted negative attention and criticism. Her display of wealth and luxury can sometimes be seen as promoting materialism, which may not be attainable for all her followers. Some of her outspoken comments and actions have led to mixed public perceptions, which can affect her overall influence and credibility (Kinja, 2024).

Diana B has gained popularity as a content creator, producing relatable and entertaining content that resonates with a wide audience. She has built a strong brand around her family and lifestyle: She often shares positive messages about family, parenting, and relationships, promoting strong family values and connections. Diana B has ventured into music, adding another dimension to her career. Her music often carries messages that reflect her personal experiences and values. Diana B actively engages with her followers, creating a sense of community and connection. Her interactive posts and videos have fostered a loyal fan base. Diana B's music career has faced criticism from some quarters, with debates about her talent and the quality of her music. This criticism can overshadow her other positive contributions. She has been involved in public disputes and drama, which can lead to negative publicity and affect her public image. Sharing intimate details of her personal life can sometimes lead to privacy concerns and unwanted public scrutiny.

Akothee is more established as an entrepreneur with multiple ventures, serving as a role model for aspiring businesspeople. Diana B is still developing her entrepreneurial footprint, mainly through her content creation, music career, and brand partnerships. Both Akothee and Diana B focus on family and lifestyle content, but Diana B emphasises family values and parenting more prominently. Akothee's content often includes her personal and professional experiences, blending empowerment messages with lifestyle elements. Both have faced controversies that affect their public perception. Akothee’s controversies are often tied to her outspoken nature, while Diana B’s stemming from public disputes and criticism of her music career and style, sometimes seen as inappropriate, especially for a parent. Despite this, they both maintain a strong and loyal following. Akothee has a more pronounced presence in philanthropy, actively engaging in charitable activities and using her platform to support various causes. Diana B’s impact in this area is less prominent but still notable through her positive messages about family and relationships.

Akothee and Diana B both wield significant influence through their social media presence, impacting their followers in various ways. Akothee stands out for her entrepreneurial success, philanthropic efforts, and advocacy for women's empowerment, despite facing controversies. Diana B excels in content creation, promoting family values, and engaging her audience, even though she faces criticism in her music career and personal life. Both personalities highlight the power of social media in shaping public perception and driving influence in contemporary society.

Research on women’s economic empowerment encompasses various aspects such as access to education, participation in the labour market, entrepreneurship and inclusion in financial policy frameworks. World Bank (2002) presents empowerment as a tool for poverty reduction through improved access to resources, increased agency and greater participation in economic activities. Averett et al. (Eds.) (2018) examine women’s economic roles, focusing on economics, sociology and demography. Combining theoretical perspectives with empirical research, they provide a holistic view of the economic factors that influence women’s lives and the impact of gender inequality on economic outcomes. The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW)

(2011) discusses the social benefits of empowering women, such as better healthcare and education for families and communities.

Ellis et al. (2006) explore barriers to women's economic participation. These include, but are not limited to, legal and discriminatory laws, limited credit access, high interest rates meted by lending institutions, lower education attainment, lack of vocational training, gender roles expectations, social stigma, limited access to technology, employment segregation, and safety concerns.

One way women have gained a voice in the last decade is through the increased use of social media platforms. Social media is a multifaceted tool that significantly contributes to women's economic empowerment by providing entrepreneurial opportunities, facilitating professional networking, raising awareness on issues affecting women, offering educational resources, supporting mentorship, and promoting inclusive business practices. By leveraging these platforms, women can overcome traditional barriers and achieve greater economic independence.

Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest enable women to start and grow their businesses with minimal investment, thus offering them entrepreneurial opportunities and market access. These platforms offer a marketplace for selling products and services, reaching a global audience without the need for physical business premises. International Finance Corporation (2020) highlighted that women entrepreneurs leverage social media to increase sales, access new markets, and engage directly with customers, which has particularly benefited women in developing countries. A study by the African Development Bank highlights how social media has enabled African women entrepreneurs to expand their businesses and access new markets, particularly in the fashion and beauty industries. In Nigeria, the fashion entrepreneur Chioma Ikokwu used Instagram to promote her luxury hair brand, "Good Hair Ltd." This platform allowed her to showcase products, engage with customers, and drive sales internationally. In India, Pooja Dhingra, a pastry chef and entrepreneur, utilised Instagram to grow her Mumbai bakery business, Le15 Patisserie. Through visually appealing posts and engaging content, she built a strong brand presence and attracted a large customer base, both locally and internationally. For example, Suzie Wokabi, the founder of SuzieBeauty, leveraged social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to market her beauty products. This visibility helped her build a strong customer base and brand recognition without significant traditional advertising costs.

LinkedIn and other professional networking sites provide women with opportunities to connect with industry leaders, mentors, and potential employers, facilitating career advancement and professional development. A Doctoral dissertation at Creighton University indicates that professional networking on social media helps women build valuable connections, which can lead to job opportunities, mentorship, and career growth (Kalina, 2022). In Brazil, Luiza Helena Trajano, the retail giant Magazine Luiza chairwoman, actively uses LinkedIn to share business insights and network with other professionals. Her presence on the platform has inspired many Brazilian women to pursue careers in business and leadership. LinkedIn has been instrumental for many African women in technology, such as Rebecca Enonchong from Cameroon, who is a prominent tech entrepreneur and advocate. She uses the platform to connect with other professionals and mentor young women in tech. Catherine Mahugu, a tech entrepreneur and founder of Soko, a social enterprise, has utilised LinkedIn to connect with investors, partners, and other professionals, which has been crucial for her business growth and professional development.

Social media serves as a platform for advocacy and raising awareness about gender equality and women's rights issues. This increased visibility can lead to policy changes and greater support for women's economic participation. In Africa, for example, the *#BringBackOurGirls* campaign, initiated on Twitter, brought global attention to the kidnapping of schoolgirls in Nigeria by the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram. This campaign highlighted the importance of girls' education and women's rights, mobilising international support and leading to discussions. The *#AnaKaman* ("Me Too") movement in Egypt, inspired by the global *#MeToo* campaign, gained traction on Twitter and other social media platforms. It has raised awareness about sexual harassment and women's rights in the country, leading to increased public discourse and some legislative changes. The *#MyDressMyChoice* campaign on Twitter, which protested against the harassment of women based on their dress, garnered significant attention and led to increased discussions on women's rights and gender-based violence in Kenya (Omondi, 2020).

Platforms like YouTube, Coursera, and LinkedIn Learning offer free or affordable access to educational resources and skill development courses. Through these resources, women can enhance their skills, learn new trades, and improve their employability. A study in the Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education found that online educational platforms have significantly increased women's access to education and skills training, contributing to their economic empowerment (Amina, 2021). The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) in Pakistan uses social media to provide digital literacy training for women, helping them to navigate the online space safely and effectively. This training has empowered many women to use social media for business and personal development. The African Women Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP) uses social media to provide training and resources to women entrepreneurs across Africa, helping them to improve their business skills and access new markets. The African Development Bank reports that online educational platforms and social media have significantly increased access to education and skill development for women in Africa, contributing to their economic empowerment. The AkiraChix initiative uses social media to offer training programs in coding and technology for young women in Kenya, helping them acquire valuable skills and improve their job prospects.

Support and mentorship networks in social media groups and communities provide opportunities where women can share experiences, seek advice, and find mentorship. These networks can be crucial for personal and professional growth, especially for women in male-dominated industries. Research in the Journal of Women's Entrepreneurship and Education shows that online support networks play a critical role in providing emotional support, practical advice, and mentorship, which are essential for women's entrepreneurial success (Redd & Wu, 2020). The Women in Technology in Nigeria (WITIN) organisation uses Facebook and WhatsApp groups to connect women in tech, providing a platform for mentorship, resource sharing, and support. This community has been crucial in helping women overcome challenges in the male-dominated tech industry. Social media groups and communities offer African women support networks where they can share experiences, seek advice, and find mentorship, which are essential for personal and professional growth. The Facebook group "She Leads Africa" provides a community for African women entrepreneurs to connect, share resources, and support each other. This network has been instrumental in fostering a supportive environment for women in business across the continent. Online support networks play a critical role in providing emotional support, practical advice, and mentorship for African women entrepreneurs, enhancing their chances of success. The Facebook group "Kenyan Women in Technology" serves as a platform for women in tech to connect, share resources, and support each other.

Businesses increasingly use social media to promote gender-responsive practices and corporate social responsibility initiatives, which can create more inclusive and supportive environments for women. A report by UN Women (2024) emphasises that companies engaging in gender-responsive marketing and social media campaigns enhance their brand reputation and contribute to broader gender equality efforts, benefiting women economically and socially. Gojek, a leading tech company in Indonesia, uses social media to promote its gender-inclusive policies and initiatives, such as supporting female drivers and providing safe spaces for women in their operations. These efforts have improved the company's reputation and empowered many women economically. Nigerian telecommunications company MTN uses social media to promote its gender-inclusive policies and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Safaricom, a leading telecommunications company in Kenya, uses social media to highlight its gender-inclusive policies and initiatives, such as promoting women in leadership and supporting women-led startups.

The role of social media in women's economic empowerment cannot be ignored. It has created a space for women who may otherwise have remained silent and disempowered in keeping with cultural and socioeconomic factors (Kabeer, 2012). While acknowledging this, it is equally important to examine the challenges and risks associated with women's use of social media. These challenges can undermine the gains made, and there is a need for well-thought-out strategies on how they can be mitigated. Cyberbullying of women is one such challenge that impacts many lives. The situation can be understood through several key aspects. A high percentage of women in Africa, particularly those who are active online, report experiencing cyberbullying. The forms of harassment include stalking, threatening messages, doxing, and sharing intimate images without consent. Young women and girls are particularly vulnerable. Those with a public presence, such as journalists, activists, and celebrities, often face intensified harassment. Traditional gender roles and societal norms can exacerbate the issue. Women challenging these norms or speaking out on social media often face backlash. Victims may feel ashamed or fear not being taken seriously, leading to underreporting of cyberbullying incidents. The effectiveness of reporting mechanisms varies, with many victims feeling that authorities do not take cyberbullying seriously. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues due to sustained online harassment. Cyberbullying can lead to social isolation and damage professional reputations, particularly for women in public-facing roles

Women are also at risk of privacy breaches and security threats on social media, including identity theft, hacking, and unauthorised use of personal data. These risks can deter women from sharing their experiences and participating in online business activities, thus affecting their economic empowerment. According to a study by the Pew Research Centre, 61% of women are concerned about privacy breaches and online security, which affects their willingness to engage fully on social media platforms. Women in Kenya face significant privacy and security challenges on social media, including doxing, cyberstalking, revenge porn, and sexual harassment (Mutie, 2021). These incidents highlight the need for stronger legal protections, better cybersecurity measures, and increased awareness to ensure the safety

For example, Esther Passaris, a prominent Kenyan politician and women's rights advocate has been subjected to significant online harassment. Her personal information has been leaked online, leading to threats and defamatory remarks. The harassment has forced Passaris to address the issue publicly, raising awareness about the dangers of online harassment and doxing for women in Kenya. An article published by DW on online harassment against female candidates in Kenya has highlighted the challenges women like Esther Passaris and Martha Karua face in Kenya (Krippahl, 2022). This underscores the need for better legal protections and enforcement to safeguard women online. Media Personality Betty Kyallo experienced a privacy breach when her intimate photos were leaked online. The incident brought to light the vulnerabilities in personal data security and the violation of privacy that many public figures face. The leak had a significant emotional and professional impact on Kyallo, highlighting the need for stricter measures to protect individuals' private information online. According to an article by Nairobi News, the incident with Betty Kyallo raised important discussions on privacy and the treatment of women in the media. Another example is blogger Njoki Chege, who has faced extensive online harassment, including cyberstalking, due to her outspoken views. The harassment often involves abusive messages, threats, and attempts to discredit her professionally. The harassment has affected Chege's sense of safety and has highlighted the broader issue of online abuse faced by women journalists and bloggers in Kenya. An article by The Standard details the online harassment faced by Njoki Chege and its broader implications for women in journalism. A female university student in Kenya experienced ‘revenge porn’ when her intimate videos were leaked by a former intimate partner. The videos were widely circulated on social media, causing severe distress and reputational damage. The incident brought attention to the issue of revenge porn in Kenya and the lack of effective legal frameworks to protect victims. A report by the Kenya Human Rights Commission discussed the prevalence of revenge porn and the urgent need for legal reforms to address such violations. Identity theft and fraud are also a negative effect of social media use among women. Dorothy Nyong'o, a well-known public figure in Kenya and the mother of award-winning actress Lupita Nyong'o faced identity theft when her social media profiles were duplicated and used to scam people. The fake profiles solicited money from unsuspecting victims, tarnishing her reputation. The incident highlighted the risks of identity theft for public figures and the need for social media platforms to implement better verification processes and security measures. An article by The Star reported on this identity theft incident, emphasising the need for stronger cybersecurity measures. In another incident, Mercy Juma, a Kenyan journalist, faced sexual harassment and intimidation online due to her investigative reporting. She received threatening messages and abusive comments, which affected her ability to work freely and safely. The harassment brought to light the risks faced by women journalists in Kenya and the urgent need for protection against online abuse.

Digital access issues significantly challenge women's economic empowerment through social media in Kenya. A substantial digital divide exists, with disparities in internet access, affordability, digital literacy, and device access. For instance, many women in rural areas, such as those in Turkana or Kilifi counties, may lack reliable internet connections. This limited connectivity prevents them from engaging in online businesses, accessing digital marketplaces, and utilising social media platforms to promote their products and services. Without consistent internet access, women in these regions miss out on opportunities to participate in the digital economy and improve their economic prospects.

Affordability is another critical barrier. The cost of internet services and digital devices remains prohibitively high for many Kenyan women, especially those in low-income areas like Kibera in Nairobi or the informal settlements in Mombasa. For example, a smartphone, which is essential for accessing social media platforms, can cost more than a month's income for many women. Additionally, data plans are often expensive, making it difficult for women to stay connected. This financial barrier excludes them from the economic benefits that digital platforms can offer, such as networking, marketing, and accessing educational resources to enhance their business skills.

Digital literacy also presents a significant issue affecting women's economic empowerment through social media. Many Kenyan women lack the necessary skills to effectively use digital tools and platforms to set up and manage their economic activities online. This gap in digital literacy can be attributed to limited access to education and training programs focusing on digital skills. For example, educational opportunities are limited in areas like Mandera and Wajir, and digital literacy rates are low. Without adequate digital literacy, women may struggle to navigate social media platforms, missing out on opportunities to expand their businesses, reach wider audiences, and engage in e-commerce. Initiatives like the Ajira Digital Program aim to address this gap by offering digital skills training, but there is still a long way to go to ensure widespread digital literacy among women.

Moreover, societal and cultural norms often restrict women's access to digital technologies. In some Kenyan communities, prevailing attitudes discourage women from using the internet or owning digital devices. These norms can further marginalise women and limit their participation in the digital economy. For instance, in certain parts of Kenya's Rift Valley, women may face resistance from family members or community leaders when attempting to use social media for business purposes. This resistance hinders their economic independence and empowerment, as they are discouraged from utilising digital platforms that could enhance their economic opportunities.

Algorithm bias and content moderation issues present significant barriers to women's economic empowerment through social media in Kenya (Kabeer, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from social media platforms to implement fairer algorithms and more effective content moderation practices. By doing so, platforms can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that enables Kenyan women to fully leverage digital opportunities for economic growth.

Algorithm bias occurs when the automated systems that curate and recommend content on social media platforms inadvertently favour certain types of content over others, often reflecting existing societal biases. In Kenya, this bias can manifest in various ways, disproportionately affecting women. Many Kenyan women entrepreneurs use platforms like Facebook and Instagram to market their products. However, algorithmic bias can reduce the visibility of their posts. Algorithms may prioritise content with high engagement from accounts with larger followings, often male-dominated, thereby marginalising women's posts that may receive less initial engagement due to smaller networks. Additionally, algorithms may promote content that reinforces gender stereotypes. For instance, a study by Policy, an East African civic tech organisation, found that content from women discussing technology or business often received less promotion compared to content related to beauty or fashion, aligning with traditional gender roles. This bias limits the reach and influence of women engaged in non-traditional sectors.

Content moderation practices on social media platforms can also disproportionately affect women. Automated systems and human moderators can exhibit biases through overly strict enforcement or inadequate protection against harassment. Kenyan women's content discussing sensitive but critical issues, such as gender-based violence, can be flagged and removed under content moderation policies designed to curb explicit content. Posts from women's rights groups like the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Kenya) discussing domestic violence might be mistakenly removed for violating content policies and silencing crucial conversations and support networks (Federation of Women Lawyers, 2021). Conversely, content moderation systems often fail to protect women from online harassment adequately. High-profile women, such as activists and journalists, frequently report receiving abusive messages that remain unchecked. For example, Kenyan journalist Yvonne Okwara has faced sustained online harassment without sufficient intervention from platform moderators. This lack of effective moderation can drive women away from social media, limiting their economic opportunities.

Misinformation and scams on social media present substantial challenges to women's economic empowerment in Kenya (Karlan & Zinman, 2010). These issues undermine trust in digital platforms, making it more difficult for women to harness these tools for economic growth. The proliferation of misinformation can distort the online environment, while scams directly target women's financial resources and entrepreneurial efforts. Misinformation often spreads rapidly on social media, affecting public perception and decision-making. For Kenyan women entrepreneurs, misinformation can lead to mistrust among potential customers. For instance, false reviews or negative propaganda about a business can damage its reputation, reducing sales and customer engagement. This is particularly harmful in sectors where women try to establish themselves, such as online retail or freelance services. The spread of false information about product quality or business practices can be devastating, especially for small businesses that rely heavily on word-of-mouth and social media marketing.

Scams are another significant issue that affects women disproportionately. Women entrepreneurs in Kenya often use social media to market their products and services, making them targets for various types of scams. For example, some women have reported falling victim to fake investment schemes promoted through social media platforms. These scams promise high returns on investments but result in significant financial losses. Additionally, fraudulent buyers may trick sellers into sending products without making payments, exploiting the trust of these women entrepreneurs. These scams lead to financial losses and discourage women from participating fully in the digital economy due to fear of being defrauded.

Conclusion

This study delved into the intricate relationship between social media usage and women's economic empowerment. Through the analysis of various case studies, the research has highlighted both the benefits and challenges that social media presents for women in economic activities.

On one hand, social media has emerged as a potent tool for expanding business networks, broadening market access, and offering platforms for professional growth. Women entrepreneurs have successfully used social media to overcome traditional barriers, such as limited access to finance and markets, by leveraging these digital platforms for marketing, networking, and sales.

On the other hand, the study identified significant challenges associated with social media use. Issues like online harassment, privacy concerns, and the digital divide remain substantial obstacles. The gap in digital literacy and access to technology, especially between urban and rural areas, exacerbates these challenges and highlights existing inequalities.

The dual nature of social media's impact on women's economic empowerment underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of its role. While it presents substantial opportunities, the accompanying risks and barriers must be carefully considered. Balancing these aspects is essential for fully harnessing social media's potential to support women's economic progress.

In conclusion, social media represents a complex but significant factor in women's economic empowerment. This study emphasises the importance of recognising and addressing the multifaceted nature of this relationship to ensure that social media effectively promotes women's economic activities and overall empowerment. Future research should continue to explore this dynamic, seeking new strategies and insights to better understand and utilise social media's benefits for women.

Recommendations.

This section discusses possible measures that can be taken to mitigate the challenges faced by women when using social media as a tool for economic empowerment.

3. Establishing support networks, including counselling and legal aid, helps victims navigate the repercussions of cyberbullying. Initiatives aimed at empowering women digitally, including safe online practices and digital literacy, are crucial. In Kenya, cyberbullying is a recognised problem, with several high-profile cases bringing attention to the issue. The Kenyan government and various organisations are taking steps to combat it, for example, the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018, which addresses cyber harassment, though enforcement can be inconsistent. The aforementioned Act is a step towards addressing cybercrimes, including cyberbullying. Organisations like the Kenyan Women in Technology (WIT) and the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Kenya) provide support and advocacy for victims. These campaigns aim to educate the public about the consequences of cyberbullying and encourage respectful online behaviour.
4. Addressing digital access issues requires a multi-agency approach. The Kenyan government, private sector entities, and non-governmental organisations must collaborate to improve infrastructure, making internet access more affordable and widespread. For instance, the Kenyan government's efforts to expand broadband access through initiatives like the National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure (NOFBI) project are crucial. Additionally, targeted digital literacy programs, such as those provided by organisations like AkiraChix, are essential to equip women with the skills needed to navigate and leverage social media platforms effectively. By addressing these challenges, Kenya can

create a more inclusive digital environment that empowers women economically and allows them to fully participate in the opportunities presented by social media.

5. To mitigate the challenges related to algorithmic bias and content moderation, social media platforms need to adopt more nuanced and inclusive practices. Platforms should implement transparent algorithms that actively work to eliminate bias. This involves regular audits and adjustments to ensure equitable visibility for all users, regardless of gender. Enhanced content moderation policies should balance the removal of harmful content with the protection of important discussions. Training moderators to understand cultural contexts and the specific challenges faced by women in Kenya can improve the accuracy and fairness of moderation decisions. Additionally, providing robust support systems for users to report and address harassment can empower women to use social media more confidently. Platforms should ensure that reports of harassment are taken seriously and acted upon promptly.
6. Social media platforms need to enhance their algorithms to detect and reduce the spread of false information. This involves using advanced machine learning techniques and employing fact-checking teams to verify information before it goes viral. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have started implementing such measures, but continuous improvement and context-specific adjustments are necessary to effectively counter misinformation in regions like Kenya. Additionally, increasing public awareness about identifying and avoiding scams is crucial. Educational campaigns and digital literacy programs can help women recognise red flags and employ safer online practices.
7. Stronger regulatory frameworks are essential to protect consumers and entrepreneurs from scams. Through agencies like the Communications Authority of Kenya, the Kenyan government can play a critical role in enforcing stricter regulations on digital financial transactions and penalising fraudulent activities. Collaborations between government bodies, social media platforms, and civil society organisations can create a safer digital environment. For example, initiatives that offer legal support and financial recourse for scam victims can empower more women to engage confidently in online business activities.

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