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Predictors of Online Civic Participation among Women Journalists: The Role of Digital Media Literacy

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, where interactions, mobilisations and opinions are deeply influenced by digital media, civic participation remains uneven, even among journalists who are deeply engaged in the digital spaces. Thus, the skills required to efficiently navigate digital spaces, Digital Media Literacy (DML), are the need of the hour. Moreover, finding the relationship between DML and Civic participation in digital spaces is inevitable. Addressing this, the present study examines whether DML predicts online civic participation among women journalists in India. Hence, this study applies the Binary Logistic Regression model to predict the factors influencing online civic participation of women journalists in India in the digital era. The study analysed a random sample of 300 women journalists working on digital media platforms from six major metropolitan cities in India. The findings indicate that digital media literacy is a strong and statistically significant predictor of online civic participation ($B = 1.502$, $SE = 0.411$, $p < .001$), with higher DML levels substantially increasing the odds of engagement. By focusing on women journalists, this study contributes to existing scholarship on the gender digital divide and its impact on civic engagement in the Global South, enforcing the role of digital media literacy initiatives.

Keywords: digital media literacy, civic participation, women journalists, India, digital skills.

1. Introduction

Today, campaigns and protests are not just physical; they have transcended to the virtual digital realm, where you can sit in the comfort of your home and still raise your opinion against pretty much anything and everything. From sharing first-hand information to spreading awareness to fundraising and mobilizing support for a social cause, civic participation today is deeply intertwined with everyday digital practices (Theocharis, 2015; Tinák, Gálik, 2026). Thus, digital media has become an inevitable part of common people's civic engagement, even before we know it. Social media platforms, in particular, have enabled the rapid dissemination of information, fostered networked publics, and facilitated new forms of collective action. Though these platforms promise greater civic inclusion due to their easy reach and accessibility, participation remains highly uneven. Not all users who have access to digital media choose to engage civically, nor do they do so with equal confidence, effectiveness, or impact (Valenzuela, 2013).

Scholars of technological determinism put forward the idea that technology has a causative link to shaping the nature of a society. On the contrary, in the book *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Norris, 2001) argues that access to technology does not produce democratic engagements. Moreover, digital skills, socio-demographic factors, and social positioning (Boulianne, 2015) play a significant role in determining whether digital opportunities translate into meaningful civic action. Digital Media

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Literacy (DML) has emerged as a critical concept in this context. DML encompasses not only the technical skill sets required to navigate digital spaces but also the critical skills of evaluating online information, understanding media logics, and creating and circulating content (Kahne et al., 2012). These skills are extremely relevant in the current digital age marked by misinformation and AI-generated deepfakes.

Empirical research has linked digital media literacy to political engagements, online expression, and civic engagement, particularly among youth and marginalised groups (Kahne et al., 2012; Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2013). However, most of these studies remain descriptive and correlational, documenting associations between the two without actually testing if DML can predict civic participation when other influential factors are accounted for. At the same time, a parallel body of literature has identified several well-established predictors of online civic participation, including socio-demographic characteristics, media use patterns, and political orientations (Verba et al., 1995; Boulianne, 2015). What remains underexplored is how DML operates alongside these factors and whether it retains explanatory power when they are statistically controlled.

Despite these insights, few studies integrate digital media literacy, socio-demographic anchors, media-use characteristics, and motivational orientations within a single predictive framework. This gap is clearly evident in the case of women journalists, whose civic engagement in digital spaces is shaped by intersecting dynamics of visibility, professional identity, and structural constraints. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a predictive analytical approach to examine whether Digital Media Literacy predicts online civic participation among women, while controlling for age, employment status, frequency of media use, advocacy group membership, belief in the power of social media, political interest, and expressive online behaviours such as posting and discussion.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the Predictor Variables

Variable ID	Description	Type	Coding/ Categories	Reference Category
DML	Digital Media Literacy score	Continuous	Range: 1.0–3.0	—
Age	Age group of the respondent	Categorical (modelled as an ordered predictor)	1 = 18–25; 2 = 26–35; 3 = 36–45; 4 = >45	—
Media_Use	Frequency of digital media use	Ordinal (dummy-coded)	1 = High; 2 = Medium; 3 = Low	Low
Advocacy_Membership	Membership in advocacy/activist groups online	Nominal (binary)	1 = Yes; 0 = No	No
SM_Power	Belief in the power of social media for social change	Nominal (binary)	1 = Yes; 0 = No	No
Pol_Interest	Level of political interest	Ordinal (dummy-coded)	1 = High; 2 = Medium; 3 = Low	Low
Posts_on_Issues	Frequency of posting on social issues	Ordinal (dummy-coded)	1 = High; 2 = Medium; 3 = Low	Low
Employment	Employment status of the respondent	Nominal (dummy-coded)	1 = Employed; 2 = Unemployed; 3 = Student; 4 = Self-employed	Employed

Statistical Model: The DV, online civic participation among women journalists, were coded as: 1, if the respondent is an active civic participant.

$$Y = \begin{cases} \\ 0, \text{ if the respondent is not an active civic participant} \end{cases}$$

The model estimates the log-odds of a respondent being an active civic participant as a function of multiple independent variables. The logistic regression equation is specified as follows:

$$Z = \text{Log}\left(\frac{\text{Pi}}{1-Pi}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \beta_4X_4 + \beta_5X_5 + \beta_6X_6 + \beta_7X_7 + \beta_8X_8 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

– Pi is the probability that the i-th respondent is actively participating in civic participation,

– 1–Pi is the probability that the respondent does not engage in online civic participation,

– $\text{Log}\left(\frac{\text{Pi}}{1-Pi}\right)$ is the log-odds of active civic participation,

– β_0 is the intercept,

– β_1 to β_2 are the coefficients for the predictor variables β_1X_1 to β_8X_8 , and ε is the error term.

– X_1 to X_8 are the predictor variables

$$\text{Log}\left(\frac{\text{Pi}}{1-Pi}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1\,(\text{DML}) + \beta_2\,(\text{Age}) + \ldots.$$

2. Materials and methods

Binary logistic regression was used for forming the empirical model of this study since the dependent variable, civic participation, is binary or dichotomous (Agresti, 2006). Also, it is considered a good model for analysis in which both continuous and categorical independent variables are applicable (Garson, 2006).

For the current study, Digital Media Literacy (DML) was treated as the primary independent variable (IV) of interest, as the central objective was to examine its influence on online civic participation of women journalists in the Indian context. To ensure that the observed relationship between DML and civic participation was not confounded by alternative explanations, a set of control variables was included in the analysis. These control variables comprised of socio-demographic factors *(*age group, employment status*)*, media use characteristics (frequency of media use, membership in advocacy groups, belief in the power of social media), and online behavioral indicators (participation in socio-political discussions, frequency of posting on social issues). Including these variables as controls allowed the model to statistically isolate the effect of DML while accounting for background characteristics and behavioral tendencies that might otherwise influence civic participation outcomes.

SPSS (IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 31.0) software was used for the quantitative data analysis. The study employs binary logistic regression for data analysis, as the dependent variable (DV), Civic Participation, is dichotomous or binary.

The study employed a quantitative survey design, conducted among 300 women journalists across India. Purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball dissemination, was adopted to reach respondents who met the study's inclusion criteria of women actively engaged in journalistic work in digital media platforms and who are regular users of digital media for personal content sharing. The online survey was administered between February 2025 and April 2025. Responses were collected from six major metropolitan cities in the country – Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad, in order to equally represent respondents across diverse regional and linguistic contexts within the country. The survey link was disseminated to a total of 500 women journalists across India through professional networks and media organisations. At the end of the data collection period, 335 valid responses were received, of which 300 were retained for analysis after data cleaning, corresponding to a response rate of 60 %.

The variables used in the study are presented in Table 1.

3. Discussion

Digital Media Literacy (DML) refers to the ability of an individual to efficiently and responsibly access, use, understand, critically analyse, and engage with digital media (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2015; Guess et al., 2020; Swart, 2021) of all forms. The modern-day definition of DML extends beyond its traditional notion of making an individual

technically proficient in using and accessing digital platforms. DML, in the context of this study, focuses not only on the technical side but also on the critical consumption and content creation aspects. Hence, DML can only be conceptualised as a multi-dimensional skill. This study operationalises DML through three skills: technical, critical thinking, and content creation, since prior scholarship argues that for effective online participation (Baird, 2022), digital illiteracy acts as a serious barrier (Hoffmann et al., 2015).

First, technical skills are the practical ability to use smartphones and other gadgets and are considered the basic level of digital competence. Studies have proven that higher levels of digital and technical skills significantly increase individuals' online engagement (Vicente, Novo, 2014). Additionally, self-efficacy in navigating digital spaces positively correlates with digital civic participation (Choi et al., 2017) but it alone cannot guarantee digital civic engagement (Tenenboim, 2025).

Second, critical thinking skills, which are considered the most important aspect of digital media literacy by scholarship, as they go beyond the traditional norms of simply accessing digital media to critically understand and analyse it, thus combating misinformation in this era of deepfakes (Anstead et al., 2025). Critical thinking skills capture the evaluative and interpretive competencies central to civic participation in information-rich digital spaces: (i) understanding and interpreting media messages (critical consumption) (McGrew, 2019), and (ii) verifying credibility through strategies like double-checking and lateral reading (Wineburg, McGrew, 2019; Brodsky et al., 2021).

Lastly, content creation skill contributes to the production part of DML. It helps in the participatory dimension, where individuals can produce and share content online. Civic participation online is not possible without expressing one's opinion online through comments, posts and discussions. Higher levels of media literacy can predict higher interaction with digital platforms and multimedia content creation, which can be translated to digital participation (Literat, 2014).

Thus, combining these three skill sets to develop the ability to carefully navigate and utilise digital media for the greater good of society is imperative for individuals working in information-dissemination environments, especially digital media journalists. Thus, improving media and information literacy is imperative for developing knowledge on human behaviour (Austin et al., 2021), such as civic engagement (Belentsov, 2025). The set of activities, which individuals carry out on their own or in groups, enhances the living conditions of others and is typically called Civic participation (Cnaan, Park, 2015). Whereas "civic participation online differs from this offline or on-ground civic participation definition, it unfolds to include unconventional activities such as sharing awareness posts, writing emails to authorities about civic issues, and fundraising through digital platforms" (Cho et al., 2020). Moreover, as per earlier studies, commitment to community (social issues) and efficiency in navigating digital technologies have a significant positive effect on online civic engagement (Deng, Fei, 2023; Durotoye et al., 2025). On the other hand, some studies argue that platform use and engagement alone cannot predict online civic participation behaviours (Valenzuela, 2013).

Socio-demographic factors play a major role in civic participation both online and offline. Historically, India has had clear gender divisions in social and political participation, where women have been deliberately left behind (Prillaman, 2021), including in work sectors that require social exposure, such as journalism. Thus, women journalists fall within the highly sensitive intersection of marginalised communities in India. As women are a marginalised community and journalism is a profession which requires a sense of accountability, when a woman journalist, in particular, is able to critically 'use' and 'engage' with the digital media platforms, they become civic participants online. According to studies, digital life elements foster positive social participation among women by providing a sense of community (Showkat et al., 2025). Prior studies also substantiate this claim, stating that digital platforms have the potential to effectively communicate ideas that can increase women's civic participation (Mano, 2023). Thus, studying the nuances of this intersectionality in digital spaces further requires considering other socio-demographic factors, such as age (Vicente, Novo, 2014) and employment status (Alvarez et al., 2017). Age as a predictor is found to be negatively associated with online socio-political expression, contrary to the common belief that young users may have more interaction since they spend more time on digital spaces (Boulianne, Shehata, 2021). Some studies suggest that socio-economic factors become irrelevant once the digital

divide is overcome, while others argue that they continue to shape differential access to and engagement with digital platforms (Vicente, Novo, 2014; Yang et al., 2025).

Research has consistently demonstrated that characteristics of media usage play an important role in shaping online civic participation, although their effects often depend on context and motivation. Studies show that the frequency of social media use, particularly for public discussion, is positively associated with civic and political engagement, as it facilitates exposure to civic information and networked interaction (Boulianne, 2015, De Zúñiga et al., 2012). Beyond usage frequency, scholars highlight the importance of networked affiliations and advocacy-oriented connections, suggesting that individuals embedded in activist or issue-based online networks are more likely to engage civically (Lee, 2021). Research also indicates that beliefs about the efficacy of social media, such as viewing platforms as effective tools for mobilisation and social change, can strengthen the link between online activity and civic action (Valenzuela, 2013). However, emerging evidence cautions that media exposure alone is insufficient, as active engagement and contextual factors mediate participatory outcomes (Oden, Porter, 2023).

With the growing popularity of social media platforms (such as X, Instagram, Facebook, etc.), individuals, especially marginalised groups, have begun using them as an alternative platform for self-expression. Given that online civic participation often involves using the internet as a platform for self-expression (Bennett et al., 2009), assessing its influence became important. Digital gender divide and skill factors are not the only standalone factors that account for disparities in online civic engagement; behaviours and motivations also affect them. Individuals who frequently posted or shared content on socio-political issues on social media were found to engage in civic participation both online and offline (Gearhart et al., 2024). The literature also reveals that scenarios in which age is negatively related to civic participation suggest that underlying motivations (e.g., political interest) matter more than mere media use characteristics (Boulianne, Shehata, 2021).

The literature review revealed a significant lack of empirical studies in the domain. The current study is thus trying to bridge this gap by quantitatively assessing whether DML can predict online civic participation along with control variables such as age, employment, media use frequency, political interest, belief in the power of social media, posting on social issues and advocacy membership, while holding gender constant (females in this case). As a result, a preliminary hypothesis was formulated based on the existing literature, which gave qualitative descriptive evidence for a possible association between Digital Media Literacy and Civic participation (Kahne et al., 2012; Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2013). Based on the literature, this study assumes that DML levels of women journalists have an influence on their online civic participation, and hence, the following null hypothesis was formulated;

H_1: Digital media literacy significantly increases the likelihood of online civic participation among women journalists.

This study tries to address this gap through a predictive analysis using binary logistic regression. It not only establishes whether DML is statistically significant but also allows for the identification of additional predictors that may strengthen or weaken women's likelihood of civic participation online. By moving beyond descriptive accounts to predictive modelling, this study contributes a more rigorous, empirically grounded understanding of how DML shapes civic outcomes among women journalists in India.

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics: The final respondents were N = 300, with an age range of 18 years or older. Figure 1 shows the DML score of the respondents based on their technical skills, critical thinking and content creation skills.

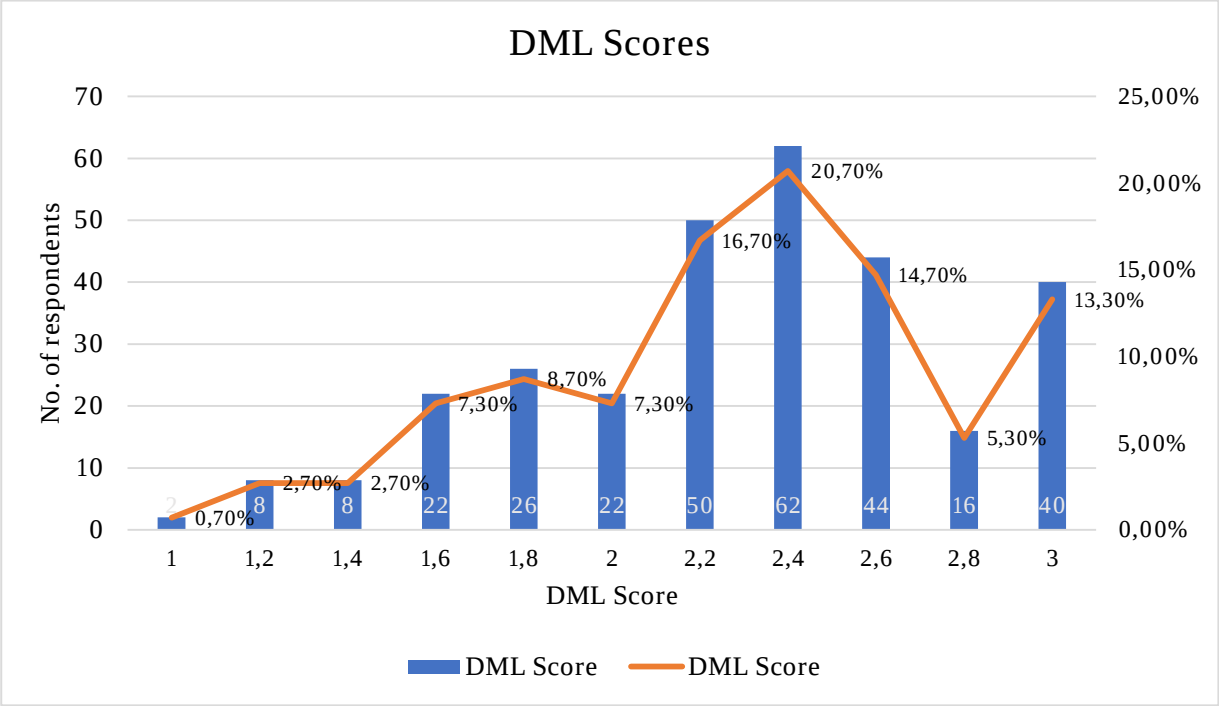


Fig. 1. Distribution of DML Scores Among Respondents
Notes: Numbers displayed inside the bars represent the frequency (N) of respondents at each Digital Media Literacy (DML) score. Percentages shown outside the bars indicate the proportion of respondents corresponding to each score, calculated based on the total sample size (N = 300). Higher DML scores indicate higher levels of digital media literacy.

Table 2. Age distribution of the respondents

Age Group	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
18–25 years	60	20.0
26–35 years	100	33.3
36–45 years	58	19.3
More than 45 years	82	27.3
Total	300	100.0

The cross-tabulation effects, along with the chi-square tests of independence of civic participation by DML, age and political interest, are presented in Tables 3, 4 and Tables 5, respectively. To enhance readability and facilitate descriptive comparison, the continuous DML score was recoded into three categories: high, medium, and low, using an equal-interval approach. Scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.66 were classified as low DML, scores from 1.67 to 2.33 as medium DML, and scores from 2.34 to 3.00 as high DML. The continuous DML score was retained for the logistic regression analysis to preserve statistical power.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of Civic Participation (CV) by Digital Media Literacy (DML)

DML	CV: No	CV: Yes	Total
Low DML	12 (30.0 %)	28 (70.0 %)	40 (100 %)
Medium DML	18 (18.4 %)	80 (81.6 %)	98 (100 %)
High DML	22 (13.6 %)	140 (86.4 %)	162 (100 %)
Total	52 (17.3 %)	248 (82.7 %)	300 (100 %)

Notes: Values in parentheses represent row percentages.
Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 6.15$, $p = .046$; Linear-by-linear association $\chi^2 = 5.67$, $p = .017$.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of Civic Participation (CV) by Age

Age Group	CV: No	CV: Yes	Total
18–25 years	18 (30.0 %)	42 (70.0 %)	60 (100 %)
26–35 years	20 (20.0 %)	80 (80.0 %)	100 (100 %)
36–45 years	14 (24.1 %)	44 (75.9 %)	58 (100 %)
More than 45 years	0 (0.0 %)	82 (100.0 %)	82 (100 %)
Total	52 (17.3 %)	248 (82.7 %)	300 (100 %)

Notes: Values in parentheses represent row percentages.
Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2(3, N = 300) = 26.28$, $p < .001$; Linear-by-linear association $\chi^2 = 19.97$, $p < .001$.

Table 5. Cross-tabulation of Civic Participation (CV) by Political Interest

Political Interest	CV: No	CV: Yes	Total
High	8 (12.3 %)	57 (87.7 %)	65
Medium	7 (10.0 %)	63 (90.0 %)	70
Low	37 (22.4 %)	128 (77.6 %)	165
Total	52 (17.3 %)	248 (82.7 %)	300

Notes: Values in parentheses represent row percentages.
Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 6.76$, $p = .034$; Linear-by-linear association $\chi^2 = 4.81$, $p = .028$.

Table 6 and Table 7 represent the Model Fitness and Model Summary for the regression analysis.

Table 6. Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	59.239	13	<.001
	Block	59.239	13	<.001
	Model	59.239	13	<.001

Table 6 shows that the overall fitness of the model was examined using the Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients and pseudo R^2 indices (Cox & Snell R^2 and Nagelkerke R^2). The Omnibus Test yielded a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 59.239$, df = 13, $p < .001$), indicating that the predictors collectively improved the model fit over the null model.

Table 7. Model Summary

Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	217.440[a]	.179	.297
a. Estimation terminated at iteration number 6 because parameter estimates changed by less than			

As per Table 7, the pseudo R^2 values (Cox & Snell $R^2 = .179$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = .297$) suggest that the model explains between 17 % and 29 % of the variance in online civic participation. These results indicate that the binary logistic regression model is statistically adequate for predicting the likelihood of online civic participation among respondents.

Table 8. Binary Logistic Regression Results

Variable	Predictor	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
	Intercept	−5.108	11.999	.001	.006
X1	Digital Media Literacy	1.502	13.341	<.001*	4.491

X2	Age Group	0.950	22.482	<.001*	2.585
X3	Media Use Frequency		4.139	.126	
	High	1.409	2.935	.087	4.092
	Medium	0.149	0.067	.795	1.160
	Low (Ref.)	0	.	.	.
X4	Advocacy membership	.204	0.198	.656	1.227
X5	Belief in SM power	.343	0.507	.477	1.408
X6	Posting on Social Issues		4.395	.111	
	High	−0.604	1.348	.246	0.547
	Medium	−0.967	4.392	.036	0.380
	Low (Ref.)	0	.	.	.
X7	Political Interest		11.464	.003	
	High	1.888	11.167	.001*	6.605
	Medium	0.471	0.984	.321	1.601
	Low (Ref.)	0	.	.	.
X8	Employment Status		6.605	0.86	
	Employed	−0.902	2.857	.091	0.406
	Unemployed	−0.807	1.624	.203	0.446
	Student	0.700	0.699	.403	2.013
	Self-employed (Ref.)	0	.	.	.

Notes: Variable(s) entered on step 1: Digital media literacy (Range 1.00-3.00), Age group (was treated as a single ordered predictor), Media use frequency (1: High, 2: Medium, 3: Low), Advocacy membership (1: Yes, 2: No), Belief in SM power (1: Yes, 2: No), Posting on social issues (1: High, 2: Medium, 3: Low), Political interest (1: High, 2: Medium, 3: Low), Employment (1: Employed, 2: Unemployed, 3: Student, 4: Self-employed). * Represents significant values.

Political interest also emerged as a significant motivational factor shaping online civic participation. In the regression model, political interest showed a significant overall effect (Wald = 11.464, df = 2, p = .003) (refer to Table 8). Notably, respondents with high political interest were substantially more likely to participate civically online (B = 1.888, p = .001; Exp(B) = 6.61) compared to those with low political interest, indicating a strong motivational threshold effect. Cross-tabulation (see Table 5) showed that civic participation rates were markedly higher among respondents with high (87.7 %) and medium (90.0 %) political interest than among those with low (77.6 %) political interest. The chi-square test confirmed a significant association ($\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 6.76$, p = .034), and the linear-by-linear association ($\chi^2 = 4.81$, p = .028) indicated that participation increased systematically with higher levels of political interest (Gearhart et al., 2024). Journalists are inherently expected to have a strong socio-political awareness, which was reflected in this outcome. The results highlight political interest as a crucial driver that works in tandem with digital literacy to translate skills into civic action.

In contrast to DML and political interest, media use frequency did not significantly predict civic participation in the multivariate model (overall p = .126). This finding reinforces the prior study results, which state the distinction between exposure and engagement, suggesting that frequent use of digital platforms does not automatically lead to civic participation (Oden, Porter, 2023) once literacy and motivation are taken into account. Similarly, membership in advocacy groups and belief in the power of social media were not significant predictors, indicating that symbolic affiliation or perceived platform efficacy alone may be insufficient to spur civic action. These findings point to a gap between attitudinal alignment and participatory behaviour, particularly in digital environments (Tenenboim, 2025). Posting on social or general issues revealed a more complex pattern. While the overall effect was not significant, one category of posting behaviour showed a significant negative association with civic participation (B = −0.967, p = .036; Exp(B) = 0.38). This suggests that moderate levels of expressive posting may not translate into sustained civic engagement and may instead reflect performative or episodic participation. Moreover, employment status did not emerge as a significant predictor, indicating that online civic participation may be less constrained by formal labour structures, as digital platforms reduce barriers related to time, location, and institutional access.

5. Conclusion

The study aims to statistically analyse whether digital media literacy (DML) can predict online civic participation among Indian women journalists. In the current study, DML was taken as

the primary independent variable (IV) while keeping online Civic Participation as the dependent variable (DV). To isolate the effect of the IV of interest, seven control variables were introduced, including age, employment status, frequency of media use, advocacy group membership, belief in the power of social media, political interest, and expressive online behaviours such as posting and discussion. Based on the prior literature and arguments, the paper hypothesised that DML significantly increases the likelihood of online civic participation among women journalists. The findings suggested that respondents with higher DML levels have higher civic participation intent. Proficiency in digital media usage provides the necessary competencies for navigating and engaging with digital spaces, while political interest supplies the motivational impetus for civic action. These findings support prior scholarship that has stressed the importance of self-efficacy as well as having both access and required skills in digital spaces to ensure inclusive civic participation online. Interestingly, the results here strongly suggest that women, especially those working in information and socio-political environments in India, have a strong civic sense that reflects in their digital interactions and contributes to the existing literature on civic engagement patterns in the Global South. This underscores the importance of incorporating unified digital media literacy-related courses at the national level of education. The findings can also be closely tied to broader practices of digital citizenship, in which individuals actively engage, deliberate, and contribute responsibly within digital public spheres. Women are trying to break the social stigma and deliberate ignorance they faced throughout generations in socio-political discourse, using their skills and access to digital media.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Although the sample includes respondents across India, the scope of this study is limited to women journalists in India and cannot be generalised to the larger female population of the country, as the researcher was looking at a particular niche community of individuals working in digital media spaces. Further studies can be done with a larger, general population to understand broader patterns. Secondly, the study focuses on online civic participation and has not assessed if this translates into offline or physical action. Finally, the data rely on self-reported measures, which may be biased by social desirability, particularly given respondents' identities as journalists.

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