



Gendered digital mediation in rural education: Common Service Centres (CSCs) as social institutions

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Abstract

The paper explores the sociological aspects of digital mediation in the ecosystem of the Common Service Centres in India (CSCs). Although the Digital India mission makes CSCs neutral infrastructure of e-governance and educational provision, this is why the current research proposes that they serve as social institutions, embedded in the rural power structures. The work breaks down the theory of habitus as proposed by Bourdieu, technofeminism as proposed by Wajcman, and the spatial sociology and uses this conceptual framework to analyse the role of the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) as a gendered gatekeeper. The paper shows that access to digital education among women is not only limited by the lack of connectivity, but also by the so-called mediation biases, such as spatial marginalisation, temporal impoverishment, and patriarchal control. The results indicate that the VLE model may start replicating instead of mitigating the inequalities in rural education without a sociological restructuring of the model.

Keywords: Common Service Centres, digital sociology, gendered mediation, rural education, technofeminism, social capital

Introduction

The Global South story of development has recently turned to the so called digital turn where technology is not merely a means to economic growth but the actual infrastructure of citizenship. This change in India is anchored by the Digital India project, one of the flagship projects that seek to turn the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [MEIT], 2019) [8]. This vision argues that connectivity is the new electricity, which is a basic utility that may overcome the historic discrepancies of opportunity. The pivotal part in this architectural vision is the Common Service Centre (CSC). Having more than 500,000 working units nationwide, the CSC is projected to be the front-end delivery point of very large numbers of government, financial and social services to the rural citizenry.

To the rural student the CSC represents more than just a convenience, it represents the main, and sometimes only, point of contact with the contemporary educational reality. It is the online entry point where life opportunities are being bargained, both by submitting scholarship applications and exams, and getting digital literacy certificates under the giant government initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyaan (PMGDISHA). In this regard, CSC is the physical place where the abstract promise of the Digital India is intertwined with the concrete reality of the rural desire.

Nevertheless, a sociological study of these centres shows to create a fateful conflict between the "technological" and the social. The prevailing party line of policy discussion tends to cast the CSC as an apolitical hub; as a simple provider of hardware, bandwidth and e-governance applications. This article is an argument against that presumption of a neutral position. It argues that, the CSC is actually a Social Institution, but it is not only related to servers, fibre optics, and biometric scanners, but also the unseen, yet strict rules,

principles, and social ranks under which it is used. These hierarchies are strictly stratified by caste, class and above all, gender, in the context of rural India. Technology will never be inserted in a social vacuum; it is embedded within an already existing power structure. Hence the digital cannot be distinguished by the social.

The digital divide can therefore no longer be seen as a dichotomy of those who have seen the benefits of computers and those who have not (Haves and Have-Nots). With the dissemination of access, the divide has transformed to be an issue of second-level digital divide, defined by deep disparities in competence, autonomy and nature of usage (Hargittai, 2002) [5]. In the case of the rural girl-child, the CSC is not easily accessible by simply walking into a shop; it is a complicated web of social permissions and surveillance. The very process of entering a social area, communicating with a male operator (the Village Level Entrepreneur or VLE) and absorbing so-called technical knowledge are all burdened with gender expectations. Technology in most rural milieus is culturally encoded as masculine and public places such as markets where CSCs are usually found are often limited places for young women. This forms a paradox of the infrastructure that is supposed to empower rural women possibly becoming the replica of their exclusion. This paradox is the main topic of the current paper that seeks to answer three key questions: First, how does the business framework of the VLE model based on private entrepreneurship interact and potentially strengthen rural gender norms? Second, how digital mediation (the real help offered by the operator) is different between male and female students and this can favour male learning as compared to female dependency? And lastly, how do the spatial limitations and the moral geography of the village support the gendered disenfranchisement of women in the digital educational arena? Answering such questions, we pass out of the domain of connectivity statistics to realise the sociology of access.

Review of Literature

From Digital Divide to Digital Inequality: The Shift in Scholarship

The early internet research was characterised by binary notion of the digital divide, which concentrated on the access gap, which was the clear distinction between those who had the physical equipment to access the internet and those who did not. The theme of this early scholarship, as identified by Pippa Norris (2001) ^[9], was mainly the macro-level inequalities, that is, the global divide between the industrialised and developing countries and the social divide within countries depending on income and geography. The general assumption that had been made at this stage was infrastructural determinism: the assumption that when the wires and boxes were installed all would become well on the social side.

Nevertheless, once telecenter infrastructure started to creep into the rural peripheries and the physical distance started reducing, scholars realised that being physically near to a computer was not the same thing as significant digital inclusion. This discovery created a paradigm shift in the more subtle definition of digital inequality. This change was facilitated by DiMaggio and Hargitis (2001) ^[9], who stated that the provision of equipment does not guarantee equity. They assumed that inequality is not a dichotomy of either have or have not, but a differentiation spectrum.

The rural India context is no exception in this regard as this distinction has been closely intertwined with gender. An important observation by Rangaswamy (2009) ^[10] holds a critical view of the access point that it is neutral. She noted that rural telecenters usually deteriorate into "clubhouses" of young men. Digital fluency, a sense of comfort and competence that is achieved after using these spaces informally, in a recreational way, like gaming, social media, and open-ended browsing, is used to characterise male usage. This playful interaction is essential; it will enable a user who is a man to get familiarised with the logic of the interface, troubleshooting, and a sense of ownership of technology.

On the other hand, Rangaswamy observes that women are largely only used in what she describes as instrumental activities, that is, narrow, time-constrained activities such as paying bills, exam results, or printing forms. It is a sociologically deep difference between the terms of leisure and work. Instrumental use denies women the opportunity to play around with digital logic to the extent that they have to. Since they interact in a transactional and temporary manner, they cannot transform digital access into more real social capital. Instead, they are dependent users, who can access the machine with a given output only, unlike their male counterparts, who can be autonomous agents, and utilise the tool to achieve various social and economic purposes.

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu, Habitus, and Technofeminism.

The sociological richness of these inequalities requires the application of a theory of capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) ^[1] that is used as a main analytical instrument in this research. Bourdieu considered that power is not only economic but it is also the result of Cultural Capital, the embodied skills, knowledge, qualifications and dispositions to move through social hierarchies.

This framework has been further extended by contemporary scholars in order to conceptualise the Digital Capital

(Halford and Savage, 2010) ^[4]. Digital literacy in this perspective is not merely the technical skill of typing or operating a mouse, but a capital of possessions of intellectual assurance to assess information, operate digital systems, and exploit connectivity to access opportunities in life. The habitus however controls this amassing of capital.

The idea of habitus as proposed by Bourdieu is the internalisation of history and disposition, which determine the behaviour and perception of an individual. The rural female habitus of Indian society is socialised to domesticity, modesty and caution and perceives technology as a male terrain. This socialisation establishes a psychological wall that is very formidable in most cases than the physical barrier. The habits of a rural girl, developed through years of being instructed that machinery and human interaction in the world is a male domain, when she enters a computer centre may not agree with the demands of the digital world. This is in the form of techno-anxiety, indecisiveness or failure to have the right to tinker with the machine. She does not feel that she owns the machine, neither does it own her.

To supplement this Bourdieusian analysis, a theory of Techno feminism developed by Judy Wajcman (2004) ^[13] has been added. Wajcman opposes the techno-utopian perspective of the neutrality of technology and claims that technology and gender are co-constitutive. Technology is traditionally crafted as a manly culture, and this coding is incorporated even in the design of technical spaces.

This coding is supported by the physical reality of the CSC. As the literature has pointed out, the structure of the CSC, which tends to be a small, dark, overcrowded store with wires, hardware, and hanging around young men, serves as a masculinised space. It is not an impartial civic area such as a library; it is a masculine social area. This physical space as a sociological category acts as a closure mechanism (Weber, 1978) ^[14]. Weber understood social closure, as the process through which groups maximise their benefit by creating and maintaining accessibility to privileges and opportunities to a small group of insiders. Regarding the CSC, the environment makes women aware that they are trespassers and practically lock out of the open realm of digital knowledge with an invisible, yet powerful, social fence.

The Role of Intermediaries in Development: The VLE Paradox

Lastly, the literature underlines the fact that in the Global South, digital access is not usually direct, but is rather mediated almost all the time. Human intermediaries are the key to the success of Information and Communication Technologies to Development (ICT4D). In the Indian CSC model, the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) is used in this intermediate.

The VLE is the key to the whole digital ecosystem serving as the bridge between the semi-literate or illiterate citizen and the digital state. Yet, Kuriyan and Ray (2009) ^[6] point to one inherent structural contradiction in the work of the VLE: they are supposed to be social servants who enable their communities, and at the same time, they have to make money as running a business is their way of livelihood. It brings about a situation of a double bind where development (equity, inclusion) goals collide with entrepreneurship (efficiency, profit) goals.

According to Srinivasan (2012) ^[12], this is a commercial necessity that inevitably triggers VLEs to focus on those customers capable of paying or being easier to serve. These

pre-eminent customers in the rural setting are usually learners who are educated and males, and who have a degree of digital literacy and need minimal instructions. On the other hand, it takes a lot of time, patience and emotional labour to assist a semi-literate rural woman with a complicated scholarship portal or a digital literacy course. The female user will be a low pay off to the entrepreneur in purely economic terms. It takes her longer to make the same deal with a male user. Thus, the market logic of the VLE model marginalises those most in need automatically. The VLE can hurry the female user, do the transaction on her behalf (depriving her of the learning process) or make her feel that she is a burden. This argues that the human middleware that was created to fill the digital divide is possibly a gatekeeper. The VLE promotes, unwittingly, that very exclusion that the very system was meant to eliminate, selecting who deserves digital citizenship not based on the logic of fairness and equality, but rather on the logic of profitability and convenience, being male and having a pen.

Theoretical Streams

Theoretical streams refer to the synthesis of a theory, subsystem, or outline of particular components that make up

an entire system. Synthesis of Theoretical Streams are the synthesis of a theory, subsystem or outline of specific constituents that are the parts of a complete system.

When these three streams, the movement to inequality, the gendered habitus and the intermediary paradox are synthesised, one can observe a compounding disadvantage to the rural women. They have a triple obstacle to overcome:

The Skill Barrier (Inequality): They do not have the time needed to engage with it in a recreational (not instrumental) use of the language to develop fluency, being confined in an instrumental dependency.

The Symbolic Barrier (Habitus/Technofeminism): They have to find their way through a masculinised space of which their presence, culturally speaking, is perceived as a trespassing.

The Structural Barrier (Intermediaries): They are the beneficiaries of profit-driven VLEs effectively structurally disincentivised to spend the time needed to upskill them.

Table 1: Theoretical Streams

Theoretical Stream	Key Concept(s)	Impact on Rural Female Users	Primary Source/Scholar
Digital Inequality	Instrumental vs. Recreational Usage	Women are often limited to "instrumental" tasks (paying bills, checking results), which prevents the "playful exploration" needed to develop deep digital fluency and social capital.	Rangaswamy (2009) ^[10]
Technofeminism & Habitus	Masculinized Zones & Social Closure	CSCs are often "masculinized zones" (cramped, male-dominated) where women feel like "trespassers," leading to "techno-anxiety" and self-exclusion.	Wajcman (2004); Bourdieu (1986); Weber (1978) ^[1, 13, 14]
Intermediary Paradox	The VLE "Double Bind"	Profit-motivated Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) may prioritize "easier" male clients over female users who require more "emotional labor" and time.	Kuriyan & Ray (2009); Srinivasan (2012) ^[6, 12]

Methodology

Research Design: Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

The methodology framework that is used in this research paper is Qualitative Meta-Synthesis, a high-technological approach that has been chosen to help synthesise and interpret the results of various qualitative researches in order to come up with a comprehensive explanation of a sociological phenomenon. Since only conceptual methodology can be applied, i.e. this is an inquiry that explores the social and gendered aspects of digital infrastructure, it is not possible to consider the structural subtleties of the Common Service Centre (CSC) ecosystem using a single primary dataset or a localised case study. Rather, the current study in question is the combination and synthesis of macro-level government reports, as well as micro-level findings of the existing ethnographic field studies. The meta-synthesis is a wise selection because this type of methodology enables the triangulation of the so-called official stories that are disclosed in the performance indicators of the government against the so-called ground-level reality descriptions that are outlined in the independent sociological research. This contrast is essential to a critical sociological break, as government statistics tend to measure access only by physical infrastructure, i.e., how many kiosks or fibre optic connections are available or how many people have registered on digital literacy programmes, but not how good that access is or how socially obtrusive it may be. This data synthesis combined with ethnographic narratives of organisations directly engaged in working with rural

populations will help this study unveil the hidden transcript of digital mediation by revealing the tacit, invisibility, of how gender norms inform the user experience.

The synth is based mainly on the two different kinds of data sources to create this comprehensive image. To begin with, it employs macro-level policy-related information, i.e., annual reports by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) starting in 2021^[2] and till 2023. These reports give the structural background, the overall number of the functioning CSCs, the demographic distribution of VLEs, and the performance outcomes of flagship programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyaan (PMGDISHA). These sources determine the official scale and scope of the digital intervention. Second, micro-level ethnographic data are included in the study by conducting a systematic review of field research and qualitative reports held in the most important states of northern India namely Uttar Pradesh, Bihar as well as Rajasthan. The choice of these regions is due to being the Hindi Heartland, one of the areas that have high levels of problems in adopting digital and a strong patriarchal societal culture. The particular ethnographic information is extracted by respectable civil society organisations and research institutions, in particular, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and IT for Change. These organisations have recorded much about what rural women go through trying to gain access to digital services, and they have provided thick descriptions of what transpires inside the CSC walls. Combining these two

seemingly unrelated sources will not only elevate the research design further than a mere literature review, but also it will regard the results of the past research as a kind of data that will be analysed and as a result, the cross-cutting themes will be identified which will be irrefutable when considered within the context of several situations.

Data Analysis Framework: Mediational Events

The central reasoning in this paper has been made up of what is termed as mediational events, which are the position-specific, context-based interaction between a rural user (the one seeking information) and the digital system (the place where information exists) as mediated-or inhibited by the Village Level Entrepreneur (the mediator). The CSC is not a self-service kiosk such as an ATM, rather it is an assisted-service point in which the user communicates with VLE, who in turn communicates with the screen. The location where social power is practised is this so-called triadic relationship (User-VLE-System). In order to analyse these interactions in a systematic fashion, the research breaks down the synthesised data into the three important dimensions using the literature they reviewed: Access Modality, Purpose of Visit, and Time-on-Task.

The first dimension, Access Modality, is the way in which the user interacts with the technology, and it makes the difference in between the Independent and Mediated access. Independent access implies the cases when the user has a physical control of the input devices, including the mouse and the keyboard, and moves through the interface independently, which presupposes a high degree of the so-called digital agency. Conversely, mediated access is where the customer is not present, but the VLE is doing it on behalf of the user. This has been commonly referred to in literature as proxy usage. The analysis intends to find out whether there is a gendered mode of this modality, namely to examine whether female users are disproportionately consigned to the mediated mode of access, and hence deprived of a chance to learn through practising.

Purpose of the visit is the second dimension, which examines the intent of the visit with the CSC by differentiating between the "Instrumental" and the "Expressive" use. Instrumental purpose is the kind of visits that involve tasks, which have an outcome, like printing an Aadhaar card, checking a board exam result, or applying to a certain government form. These are the transactional types of visits where a user comes in, makes the purchase and goes out. Expressive purpose, in turn, is expressive, non-purposive visits, e.g., watching YouTube to have some fun, employing social media, or playing a video game. Emotional use plays an essential role in the development of a so-called digital fluency - the intuitive knowledge of how digital interfaces are implemented. The evaluation is based on the investigation whether the social setting of the CSC allows women to participate in this type of learning, which is playful, or limits them to only instrumental errands.

The third one is Time-on-Task which is concerned with the session time. This measure is an approximation of comfort and welcoming. The short time implies a hostile or strictly transactional setting whereas the longer time implies that the CSC is a third place or community centre. The analysis puts together evidence on length of its sessions to find gender differences, namely, to find a presence of temporal poverty, when women are pressured to get their online jobs done quickly so that they could resume household chores or

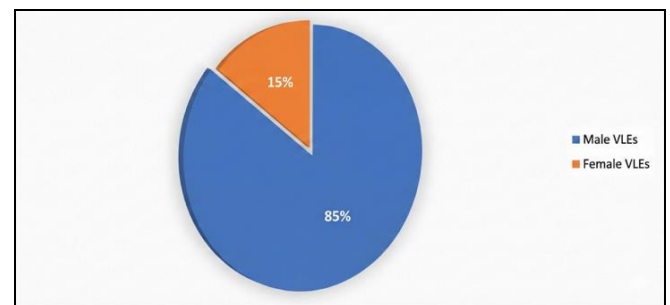
escape the male gaze of the marketplace. It is worthy to explain that all the figures, charts and graphs used in the following section of the paper in the discussion part are illustrative presentations. They do not derive off a primary quantitative data that might be collected by the author in surveys or logs. Rather, they are pictorial abstractions based on the synthesised trends and qualitative descriptions existing in literature reviewed. It is based on the synthesis of policy measurements and ethnographic richness, which means that the paper is able to create a holistic sociological image of the CSC beyond the question of whether there is access. to the much more critical question of what type of access is allowed, to whom, and on what social conditions?

Discussion and Findings

The synthesised data analysis shows that the Common Service Centre (CSC) is not an unbiased channel of digital delivery, but it is a very efficient filter, which is gendered. Although the technological infrastructure is unchanged by all people, the sociological experience of using said infrastructure is radically stratified. These three intersecting and intertwined sociotechnical barriers, namely the patriarchal Gatekeeper, the masculinised space, and the gendered clock, mediate the digital education in rural India.

The VLE as a Gatekeeper of Patriarchy

The "human middleware" of the digital state is the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) the human interface between the illiterate or semi-literate citizen and the digital bureaucracy. But this layer of human beings is not a demographically neutral layer. It has been statistically shown that the majority of VLEs are male (more than 80%), (CSC SPV, 2022). This excessive gender bias, in the case of conservative rural sociology, has an overwhelming gatekeeping effect.



Source: Synthesized from CSC SPV Reports

Fig 1: Gender Distributions of VLEs

Because of the male dominance in the ownership of VLEs, as Fig 1 (constructed out of CSC SPV Reports) demonstrates, any rural girl venturing to the digital realm is almost always brokered by a male non-kin. In most of the rural areas, the communication between teenage girls and unrelated men is highly controlled by the rules of purdah or social isolation. As such, a girl cannot just go to the CSC, but she has to bargain social permission, which, in many instances, involves a male chaperone, which in turn increases the transaction cost of her entry. In addition, we find a widespread effect, which we define as the Proxy Usage Effect. This is done when a female student comes to a male VLE to carry out a certain digital procedure, e.g. applying to a scholarship or checking an exam score. Instead of simply showing her the ropes, i.e. teaching her

how to use the portal, feed data into it, etc. the VLE tends to actually grab the mouse and the keyboard. He does the job to her and not with her. Such an attitude is caused by two reasons: the commercial necessity to save time (it is time-consuming to teach a novice; it slows down the profit speed) and the patriarchal belief that women are technically incompetent. The result is an inclusionary exclusion: the girl gets the service (her application is lodged), but getting the skill (digital literacy) is denied. On the contrary, male pupils tend to be told to give it a go or to figure it out and develop a feeling of digital self-confidence and entitlement. The VLE, then, is not an educator, but an obstacle to the female digital agency.

Spatial Sociology: The Marketplace as a Male Domain

Another vital factor of gendered access is the physical location of the CSC. Since CSCs are meant to be businesses that are operated by commercial individuals, they are strategically positioned in areas that have a lot of traffic within the commercial centres to tap as much traffic as possible. This usually puts them in the village chowk (market square) or bus stands. The chowk is specifically coded in the rural sociology as a male public sphere (Massey, 1994)^[7]. It is a commercial place, hanging around, and male sociality. Women do not loiter over this space; they only pass by because of certain, justifiable reasons. The fact that the CSC is situated in this masculine geography

serves as a strong deterrent. As a young woman, going to the chowk alone to see a computer centre is subjecting her to male gaze and possible harassment. This omission is further intensified by what we refer to as “The Fishbowl Effect”. The standard CSC design is that of glass front or an open door shop form, which is meant to showcase the technology to the prospective consumers. This openness, however, has the disadvantage of exposing a girl at a computer to the whole market. She is put under permanent social surveillance. She is compelled to practise extreme self-censorship due to this visibility. She is not able to use the internet at her own will, such as watching educational videos on reproductive health, legal rights, or romantic material, because she is afraid someone will be able to see what she is looking at, and people may start to gossip about her so-called moral character. The fishbowl structure of architecture turns the practise of digital learning into the performative gesture of humility, which suffocates the inquisitiveness of profound learning.

The Temporal Poverty and Double Burden

Time is a gendered resource. The discussion shows that, in comparison to males, rural girls experience the double burden of household chores (cooking, cleaning, taking care of their siblings) and educational tasks, which means that they have much less free time.

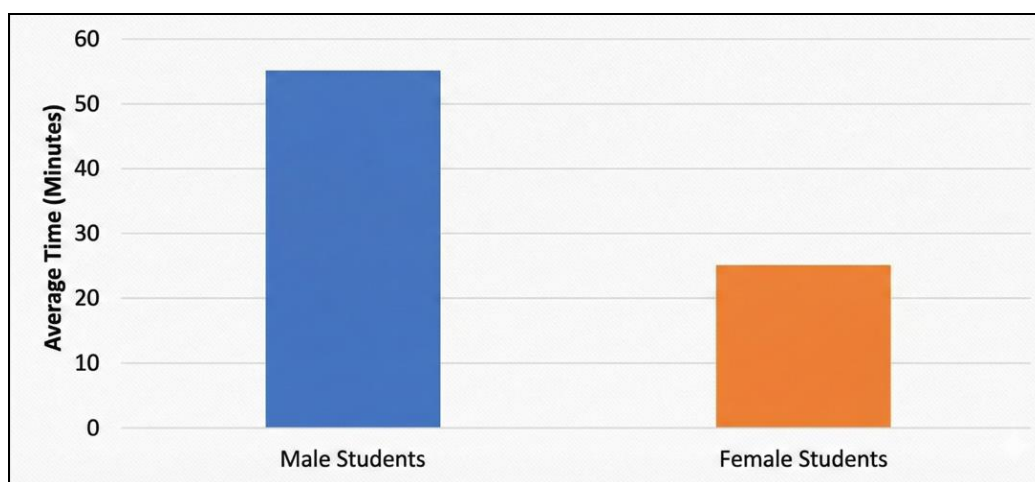


Fig 2: Average time spent per visit at CSCs: Male vs. Female Students

Fig 2 depicts a high contrast difference in terms of time-on-task between genders. The male students (Blue Bar) have an average time of 55 minutes per visit. The long timeframe gives them the freedom to do unstructured tinkering, browsing, gaming, and social media use, which, on the one hand, might not seem productive but on the other, it is vital in the development of digital intuition and familiarity with the interface. Conversely, the female students (symbolised by the Orange Bar) spend only 25 minutes on average visits. They visit with an emphasis on tasks and transactions only. They come in, do the required job and walk out like that to go back to their household chores or to get rid of the male dominated environment. The sociological implication is that girls have been victims of Digital Temporal Poverty. They cannot afford to play around with technology (Resnick, 2006)^[11]. This absence of play time is an essential shortage; without the freedom to do nothing meaninglessly and the freedom to make mistakes and experience, they will lack the

intuitive depth of digital fluency that the power users exhibit.

The Leaky Pipeline of Digital Literacy

Lastly, an evaluation of the data on the PMGDISHA scheme demonstrates that there is a disjuncture between the enrollment and actual utilisation of the scheme which we term the Leaky Pipeline of digital literacy. Although VLEs are encouraged by government incentives to enrol women, which results in large numbers of initial enrolment, the leakage is experienced on the certification and independent-use stages. The structural obstacles of the gatekeeper, the space and the clock make sure that women are statistically linked but in fact sociologically unrelated, being incapable of translating the access of the digital into real empowerment.

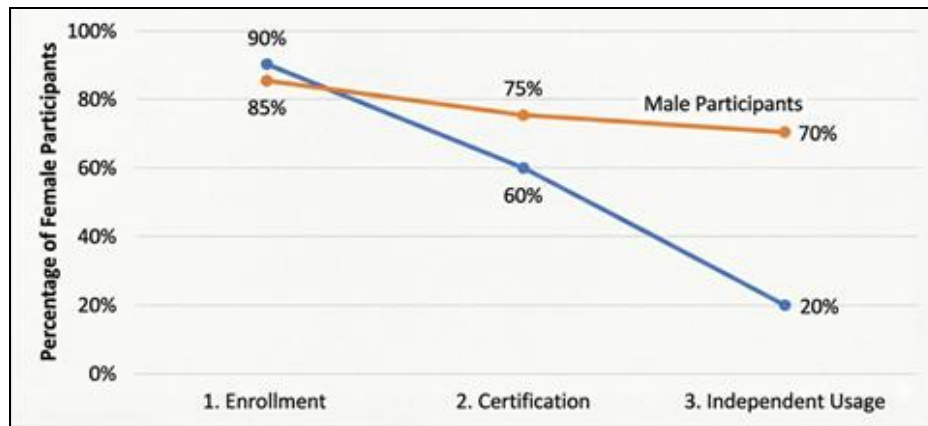


Fig 3: The Leaky Pipeline of Rural Female Digital Engagement

Purpose of Internet Usage: Instrumental vs. Exploratory

This stacked bar chart provides a qualitative breakdown of how men and women use the internet at CSCs. It demonstrates that female usage is overwhelmingly "Instrumental"

(e.g., for specific tasks like form-filling), while male usage is a mix of "Instrumental" and "Exploratory" (e.g., social media, gaming, browsing). This lack of exploratory usage among women is a key barrier to developing deep digital literacy.

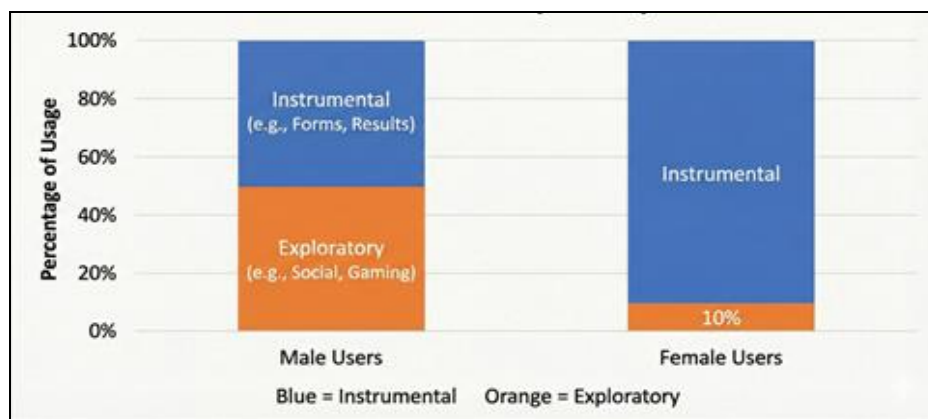


Fig 4: Purpose of Internet usage: Instrumental vs. Exploratory

Conclusion

Common Service Centre (CSC) is the frontline of the digital state in rural India, the physical manifestation of the abstract promise of the information age coming into contact with the tangible reality of the village life. Nevertheless, the aggregate results of this study are sobering to sociological implications that continue to exist: instead of being a disruption to old forms of inequality, the CSC today does indeed serve as a reproductive institution. This sociologically implies that what the centre does is not to break down the gender inequalities that already exist in the rural areas. The infrastructure is state of the art hardware-wise, but is socially archaic. The paper essentially alters the discourse of the digital divide in education by arguing that it is not only a matter of who possesses a computer or an internet connexion but essentially a matter of who possesses the social authority to access it.

The very phenomenon that is the focus of this work which is known as Gendered Digital Mediation demonstrates that access is never direct. The three forces of exclusion that are typified in this mediation include the exclusionary forces of patriarchy that gates the male Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs), the spatial features of exclusion in the marketplace location of the kiosks, and the temporal features of poverty among the female students. All of these are indicative of the

fact that access is a requisite yet absolutely incomplete requirement of empowerment. The access, which is not agency, is just another type of dependency. This is best acted out in the micro-interaction where a VLE takes the mouse in the hand of a girl in order to do something on her behalf. It is not only a customer service shortcut, but a symbolic violence. It reinforces the cultural belief that technology is male and the female user is an intruder and needs to be supervised by a male to enable her to work in the digital universe.

Policy Implications

In order to turn the CSC into a place of transformation rather than a reproduction place, this paper suggests three structural interventions that would be targeted as follows:

Feminisation of Intermediaries: The state has to go beyond gender-neutral recruitment and aggressively target the placement of Female VLEs. There is empirical evidence to strongly indicate that the social physics of the space is changed significantly by the fundamental nature of the work of Pink CSCs (centres run by women). They are able to record much greater rates of female footfall and longer visit time since they form a social sanctioned safe space in which the gender of the operator does not challenge the gender of the user.

Pedagogical Reform: VLE needs to be rethought. The existing training is on technical trouble-shooting and business management. Pedagogical Reform curriculum is necessary, in which VLE training modules are obligatory, including gender sensitisation. This is aimed at transforming their professional identity (beyond themselves as service providers) (who fix problems) into being digital educators (who transfer skills), making sure that they empower and not disable their female clients.

Spatial Planning: Geography of access. Market squares (chowks) that are dominated by men could not be automatically considered as the locations of future CSCs. Rather, the policy is supposed to promote Spatial Planning which mixes these digital nodes with the existing female institutions that are already there, like Anganwadis (rural child care centres), or Girls Schools. By locating technology in locations where women already hold a social right to be, it becomes possible to circumvent the forms of mobility that serve as barriers to access.

Finally, in order to reduce the digital gender divide, policymakers and technologists should cease to consider the user as a depersonalised pair of hands and eyes. They have to realise that she is a social actor and she has to manoeuvre in an uneven, arduous terrain of caste, class, and gender in order to get to the keyboard. It is only on redesigning the social architecture of the Common Service Centre to be aligned with the spirit of its technical counterpart that it can transform into a kiosk of exclusion to becoming a real institution of social change.

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