



Digital Marginality and Social Media: Negotiating Inclusion and Exclusion in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the age of digital communication, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for information exchange, identity formation, activism, and representation. It has become so basic that its necessity is found in all sectors, and in personal and professional space. Moreover, today's artificial enhanced social media brings out a host of benefits for its users making them dependent on it. However, access to and participation in digital spaces is not equitable. This paper explores the concept of digital marginality—the condition of being socially or culturally excluded from dominant online narratives—and how social media both reinforces and challenges these marginalities. Drawing on case studies, scholarly literature, and theoretical frameworks from digital sociology and media studies, this paper examines how digital marginality manifests through issues of access, algorithmic bias, digital literacy, and online harassment. It also highlights how marginalized groups use social media for community building, resistance, and reclaiming narratives. The paper concludes by suggesting pathways to mitigate digital marginality through inclusive digital policies, equitable infrastructure, and critical digital education.

Keywords: digital marginality, social media, digital age

Introduction

Social media is often celebrated for its democratizing potential. It comes with a very minimal cost, almost free for its users. It asks for a device like a smartphone, notepad, laptop, and tablet, with internet connection. It opens up into a lot of benefits aiding almost all sectors, from education to manufacturing, and transportation to defence. On top of its integration in profession and sectors, it is increasingly used in the personal domain as well. Helping students, scholars, doctors, patients, businessmen, etc, social media with the integration of artificial intelligence has become more just a platform. It also promises to offer a voice to the

voiceless and power to the marginalized. Yet, despite its reach and influence, social media frequently reproduces offline inequalities in digital form (Boyd, 2011). In this context, *digital marginality* refers to the exclusion or peripheralization of individuals or groups from full participation in digital spaces due to socio-economic, cultural, infrastructural, or algorithmic factors.

As van Dijk (2006) explains, digital marginality is not only about lack of access to the internet, but also about limited skills, unequal representation, and exclusion from meaningful digital participation. This paper critically examines the paradox of social media as both a site of marginalization and empowerment.



Theoretical Framework

Digital marginality can be best understood using a multidimensional approach that combines theories of digital divide, intersectionality, and platform capitalism.

Digital Divide

Digital divide is the gap between two sets of users vis-à-vis digital usage. The gap could spring from two fronts, personal front where digital literacy is the primary reason; infrastructural front where the connectivity is not strong or there is no connectivity at all. The digital divide, initially defined in terms of access, has evolved to include issues of skills and usage (Warschauer, 2003). People in rural areas, the elderly, disabled persons, and those from lower socio-economic strata often face limitations in using social media effectively.

Intersectionality

Intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1991) helps understand how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to create compounded forms of digital exclusion. For example, a queer woman of color may face unique challenges on social media, including targeted harassment and underrepresentation.

Platform Capitalism

Social media platforms operate under capitalist logics that prioritize profit over equity. Algorithms are designed to maximize engagement and profit, often at the cost of marginalized voices (Noble, 2018). This results in a digital hierarchy where dominant narratives are amplified, and others are invisible.

Manifestations of Digital Marginality

Unequal Access and Infrastructure

Despite increasing smartphone penetration, the Global South still lags behind in internet infrastructure. Digital marginality is often shaped by geography, as rural communities may lack stable connections or digital training (Donner, 2015).

Algorithmic Bias

Algorithms dictate visibility and influence on social media. Noble (2018) demonstrates how search engines and recommendation systems reflect societal biases, reinforcing racial and gendered stereotypes. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have been accused of “shadow banning” content from Black and disabled creators.

Online Harassment

Marginalized users are disproportionately subjected to trolling, doxxing, and cyberbullying (Jane, 2014). Women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and activists often self-censor or leave platforms altogether due to sustained online abuse.

Digital Literacy Gaps

Lack of digital literacy also contributes to marginality. Many users, especially elders or those with lower education levels, struggle to navigate privacy settings, detect misinformation, or leverage platforms for socio-political gain (Selwyn, 2004).

Resistance and Reclamation: Marginalized Voices Online

Despite challenges, social media can also be a site of resistance and empowerment.

Hashtag Activism

Movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #DalitLivesMatter have demonstrated the power of social media to challenge dominant narratives and amplify marginalized voices (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020). Hashtag activism facilitates digital solidarity and public consciousness.

Community Building

Social media allows marginalized groups to find and support each other. Trans people use platforms like Reddit and Tumblr to share experiences, while Indigenous communities use Twitter and YouTube to archive oral histories and assert cultural sovereignty (Cunningham & Craig, 2016).



Citizen Journalism

Social media serves as a platform for spreading news and information. There has been growing reliance on this platform for news than the earlier conventional ways from newspaper and television. It has been felt that when mainstream media fails to represent certain communities, social media becomes a tool for citizen journalism. It also gives the desired force for the agencies to act fast. During protests and crises, marginalized individuals use platforms to document state violence or systemic neglect (Tufekci, 2017).

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Indigenous TikTok

Indigenous creators on TikTok have used the platform to challenge cultural erasure by sharing language lessons, traditional songs, and critiques of settler colonialism. However, many also face content removals and algorithmic suppression (Lewis, 2021).

Case Study 2: Internet Shutdowns in India

During political unrest, the Indian government has repeatedly shut down internet services in Kashmir and northeastern states, digitally marginalizing already vulnerable populations and curtailing their freedom of expression (Access Now, 2020).

Case Study 3: Disabled Influencers

Disabled influencers on Instagram have formed communities around disability pride, but face issues like lack of accessible interfaces, censorship of disability-related hashtags, and minimal brand partnerships (Ellis & Kent, 2017).

Toward Inclusive Digital Futures

Inclusive Design

Social media platforms must adopt universal design principles to ensure accessibility. Features like screen reader compatibility, alt text for images, and captioning should be default settings, not optional.

Algorithmic Accountability

Tech companies need to conduct bias audits and allow third-party oversight of algorithmic processes. Transparency in content moderation and

recommendation systems is vital to curbing marginalization.

Digital Education

Critical digital literacy should be incorporated into formal education systems to empower users to navigate, critique, and influence digital environments meaningfully (Hobbs, 2010). Research and development on this regard should be strengthened. Mere digital literacy is not enough. They should also be taught how to further themselves using digital platforms and promote their business using social media. This hind sight of overusing of social media should also be a part of proper digital education.

Policy Reform

Governments should implement policies that safeguard digital rights, prevent censorship, and ensure equitable access to digital infrastructure. Just like fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution, social media has transcended itself nearly to that status. Most importantly, digital inclusion through digital infrastructure and digital access should be the priority of the government and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Digital marginality is a complex, multifaceted issue that mirrors and magnifies offline disparities. While social media offers opportunities for expression and solidarity, it also functions as a site of exclusion shaped by structural and algorithmic forces. Recognizing and addressing digital marginality requires a collaborative effort between users, tech companies, educators, and policymakers. Only through inclusive digital practices can social media realize its potential as a truly democratic space.

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