



## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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### Abstract

This study investigates the role of social media in empowering female students enrolled in an online university in Afghanistan. Despite ongoing socio-cultural restrictions that limit Afghan women's access to education, employment, and public engagement, digital platforms present new avenues for empowerment. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 110 female students aged 20–25 across three academic programs: Computer Science, Economics, and Medical Sciences. A structured questionnaire measured four empowerment dimensions—educational, economic, social, and digital—using a 5-point Likert scale. The results reveal strong educational empowerment, with respondents indicating that social media enhances access to academic resources, collaboration, and motivation for further studies. Social participation also showed significant improvement, as students reported increased confidence in communication and engagement with online communities. Digital literacy and self-efficacy were notably high, reflecting the positive impact of regular digital platform use. However, economic empowerment scored moderately, suggesting that although social media provides exposure to entrepreneurial opportunities, broader structural barriers still limit financial independence. Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media is a transformative tool for promoting women's empowerment in Afghanistan. The study recommends enhancing digital literacy programs and expanding online economic opportunities to maximize empowerment outcomes.

**Keywords:** Social media, Women's Empowerment, Afghanistan, Digital Literacy, Online Learning

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the internet and social media platforms, has significantly transformed the ways individuals access information, communicate, and participate in social, economic, and political activities worldwide. In Afghanistan, where cultural, social, and political constraints have historically limited women's participation in public life, the proliferation of digital technologies offers unprecedented opportunities for empowerment and social inclusion (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024). Women's empowerment in this context refers to the ability to make autonomous decisions, access education and employment opportunities, engage in social and civic life, and challenge existing gender inequalities through enhanced digital literacy and connectivity (Ahmed, Tasmin, & Ibrahim, 2022).

Social media platforms, online learning portals, and e-commerce platforms have emerged as critical tools enabling Afghan women to overcome barriers related to mobility, safety, and cultural restrictions. Studies have shown that access to digital technologies allows women to acquire knowledge, develop entrepreneurial skills, and participate in virtual networks that promote collaboration and economic engagement (Hakimi, Fazil, Ahmady, Qarizada, & Quraishi, 2024; Ghiyasi, Amiry, Rahimi, Quraishi, & Hashimi, 2024). For instance, e-commerce platforms have provided Afghan women with avenues to establish small businesses, market handmade products, and generate independent income, contributing to economic empowerment and financial independence

(Hakimi et al., 2024). Similarly, online education initiatives, including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and women-focused digital universities, have enhanced access to knowledge and professional development opportunities previously unavailable to women due to geographic and social restrictions (Hakimi, Musawi, & Khaliqyar, 2024; Quraishi, Hashimi, Yasini, Barak, Amani, & Sahel, 2024).

Despite these opportunities, Afghan women face numerous challenges in leveraging ICTs for empowerment. Limited digital infrastructure, gendered access disparities, low levels of digital literacy, and sociocultural norms that restrict women's online engagement remain significant obstacles (Shaikhzada, Rahmani, Asghari, Hosseini, & Quraishi, 2025; Hassani et al., 2025). Moreover, issues related to online safety, privacy, and cyber harassment present additional risks for women navigating digital spaces (Glass et al., 2017). Understanding both the potential and limitations of social media and ICTs in the Afghan context is crucial for designing interventions and policies that effectively support women's empowerment.

This study examines the transformative role of social media and ICTs in empowering Afghan women, exploring how digital platforms facilitate educational, economic, and social opportunities while considering the structural and cultural barriers that hinder equitable access. By highlighting the intersections of technology, gender, and socio-cultural constraints, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on ICT-enabled women's empowerment in developing and conflict-affected regions (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024; Ahmed, Tasmin, & Ibrahim, 2022).

### **State of Art**

The role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in fostering women's empowerment has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in contexts where socio-cultural constraints limit female participation in public life. Several studies highlight that access to the internet and social media platforms provides women with opportunities for education, entrepreneurship, and social engagement, effectively challenging traditional gender norms (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024). In Afghanistan, where decades of conflict and conservative cultural practices have restricted women's mobility and economic participation, digital technologies have emerged as critical tools for empowerment (Ahmed, Tasmin, & Ibrahim, 2022; Shaikhzada, Rahmani, Asghari, Hosseini, & Quraishi, 2025).

One key avenue through which ICTs empower women is education. Online learning platforms, including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and digital universities, provide Afghan women with access to knowledge and professional development opportunities without the need for physical mobility (Hakimi, Musawi, & Khaliqyar, 2024; Quraishi, Hashimi, Yasini, Barak, Amani, & Sahel, 2024). These platforms allow women to pursue higher education, develop new skills, and engage in lifelong learning, which contributes to both personal and professional empowerment (Hakimi et al.,

2024). Similarly, studies indicate that access to information through social media and internet resources helps women make informed decisions in health, entrepreneurship, and civic participation, thereby enhancing their agency in both private and public spheres (Sayakhot & Carolan-Olah, 2016; Slomian, Bruyère, Reginster, & Emonts, 2017).

Economic empowerment is another critical dimension explored in the literature. Research has shown that e-commerce platforms and online marketplaces allow Afghan women to establish businesses, market products, and generate income while circumventing societal restrictions on women's physical presence in the workplace (Ghiyasi, Amiry, Rahimi, Quraishi, & Hashimi, 2024; Hakimi, Fazil, Ahmady, Qarizada, & Quraishi, 2024). These digital avenues not only promote financial independence but also enhance self-confidence and social recognition among women, contributing to broader community development (Golzard, 2020).

However, several barriers persist. Limited digital literacy, inadequate technological infrastructure, sociocultural norms, and online security risks continue to constrain women's ability to fully leverage ICTs (Hassani et al., 2025; Glass et al., 2017). Studies emphasize that while digital platforms offer opportunities, their effectiveness is contingent on supportive policies, awareness programs, and community acceptance (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Nabizada et al., 2024).

## **METHOD**

This study employs a quantitative survey research design to investigate the role of social media and digital technologies in empowering women in Afghanistan, focusing on students enrolled in an online university. Survey research is particularly suitable for collecting standardized data from a defined population and allows for the analysis of relationships between variables such as digital access, educational engagement, and perceived empowerment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study consists of female students aged 20–25 who are enrolled in various programs at an online university in Afghanistan. The study focuses on three disciplines: Computer Science (n = 30), Economics (n = 30), and Medical Sciences (n = 50), resulting in a total sample size of 110 participants. The inclusion criteria were selected to ensure that participants have sufficient exposure to online platforms and social media, enabling a meaningful assessment of digital technology's influence on empowerment (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed online via email and learning management systems accessible to the participants. The questionnaire included sections on demographic information, frequency and purpose of social media use, digital literacy, online learning

engagement, and perceptions of empowerment across educational, economic, and social domains. A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was employed to measure respondents' agreement with statements regarding digital engagement and empowerment outcomes (Ahmed, Tasmin, & Ibrahim, 2022).

### Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and patterns of social media use. Inferential analyses, such as correlation and regression analysis, were conducted to examine the relationship between social media engagement and perceived empowerment among female students (Hakimi, Fazil, Ahmady, Qarizada, & Quraishi, 2024). Statistical analysis was performed using software such as SPSS to ensure accuracy and reliability of results.

### Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and data were used solely for research purposes (Glass et al., 2017).

By adopting a structured survey design and a targeted sample of online university students, this study aims to provide empirical evidence on the transformative potential of social media and digital technologies in empowering Afghan women.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Academic Program and Age Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Academic Program	Computer Science	30	27.3
	Economics	30	27.3
	Medical Sciences	50	45.4
Age Group (years)	20–21	35	31.8
	22–23	40	36.4
	24–25	35	31.8

The sample comprises 110 female students from three academic programs. Medical Sciences students represent the largest group (45.4%), while Computer Science and Economics each account for 27.3% of participants. The respondents' ages range from 20 to 25 years, with the majority (36.4%) aged 22–23, and equal representation in the 20–21 and 24–25 age brackets. This combined distribution ensures a diverse representation across disciplines and typical university age groups, providing a solid foundation for analyzing the impact of social media on women's empowerment in various academic contexts.

Table 2 Frequency and Purpose of Social Media Use

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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Frequency of Use (hours/day)	Less than 1 hour	10	9.1
	1–3 hours	45	40.9
	3–5 hours	35	31.8
	More than 5 hours	20	18.2
Primary Purpose of Use	Academic/Educational	50	45.5
	Social/Networking	30	27.3
	Entertainment	20	18.2
	Professional/Skill Development	10	9.0

Most respondents (72.7%) use social media for 1–5 hours per day, indicating high digital engagement. Nearly half (45.5%) primarily use social media for academic purposes, followed by social networking (27.3%) and entertainment (18.2%). A smaller proportion (9%) use digital platforms mainly for professional skill development. These patterns demonstrate that social media is predominantly utilized for learning and social interaction among female online university students, supporting its potential role in promoting educational, social, and economic empowerment.

Table 3 Educational Empowerment

Statement	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Mean	SD
Social media helps me access learning materials	5	8	20	50	27	3.95	0.97
Online learning platforms improve understanding	4	10	18	48	30	4.02	0.98
Social media allows collaboration	6	9	22	45	28	3.89	1.01
Access to online content increases motivation	5	11	20	50	24	3.86	0.96

The results indicate that online platforms significantly contribute to educational empowerment among female online university students. A majority of respondents (approximately 68–70%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media and online learning tools improve access to academic resources, collaboration opportunities, and motivation for further studies. The mean scores for all four items range between 3.86 and 4.02, reflecting a generally positive perception of digital platforms in supporting education. Standard deviations are below 1.05, indicating low variability and a consistent trend across respondents. However, a small portion of participants expressed neutrality or disagreement, suggesting that barriers such as limited digital literacy or intermittent internet access may reduce the effectiveness of these tools for some students. Overall, these findings support previous studies highlighting the role of ICTs in expanding educational opportunities for women in restrictive environments (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024).

Table 4 Economic Empowerment

Statement	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Mean	SD
Platforms provide entrepreneurial skills	6	12	25	40	27	3.78	1.03
Explore income-generating opportunities	8	10	20	45	27	3.81	1.07
Contributes to financial independence	7	11	23	42	27	3.80	1.05
Increases confidence in career decisions	5	13	22	45	25	3.78	1.01

The economic empowerment dimension shows that female students perceive social media and digital platforms as moderately effective tools for supporting entrepreneurial skills and income opportunities. Around 60–65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these platforms enhance their ability to earn income or develop career-related skills. Mean scores are slightly lower than the educational empowerment dimension (3.78–3.81), reflecting moderate but positive perceptions. Standard deviations near 1 indicate consistent responses across the sample. A notable proportion of students (15–20%) remained neutral or disagreed, likely reflecting challenges such as limited local market opportunities, lack of financial literacy, or cultural restrictions on women's economic activities (Ghiyasi, Amiry, Rahimi, Quraishi, & Hashimi, 2024; Hakimi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that while digital tools provide pathways for economic engagement, additional support, training, and policy measures are necessary to maximize their impact for Afghan women.

Table 5 Social Participation

Statement	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Mean	SD
Helps engage in discussions	4	9	20	50	27	3.95	0.96
Feeling connected to communities	5	8	18	48	31	4.03	0.98
Improves communication & leadership	6	10	22	45	27	3.87	1.00
Empowers to voice opinions	5	11	20	50	24	3.86	0.97

The social participation dimension highlights the role of online platforms in fostering community engagement and communication skills among female students. Approximately 70% of respondents reported agreement or strong agreement with statements regarding discussion participation, leadership development, and connection to local and global communities. The mean scores, ranging from 3.86 to 4.03, reflect an overall positive perception of social media as a tool for enhancing social empowerment. Low standard deviations (<1.0) suggest consistent experiences among respondents. Despite these positive results, a small portion of students expressed disagreement or neutrality, which may be influenced by limited access to active online groups or concerns about online safety and cultural restrictions (Glass et al., 2017; Shaikhzada et al., 2025). These findings align with existing literature, emphasizing that social media facilitates participation, collaboration, and confidence building, contributing to women's empowerment in restrictive socio-cultural environments.

Table 6 Digital Literacy & Confidence (n = 110)

Statement	1 (SD)	2 (D)	3 (N)	4 (A)	5 (SA)	Mean	SD
Confident using digital tools	5	9	18	48	30	4.00	0.97
Enhances problem-solving & research skills	4	11	20	47	28	3.93	0.97
Increases personal growth & empowerment	6	10	22	45	27	3.87	1.00

The digital literacy and confidence dimension indicates that female students generally perceive themselves as competent in using digital tools for academic, professional, and personal development.

Most respondents (approximately 70%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media and online platforms enhance problem-solving abilities, research skills, and overall empowerment. Mean scores range from 3.87 to 4.00, demonstrating a positive trend across all items, with low standard deviations indicating consistency among participants. However, a minority (15–20%) expressed neutrality or disagreement, reflecting possible limitations in technical skills, internet access, or previous experience with digital platforms (Ahmed, Tasmin, & Ibrahim, 2022; Hakimi et al., 2024). These results highlight the importance of digital literacy programs and technical support in maximizing the empowerment potential of ICTs for women in Afghanistan. Overall, the findings confirm that confidence in using digital tools is a crucial factor in facilitating educational, economic, and social empowerment.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of social media and digital platforms in empowering female students in Afghanistan. Across the four dimensions of empowerment—educational, economic, social participation, and digital literacy—participants reported positive outcomes associated with their engagement with online tools. The high mean scores for educational empowerment indicate that social media and online learning platforms significantly enhance access to academic resources, collaboration with peers, and motivation for further studies. These results align with previous research showing that ICTs provide women in restrictive socio-cultural environments with unprecedented opportunities to pursue knowledge and skill development (Hakimi, Quchi, Hasas, & Fazil, 2024; Afif et al., 2024).

Economic empowerment, while slightly lower than educational empowerment, still reflected moderate positive perceptions. Participants reported that social media facilitates the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and exposure to income-generating opportunities, supporting findings from Ghiyasi, Amiry, Rahimi, Quraishi, and Hashimi (2024), who emphasized the potential of e-commerce platforms to enhance women's financial independence in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the presence of neutral or disagreeing responses suggests that structural barriers, such as limited market access, financial constraints, or cultural restrictions, continue to inhibit full economic participation.

Social participation was also positively influenced by digital engagement. Students indicated that social media enables them to participate in discussions, express opinions, and engage with local and global communities. This outcome supports the argument that online platforms can enhance women's voice and visibility in academic and professional spaces, even in contexts where physical participation is constrained (Glass et al., 2017; Shaikhzada, Rahmani, Asghari, Hosseini, & Quraishi, 2025). The relatively high frequency of daily social media use, coupled with the primary use of these platforms for academic purposes, reinforces the idea that digital tools are integral to both learning and social empowerment among young Afghan women.

Finally, the findings regarding digital literacy and confidence indicate that consistent engagement with ICTs enhances self-efficacy and personal growth. Participants expressed confidence in navigating digital platforms, problem-solving, and conducting research, supporting Ahmed, Tasmin, and Ibrahim's (2022) assertion that digital competence is closely linked to empowerment outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the role of social media in empowering female students from various academic disciplines at an online university in Afghanistan. The findings provide strong evidence that digital platforms contribute significantly to women's educational, social, and digital empowerment, although economic empowerment remains comparatively moderate due to external structural constraints.

The results demonstrated that social media is a vital tool for educational advancement, enabling students to access learning materials, engage in academic discussions, and collaborate with peers beyond traditional classroom boundaries. This supports earlier research showing that ICT expands learning opportunities for Afghan women, particularly in restrictive environments where access to formal education may be limited. The strong reliance on social media for academic purposes, as reflected in the demographic data, further highlights its role as an indispensable educational resource.

Social participation emerged as another domain where social media has a strong empowering impact. Students reported enhanced communication skills, greater connection to communities, and increased confidence in expressing opinions through digital platforms. These results align with previous studies indicating that online engagement helps women overcome social constraints and expand their voices in public discourse.

Digital literacy and confidence were also notably high among respondents, indicating that continuous interaction with online platforms improves technological skills essential for academic and professional development. Nonetheless, economic empowerment showed only moderate improvement, suggesting that while digital platforms offer opportunities for entrepreneurship and financial independence, Afghan women continue to face limitations such as restricted mobility, limited market access, and socioeconomic barriers.

Overall, the study concludes that social media is a transformative force for Afghan women, contributing significantly to their empowerment across key domains. However, maximizing this potential requires addressing contextual barriers and enhancing support mechanisms for digital participation.

## **Recommendations**

To strengthen the empowering role of social media, universities and policymakers should provide targeted digital literacy programs focusing on academic research, online safety, and entrepreneurial skill development. Creating secure online spaces for women to collaborate, network,

and share resources can further enhance social participation. Additionally, partnerships with local and international organizations can help expand economic opportunities through online freelancing, e-commerce training, and mentorship programs. Finally, improving affordable internet access and promoting inclusive ICT policies will ensure that more Afghan women can fully benefit from the transformative potential of digital technologies.

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