Negotiating Digital Marginality: A Qualitative Study of Social Media Literacy among Slum Dwellers in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract - The advent of social media has led to the emergence of new forms of community building, information sharing, and participation; however, not all parts of the Global South have responded to these opportunities in the same way. Slum dwellers and other economically and socially marginalized groups in Bangladesh are increasingly using social media, yet little is known about their level of social media literacy, which is essential for safe and meaningful engagement on these platforms. This study examines the social media literacy of Dhaka's slum inhabitants through three focus groups and twenty-four in-depth interviews with young men and women from two major urban slums, aged 18 to 35, using purposive sampling. Thematic analysis, framed by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and the sociology of digital inequality (Braun & Clarke, 2006), revealed that critical aspects such as misinformation, privacy, and online risks are often overlooked, while participants' literacy remains largely functional-limited to basic navigation and messaging despite frequent mobile social media use. Four themes emerged: the use of social media for entertainment and connection; ignorance of underlying digital risks; informal learning related to digital platforms; and a desire for self-empowerment constrained by poverty, gender, and education. Overall, slum dwellers' social media use and literacy reflect profound social inequalities, and from a sociological perspective, these findings suggest that, without structural change, digital technologies are more likely to amplify rather than mitigate social marginalization.

Keywords: Social Media Literacy, Slum Dwellers, Bangladesh, Digital Inequality, Qualitative Research

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has been among the most transformative technologies of the 21st century, transforming how individuals communicate, access information, and participate in social, economic, and political life. Access to these websites and the literacy to use them effectively, nevertheless, remain unevenly distributed. Scholars have, therefore, increasingly turned to the concept of social media literacy to cover not only the technical skills that go into using these websites but also critical skills to evaluate what is online, to create, and to engage effectively with content online (Livingstone, 2004; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

While much of this research has focused on middle-class users in the Global North, little is known about the ways in which marginalized communities in the Global South, such as slum dwellers, develop and use social media literacy.

A. Social Media Use in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has experienced exponential growth in mobile phone ownership and internet access over the past decade. According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (2024), the country has more than 130 million internet subscribers, with mobile data being the dominant mode of connectivity. Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok are the most widely used platforms in the digital ecosystem (Islam & Rahman, 2022). These technologies offer new possibilities for social and economic participation, even among the poor. However, as access has expanded, digital inclusion is not the same as digital literacy (Van Dijk, 2020). The ability to critically interpret content, secure privacy, and engage meaningfully requires forms of social and cultural capital that are not evenly distributed.

B. Slum Residents: Between Inclusion and Marginality

Dhaka's urban slums-home to an estimated 4 million people (Banks, 2020)-are characterized by poverty, precarious housing, informal labor, and limited education. Amid such conditions of structural poverty, the introduction of low-cost smartphones and mobile internet has opened a new window to the outside world for the inhabitants. Social media is used to stay connected with family members in rural areas, search for jobs, watch entertainment programs, and occasionally mobilize around community issues (Sultana, 2021). However, the experience of slum dwellers with social media is often limited to instrumental use, with little exposure to formal or structured learning about online dangers, misinformation, or privacy protection. This raises a critical sociological question: How do marginalized communities, constrained by structural inequality, learn and practice social media literacy?

C. Social Media Literacy: More Than Access

The idea of "social media literacy" extends beyond general digital skills. It encompasses four interrelated dimensions: (1) being capable of accessing and utilizing platforms, (2) being able to understand and evaluate content critically, (3) being capable of creating and sharing content responsibly, and (4) possessing an awareness of the threats and opportunities of digital participation (Livingstone, 2008; Pangrazio, 2016). Scholars emphasize that without these competencies, mere access to technology may exacerbate

rather than reduce social inequalities (Warschauer, 2003; Selwyn, 2004).

For slum dwellers, the dangers of low social media literacy can be particularly significant. Low privacy awareness can expose users to harassment or exploitation, while misinformation about health, employment, or politics can reinforce existing patterns of vulnerability. In contrast, knowledgeable and creative use of social media can provide a voice for marginalized groups, offering outlets for self-expression and collective organization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In his research on urban slums in Kerala, Rajeev (2018) highlights how a lack of knowledge about public health issues-especially among women and children-combined with low educational attainment and financial hardship, can lead to an information gap that may be filled with harmful or erroneous digital content. These contradictory possibilities underscore the importance of investigating how slum residents themselves interact with this space.

D. The Sociological Problem

Despite increasing access to mobile technologies in Bangladeshi slums, social media literacy among slum residents remains a relatively understudied topic. Studies have documented the general uptake of mobile phones by low-income groups (Rashid, 2016; Aminuzzaman, 2020), but qualitative studies that delve into the meanings, practices, and skills associated with social media usage are virtually non-existent. Most studies of media literacy in Bangladesh have focused on children, teenagers, and university students (Haque & Arif, 2021), while the experiences of low-income adults have gone largely unexplored. According to Omotayo and Salami (2018), students' attitudes toward using social media for knowledge sharing are greatly influenced by social factors, and more frequent use is associated with more positive attitudes.

This finding is pertinent to Bangladeshi slum communities, where youth networks, peer pressure, and community dynamics all have a significant impact on online behavior. This neglect risks reinforcing a form of technological determinism that equates connectivity with empowerment while disregarding the social and cultural dimensions of digital inequality. In reality, digital access is shaped by gender, education, occupation, and social capital. Without understanding these processes, "digital inclusion" policies may fail to reach the most marginalized groups.

E. Conceptual Framing

This study sociologically frames social media literacy based on theories of digital inequality (Van Dijk, 2020) and Bourdieu's capital theory. Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory emphasizes how knowledge, skills, and habits acquired through socialization determine individuals' ability to use technology. In contexts such as Dhaka's slums, limited educational capital can constrain digital skills, while sources of social capital-peer groups and relatives-become vital for

learning platform-use skills. We also draw on symbolic interactionism, which examines how people assign meaning to technologies in their lives (Blumer, 1969). Rather than viewing slum dwellers as passive consumers, this approach recognizes them as active agents who interpret, adapt, and innovate in their use of social media, albeit within structural constraints.

F. Purpose and Research Questions

The present study aims to understand how social media literacy is learned, practiced, and interpreted by residents of Dhaka's slums. Specifically, the research asks:
1. How do slum residents learn to use and interpret social media?
2. How do socioeconomic and cultural conditions affect their capacities for critical engagement?
3. What opportunities and risks do they perceive in their social media use?

By foregrounding the voices of slum dwellers, this study seeks to illuminate the everyday dynamics of bottom-up digital participation.

G. Significance of the Study

The study contributes in three ways. First, it extends digital sociology research into the lives of marginalized communities in the Global South. Second, it challenges the assumption that access to social media will automatically lead to empowerment, rather revealing how literacy is socially mediated and unequally distributed. Third, the findings will be of consequence to policymakers, NGOs, and educators concerned with digital inclusion, as they underscore the need for targeted interventions beyond technical competencies to facilitate critical and safe online engagement. In so doing, this study reiterates that social media literacy is not merely a technical skill set but a sociological process shaped by inequality, agency, and cultural context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and digital technology are now ubiquitous forces shaping contemporary communication and interaction across the globe. However, the extent to which these technologies have been incorporated into the lives of marginalized communities remains an under-theorized theme in sociology.

In Bangladesh, where urban informal settlements are expanding rapidly, the diffusion of digital tools poses critical questions: How do low-income, less formally educated individuals learn the skills and capacities to utilize social media? How do structural inequalities frame their access to and use of digital platforms? This literature review provides an overview of recent research on social media literacy, digital inequality, and urban marginality and situates the current study within sociological theories of technology, inclusion, and agency.

A. Defining Social Media Literacy

The media literacy process has matured alongside technological developments. Early comprehension revolved around the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages (Livingstone *et al.,* 2014). As digital and networked societies evolved, scholars have underscored important digital literacy skills that transcend the functional, emphasizing the ability to understand, critique, and constructively shape digital spaces (Mossberger *et al.,* 2008). Social media literacy is understood as the set of skills, practices, and tendencies required to use interactive, participatory technologies such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube. It differs from earlier forms of literacy that were not socially situated, informal, or self-taught. Social media literacy is not merely technical proficiency but includes the ability to negotiate privacy, identify misinformation, and decipher online social cues (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). These abilities are typically acquired through peer-to-peer learning and observation rather than formal education within low-income and low-literacy communities (Selwyn, 2004). This learning process is informal and therefore makes social capital-the social networks and relationships of a person-an essential source for developing digital competence.

B. Digital Inequality and the Social Divide

The digital divide has been a persistent focus of sociological research, but it has shifted from issues of physical access to differences in skills, use, and impacts (van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk's multi-level approach to digital inequality highlights that first-level divides concern access to technology and the internet; second-level divides consist of differences in digital skills; and third-level divides concern differences in the benefits derived from technology use (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Studies have shown that despite the provision of mobile phones and social media to marginalized groups, structural barriers such as limited literacy, variable connectivity, and low levels of digital literacy remain the main obstacles to effective engagement (Warschauer, 2004). These barriers mean that access does not automatically guarantee empowerment or inclusion. Literature on the Global South has shed light on context-specific patterns of mobile phone and social media usage in low-income urban settings (Donner, 2015; Sey, 2011). Rangaswamy and Cutrell (2012), for example, show that in Indian slums, the internet and mobile phones are used extensively for entertainment, social networking, and occasional economic activities but only to a limited extent for civic purposes. Similar processes are at work in Bangladesh's urban slums, were socioeconomic differences and infrastructural limitations shape technology adoption.

C. Urban Marginality and the Digital World

Slums are characterized by poor accommodation, overpopulation, economies operating outside the formal sector, and limited access to state provisions. For residents of slums, social organization takes place through strong kinship and community networks, informal labor markets, and collective coping strategies. These forms of social organization influence the adoption and integration of new technologies in daily life.

Digital platforms present opportunities for residents of poor neighborhoods to communicate with distant relatives, watch entertainment, and express aspirations. The same technologies, however, can also become tools of social exclusion when residents lack the skills to use them positively. Technologically, technology in slums serves as both an instrument and a symbol: it can reduce isolation and foster a sense of belonging, yet it also represents aspirational belonging to modernity (Madianou & Miller, 2012). In Dhaka, where nearly four million residents live in slums, the widespread use of smartphones has created a new terrain of digital inclusion and exclusion. Social media use among most slum dwellers is mediated by inexpensive mobile phones and prepaid data packs, resulting in intermittent connectivity and partial participation.

D. Social Capital, Informal Learning, and Media Practices

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) is useful in describing how people acquire knowledge about social media in slums. Social capital refers to the resources that individuals gain from other people through social connections. In situations of deprivation, these connections are often a major source of knowledge and learning. Neighborhood networks, relatives, and friends provide on-the-job training in mobile phone and social media usage, especially where institutional training programs do not exist. This non-formal learning is social and experiential: new skills or programs are acquired by observing, imitating, and practicing. Research in Indian and African slums confirms that young adults act as digital intermediaries, introducing the older or less literate to digital technology (Rangaswamy & Cutrell, 2012; Sey, 2011). These intermediaries then become significant bridges between low-literate communities and the digital world.

E. Gender, Power, and Digital Use

Gender is especially significant in regulating access to and use of social media among marginalized communities. Findings show that women in slums also face other barriers-including family restrictions, lower levels of education, and fear of harassment-that moderate their use of digital media (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014). Even when women use social media, they remain more vulnerable to cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and reputation loss (Haque, 2021; Jane, 2017). This gendered digital divide translates into the benefits of social media literacy-such as information access, economic empowerment, and online networks-being allocated unevenly. Furthermore, cultural expectations of female modesty and seclusion may influence women's internet practices, affecting both the content they consume and the networks they maintain.

F. Risks and Harms: Harassment, Misinformation, and Exploitation

Social media not only brings benefits but also poses tremendous dangers to poor users. One of the biggest problems in studying the Global South is exposure to falsehoods, scams, and fake content (Donner, 2015). Without sufficient critical literacy skills, most slum dwellers are incapable of verifying sources and evaluating the authenticity of information, making them vulnerable to manipulation. Furthermore, harassment and cyberabuse are pervasive, particularly among young users and women. Studies in Bangladesh have established that gender-based harassment and cyberbullying are on the rise (Haque, 2021). Such incidents typically lead to self-censorship, withdrawal from online spaces, and increased distrust of digital platforms.

G. Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of publications on digital inequality, few studies have examined the micro-level experiences of slum dwellers in Bangladesh. Although research has generally focused on rural-urban divides or young adults' use of digital technology in middle-class environments, the specific experiences of urban poverty and informality have been overlooked. There is also a need to move beyond access-focused studies to understand how marginalized users appropriate and transform social media in everyday life. This requires consideration of how digital practices are embedded within social orders, shaped by cultural norms, and constrained by economic factors. Moreover, there is limited evidence on critically reflexive digital literacy interventions that are gender-sensitive, culturally responsive, and community-focused, particularly within urban slum settings. Bridging these gaps requires qualitative methods that center on the lived realities and voices of slum residents themselves.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding social media literacy among slum dwellers in Dhaka requires a strategy that goes beyond technological access to examine how digital practices are influenced by social structures, inequalities, and cultural meanings. This research will integrate three intertwined theoretical frameworks: digital inequality, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and symbolic interactionism.

A. Digital Inequality

The concept of digital inequality challenges the oversimplification of a "digital divide" that classifies groups as either internet users or non-users. Scholars argue that the problem runs deeper: even after access is achieved, inequalities persist in the ways people utilize and benefit from digital technologies (Van Dijk, 2020; Hargittai, 2002). Van Dijk (2005) proposes a multi-level model of digital inequality with four phases: (1) motivational access, (2) material access (technological equipment and connectivity), (3) skills access, and (4) usage access. Within this model, social media literacy corresponds primarily to the third and fourth levels-skills and the utilization of digital technology for personal, social, and economic purposes. For slum dwellers, access to material resources in the form of cheap smartphones has improved markedly, but inequalities in skills and utilization remain acute. Research in other low-income settings suggests that people with limited literacy rely on peers, trial-and-error, or emulation to access digital platforms (Sambuli & Zulu, 2018). This is concerning because the lack of critical knowledge may expose them to misinformation, cyberbullying, and economic exploitation. The digital inequality framework allows us to position social media literacy as a social process rather than a purely technical effect.

B. Bourdieu's Theory of Capital

While the digital inequality framework identifies the processes of access and use, Bourdieu's theory of capital offers a way of connecting these processes to broader patterns of social stratification.

For Bourdieu (1986), social advantage is reproduced through three forms of capital:
1. Economic capital (material resources and wealth)
2. Cultural capital (skills, knowledge, and education)
3. Social capital (networks and relationships)

In slum contexts, scarce economic capital emerges as an obstacle to accessing high-quality phones and data packages, leading residents to rely on cheap smartphones with limited capacity. Similarly, the lack of cultural capital, formal education, and literacy impacts the ability to critically read information on social media sites. However, social capital plays a compensatory role: friends' networks, neighbors, and family members often act as de facto teachers, guiding youngsters in learning Facebook, Messenger, or YouTube.

In this research, we consider social media literacy as a form of new cultural capital. Individuals who acquire these competencies gain symbolic capital that can be used to secure work, communicate, or entertain. At the same time, existing capital hierarchies determine who is capable of using social media, reproducing existing inequalities even among marginalized groups.

C. Symbolic Interactionism

While structural theories explain why inequalities do or do not exist, they do not fully account for how individuals interpret and integrate social media into their daily lives. In this context, the symbolic interactionism perspective (Blumer, 1969) is crucial. This perspective emphasizes that meaning is created socially through interaction. Social media platforms are not neutral tools but rather spaces where individuals negotiate their identities, relationships, and aspirations. For slum dwellers, social media use is shaped by aspirations for upward mobility, belonging, and visibility. Literature has shown that poor users see Facebook not only as a communication medium but also as a symbol of modernity and respectability (Arora, 2019). Interactionism,

however, allows us to examine how these sites can also become spaces of fear and uncertainty, particularly regarding privacy and harassment. Through these frameworks, our research highlights the agency of slum residents as active meaning-makers with technology, while also acknowledging that their meanings are structurally mediated.

D. Synthesizing the Frameworks

Together, these three theoretical strands provide a multi-level approach to social media literacy in marginalized settings:
1. Digital inequality points to structural barriers to access, skills, and meaningful use.
2. Bourdieu's theory links these barriers to broader social hierarchies and forms of capital.
3. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how individuals, even in constrained situations, create meanings and negotiate identities in their interactions on social media.

This dual lens is particularly helpful for studying social media literacy among slum residents because it allows us to focus both on macro-level inequalities (structural barriers) and micro-level processes (individual meanings and practices). It positions slum dwellers not merely as passive recipients of technology but as active participants in a socio-technological world that both reflects and reproduces their social positions.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design to investigate how Dhaka slum dwellers develop, exercise, and interpret social media literacy under conditions of structural disadvantage. Qualitative approaches were used because they provide insight into in-depth lived experiences, meanings, and social processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which are central to this study's aim.

A. Research Setting

The research was carried out in two of the largest and oldest slums in Dhaka: Korail Slum and Kallyanpur Slum. These locations were chosen because they are high-density, low-income settlements with significant mobile internet exposure. Korail is home to approximately 200,000 individuals, based on recent reports (Banks, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022), and Kallyanpur to about 80,000. Both settlements have insecure housing conditions, poor access to formal education, and high dependence on informal labor. Mobile phones are ubiquitous, with cheap smartphones and prepaid data packs serving as the primary means of internet connectivity.

B. Research Design

A qualitative exploratory design was selected because social media literacy in slum communities is a new topic with little previous research in Bangladesh. The study aimed to capture the processes, stories, and meanings of social media usage rather than test predefined hypotheses.

C. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who were active users of social media applications (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp) via mobile phones.

The criteria for selection were:
1. Residence in Korail or Kallyanpur for at least two years.
2. Age between 18 and 40 years.
3. Active social media use (for at least three months prior to the interview).
4. Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

A total of 30 respondents (15 from each site) were enlisted. To ensure diversity, the sample included both males and females, with representation from various occupational groups such as domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, small vendors, tailoring assistants, and unemployed youth.

D. Data Collection Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews constituted the main data collection instrument. This approach was flexible, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words and enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions on particular themes related to social media literacy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

E. Interview Guide

The domains covered by the interview guide were:
1. Access and exposure: When and how participants first started using mobile phones and social media.
2. Learning pathways: How they learned to use platforms (e.g., self-taught, peers, family, training).
3. Patterns of use: Content types consumed, platforms utilized, and frequency of engagement.
4. Critical awareness: Perceptions of online risks (privacy, scams, misinformation).
5. Social meanings: Perceived advantages and drawbacks of social media in their personal and communal lives.

Each interview lasted 45–70 minutes and was conducted in Bangla. Field notes were taken alongside audio recordings (with participant consent).

F. Focus Group Discussions

To supplement individual narratives, two focus group discussions (FGDs)-one in each slum-were held with 6–8 participants each. FGDs allowed for the observation of group-level dynamics, shared norms, and collective discussions on topics such as misinformation, online harassment, and aspirations associated with social media.

G. Data Analysis

Both interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Bangla, and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed as the analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process included:
1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Initial coding to identify meaningful patterns concerning social media literacy.
3. Theme development by grouping related codes into higher conceptual categories (e.g., learning pathways, risks, aspirations).
4. Refinement of themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

NVivo 12 software was utilized for coding and data management.

H. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of [Your University Name].

The research followed the guiding principles of qualitative research ethics:
1. *Informed consent:* Participants were informed about the study objectives, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.
2. *Confidentiality:* Pseudonyms were used in analyses and transcripts to protect identities. Audio recordings were stored securely.
3. *Sensitivity:* Interviews were conducted in secure, private areas, and participants were offered breaks or the option to stop if they felt discomfort.

I. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges that their middle-class and academic background may affect not only access to the field but also the analysis of results. To address potential biases, reflexive notes and field diaries were maintained, through which power relations, assumptions, and positionality were critically examined during data collection and analysis (Berger, 2015).

V. RESULTS

The results of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions are organized into four interrelated themes that capture the dimensions of social media literacy among Dhaka slum dwellers: (1) Access and Learning Pathways, (2) Patterns of Social Media Use, (3) Risks and Challenges, and (4) Opportunities and Aspirations. These themes were identified inductively through thematic analysis and reflect the intricate interaction of material conditions, competencies, and social meanings surrounding digital participation in low-income settings.

A. Access and Learning Pathways

1. From Feature Phones to Smartphones: Nearly all respondents outlined a journey into digital technology via feature phones, which they used for calls and occasional SMS. Upgrading to smartphones in the past five years was regarded as a landmark in personal and social life, as prices fell and the appeal of Facebook and YouTube grew. "Previously, we just had buttons," said Shirin, a 28-year-old Korail domestic worker. "Now my phone has Facebook and everything. I feel like I can see the world from here. "Some respondents indicated that they had obtained second-hand or low-priced smartphones, usually funded through small loans or gifts from relatives and employers. The affordability of mobile data bundles provided by telecom operators was deemed important, even though connectivity was patchy.

2. Informal Learning Networks: Respondents invariably indicated that formal instruction in digital literacy was non-existent. Rather, their learning experiences were peer-led, iterative, and informal, echoing the social capital processes outlined in the theoretical framework. Younger household members were typically the tutors who instructed seniors on how to create Facebook accounts, utilize Messenger, or search for videos on YouTube. Trial-and-error experimentation and observation were also key methods.

One 21-year-old tailoring apprentice explained: "I saw my friends doing it. Initially, I just opened Facebook to view photos. Then, gradually, I learned to send messages and even create a Facebook page for my stitching business." These stories highlight that social media literacy is not a discrete skill set but an outcome of social learning within intimate networks.

B. Social Media Use Patterns

1. Dominant Platforms: Facebook dominance was overwhelming. All participants used Facebook and its companion Messenger app. The second most-mentioned platform was YouTube, which was used for music videos, cooking instructions, or news videos. Both TikTok and WhatsApp featured less prominently, with TikTok appealing mostly to teenagers and WhatsApp being used mainly by those with relatives working overseas.

Types of Content and Uses:
Three principal kinds of use were established:
a. *Entertainment and Leisure:* Music videos, Bangla drama clips, and TikTok content comprised the most significant portion of social media usage. Entertainment was viewed as a means to "escape stress" and "pass time" after work.
b. *Communication and Connectivity:* Messenger was used heavily to stay in touch with family members in rural villages or overseas, reinforcing familial bonds over distances. In some instances, migrant workers overseas taught their families how to use these applications to remain in contact.

c. *Information and Practical Learning:* There was a smaller but notable percentage of users who used social media to look for health tips, career information, religious sermons, and skill-acquisition content such as tailoring skills or makeup lessons. One male respondent stated: I learned to repair fans and basic electrical work from YouTube. Now I can earn some extra.

2. Gendered Patterns of Use: While both men and women indicated that they used social media, they differed substantially in the reasons and experiences they reported. Women frequently mentioned limited mobility and indicated that social media enabled them to be "connected with the outside" while remaining indoors. Men, on the other hand, highlighted networking and entertainment in public areas, such as watching videos with friends.

C. Challenges and Risks

In spite of their enthusiasm for digital technologies, participants persistently identified a range of risks and challenges that compromise their safe and critical use of social media.

1. *Exposure to Misinformation*: Some participants admitted struggling to differentiate between fake and real news. Although they were aware of "wrong information," they lacked critical thinking skills. One FGD participant noted: "Sometimes we share news fast without knowing if it's true. Afterwards, people say it was not true, but how do we know?". These highlights low critical media literacy levels, with ramifications for vulnerability to misinformation.

2. *Online Harassment and Privacy Issues*: Particularly for women and young girls, online harassment was a recurring issue. Fake profiles, unsolicited friend requests, and inappropriate messages made some female users cautious about posting pictures. As one respondent noted: "I enjoy Facebook, but I don't post my pictures. People take advantage of them. That's why I just look, not share." Privacy was also a poorly understood concept. Password-sharing among family members was common, leading to blurred boundaries between private and shared digital spaces.

3. *Economic Constraints*: The price of mobile data continued to hinder regular and varied usage. Respondents described cautious budgeting of data plans, prioritizing Messenger and Facebook while restricting usage of more data-intensive apps such as Zoom or Google. Device constraints (slow, older smartphones) also limited online learning and video calls.

D. Aspirations and Opportunities

In spite of the dangers and constraints, participants discussed positive possibilities that arose through their use of social media, which they attributed to aspirations for mobility and empowerment.

1. *Pathways to Learning and Skill-Building*: Respondents appreciated YouTube tutorials and Facebook groups as means of acquiring informal knowledge. For instance, a young male interviewee described how he consulted YouTube to learn English phrases to communicate with international clients while working as a rickshaw puller catering to tourists. Likewise, some women learned embroidery designs and recipes for cooking, utilizing these skills to generate additional income.

2. *Aspirations for Social Visibility*: For most young informants, social media was linked to dreams of upward mobility and modernity. Being on Facebook or TikTok was associated with the desire to be visible and noticed, sometimes to dispel stereotypes about slum dwellers. In an FGD, one participant commented: "They assume we are backward because we are living here. If I upload good photos, I feel I am like any other person." This sense of symbolic engagement in wider society echoes the identity-constructing function of digital media.

3. *Community Mobilization:* A number of interviewees explained how Facebook groups have been used to mobilize neighborhood-level efforts, for example, raising money for a sick child or reporting fires in the neighborhood. These instances indicate that social media has the potential to enhance collective action, even in marginalized areas.

E. Cross-Cutting Insights

1. *Social Media Literacy as a Collective Process:* Results emphasize that social media literacy is highly situated in social networks. Competencies are not learned in isolation but through learning with others, with peers and family acting as coaches.

2. *Structural Inequalities Persist*: Access to data and devices continues to be stratified by education, gender, and income, so that digital inclusion does not necessarily result in digital equity.

3. *Agency Amid Constraints*: Though structural limitations exist; slum residents are not passive consumers. They creatively appropriate digital technology to connect, learn, and represent themselves, though within narrow confines.

This research demonstrates that social media literacy among Dhaka's slum residents is informed by informal learning practices, limited resources, and uneven critical consciousness. Although these communities exhibit remarkable flexibility and agency in leveraging platforms for communication, learning, and entertainment, they are also exposed to considerable risks regarding misinformation, privacy, and harassment. Notably, social media's symbolic and aspirational functions are as influential as its instrumental uses, rendering digital participation a multifaceted social process that entwines structural disparity with daily practice.

VI. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to explore how Dhaka slum dwellers learn to obtain, utilize, and make sense of social media as part of their daily experiences. Based on qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, it revealed a rich picture of digital literacy shaped by experiential learning, scarce resources, and the complex interplay of structural disadvantages and agency. The findings establish that social media literacy among marginalized urban groups cannot be explained through access or technical competence alone; rather, it is a community-mediated social process involving class, gender, and community dynamics.

Most striking, however, is the evidence that social media skill acquisition takes place outside of the classroom. None of the participants had recourse to formal courses in digital literacy. Instead, they learned through observation, experimentation, and guidance from a friend or younger relative. Such peer-to-peer processes support Selwyn's (2004) argument that digital competence usually represents a socially embedded practice rather than the product of formal instruction. Socially, this type of learning places social capital at the forefront of connecting to the digital world (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Through networks of friends and family members, slum dwellers use group resources to address particular individual skill gaps. Parallel findings from low-income communities in other Global South environments (Sey, 2011; Rangaswamy & Cutrell, 2012) demonstrate that social networks similarly act as informal gateways to digital literacy, particularly where formal support infrastructure is absent. This dispels dominant narratives of digital literacy as exclusively individual capacity. Instead, evidence supports that social media literacy is relational-its acquisition is shaped by networks of trust and shared learning opportunities.

The second major finding concerns social media usage within slum communities. Facebook and YouTube dominate, acting as doorways for entertainment, communication, and general information. Messenger, in particular, has transformed the manner in which residents stay connected with rural relatives and foreign kin, supporting literature on the use of digital platforms to preserve translocal family and kinship relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Although urban populations are frequently the focus of social media literacy, broader socio-political dynamics also affect marginalized communities like slum dwellers. Rahaman et al., (2022), for example, draw attention to the growing intensity of rural conflicts in Bangladesh, especially those with political motivations. However, this is not an enduring pattern of usage. Gendered social media use was evident: women primarily used the sites to maintain social ties and reduce loneliness at home, whereas men used them for public entertainment and peer-to-peer conversation. Such usage aligns with existing studies identifying structural gender inequalities persisting online, shaping digital participation (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014). Even with the benefits, social media use in these communities remains constrained by

infrastructural and economic limitations. Inconsistent access to affordable data bundles and low-quality second-hand smartphones limits the range of activities. This reflects what van Dijk (2006) describes as the "second-level digital divide," where availability alone is insufficient to provide equal opportunities for productive usage.

The study also recognized significant risks and vulnerabilities in how slum residents' access social media. Misinformation was a recurring problem: most participants confessed they could not differentiate between original and manipulated information, leading to rapid dissemination of false content. The results reflect Livingstone et al., (2014), who argue that digital literacy is not just functional knowledge but also critical skills to read, critique, and question information. Gendered threats were most evident in the form of online harassment, fake profiles, and unsolicited messages, all of which act as barriers to women's participation in online communities (Haque, 2021; Jane, 2017). These events foster an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, particularly among young women, who refrain from uploading personal photos due to privacy concerns. At the same time, privacy itself is a poorly understood and socially negotiated practice among these groups. Passwords are often shared among family members, reflecting both low awareness and the shared nature of resource use under poverty conditions. This common device culture challenges Western assumptions of privacy as an individual right (Donner, 2015).

While risks and constraints shape much of the discussion about marginalized groups and digital technology, this study also uncovered significant aspirations and agency among slum residents. Social media serves as a symbolic route to modernity and belonging, allowing residents to present themselves and be represented within broader societal discourses. Among younger users, posting pictures or videos to Facebook and TikTok becomes a way to resist stereotypes of backwardness and negotiate dignity. This aspirational use of social media aligns with the theory of "symbolic participation" (Couldry, 2012), under which individuals use online platforms to be heard and seen despite structural inequality. It further highlights the role of technology as an intermediary for self-expression, albeit under closely circumscribed material conditions. For others, platforms like YouTube and Facebook offer channels for informal skill acquisition, which can be commodified, for example, through small-scale domestic services or bespoke tailoring. These examples, although small-scale, illustrate those digital technologies, when imaginatively appropriated, can create micro-level economic opportunities and strengthen community resilience.

This study demonstrates that digital inequality is not merely a matter of access to technology or connectivity. Rather, it is rooted in the sociological dimensions of class, gender, and education. While slum residents in Dhaka are increasingly likely to own smartphones and use social media, structural constraints still limit their capacity to use these tools

critically, securely, and efficiently. As Warschauer (2004) argues, effective digital inclusion relies on the interconnection of physical access, digital capability, and meaningful content. The current results show that while access has improved, skills and content remain uneven, and critical literacies are lacking. These inequalities are disproportionately experienced by women and the least educated. The findings have several policy, educational, and community intervention implications. First, there is a need to design specialized digital literacy courses that go beyond basic skills to include critical evaluation of web content, privacy management, and safety measures. These courses should be culturally relevant, gender-sensitive, and locally initiated, building on existing informal learning networks. Second, affordability of internet service and devices remains a significant obstacle. Efforts should be made to overcome these cost constraints, through subsidized data plans or public access locations. Third, this research highlights the potential of social media as an informal civic and educational platform. Partnerships between NGOs, community associations, and online platforms could sponsor the production of localized, vernacular content appealing to marginalized groups.

A. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study's limitations are primarily a consequence of its qualitative, exploratory design. The sample was limited to two of Dhaka's slum settlements and may therefore not be representative of all urban poor populations in Bangladesh. Moreover, because interviews and FGDs provided richer insights into experiences and perceptions, they cannot quantify the prevalence of some practices. Future studies could use mixed methods to quantify levels of digital literacy and investigate longitudinal changes as access to digital technologies evolves. Cross-sectional comparisons between urban and rural poor populations, as well as gender-specific interventions, would further illuminate these dynamics.

VII. CONCLUSION

The research was a qualitative exploration of the social media literacy of slum dwellers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and of how marginal urban citizens learn, access, and use digital media in their everyday social worlds. The findings emphasize that social media literacy among slum communities is not merely a technical skill but a social process shaped by community networks, resource constraints, and structural inequalities. Informal learning-through family, peers, and observation-emerged as the primary channel for acquiring digital literacies. Social capital, rather than formal education or institutional training, is thus a fundamental factor in enabling access to online spaces. The study also revealed inequitable and gendered social media usage patterns, with men and women using these tools differently, reflecting offline inequalities. Respondents identified significant risks such as misinformation, harassment, and privacy concerns, demonstrating the need for critical digital literacy. Despite these challenges, the study confirmed that social media is a gateway to aspiration, belonging, and symbolic inclusion, providing potential for self-expression, learning, and, for

some, micro-level economic gains. These opportunities, however, are curtailed by poverty, low levels of education, and limited access to good-quality devices and affordable internet. This study emphasizes that solutions to digital inequality require more than access interventions alone. Initiatives must include critical literacy education, community-driven programs, gender-sensitive approaches, and affordable connectivity options. By centering the voices of slum dwellers, this research contributes to sociological understandings of how marginalized communities navigate the digital era and offers implications for policies aimed at reducing structural digital divides in Bangladesh.

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