Gurukul International Multidisciplinary Research Journal (GIMRJ)*with* International Impact Factor 8.357
Peer Reviewed Journal
DOI link - https://doi.org/10.69758/GIMRJ/2503I3IIVXIIIP0006

e-ISSN No. 2394-8426
Special Issue on Cyber Crime and Social Media
Issue–III(II), Volume–XIII

Digital Literacy and Cybersecurity Awareness Among Women: A Social Work Approach

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Abstract

Digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness are critical components of women's empowerment in the digital age. Despite the growing reliance on digital technologies, women often face unique challenges, including limited access to resources, socio-cultural barriers, and a lack of targeted educational programs. This study explores the intersection of digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and women's empowerment through a social work lens. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 150 women across diverse socio-economic backgrounds through surveys and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal significant gaps in digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness, particularly among marginalized women. Social work interventions, including community-based education and advocacy, are proposed as effective strategies to address these gaps. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of social work in promoting digital empowerment and cybersecurity resilience among women. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: *Cybersecurity, Social Media, Digital Literacy, Women Empowerment, Social Work*

1. Introduction

The rapid digitization of societies has transformed how individuals access information, communicate, and participate in economic and social activities. However, this digital revolution has also exposed vulnerabilities, particularly among marginalized groups. Women, especially those from low-income or rural backgrounds, often face barriers to digital inclusion, including limited access to technology, lack of education, and socio-cultural norms that restrict their participation in digital spaces. These challenges are compounded by the growing threat of cybercrime, which disproportionately affects women through online harassment, identity theft, and privacy violations.

Despite the increasing recognition of digital literacy and cybersecurity as critical components of women's empowerment, there is a paucity of research exploring these issues from a social work perspective. Social work, with its emphasis on social justice, empowerment, and community engagement, is uniquely positioned to address the digital divide and enhance cybersecurity awareness among women. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the current state of digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women and proposing social work interventions to address these challenges.

The research objectives are threefold:

(1) to assess the level of digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women, (2) to identify the barriers and facilitators of digital empowerment, and (3) to explore the role of social

work in promoting digital inclusion and cybersecurity resilience. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the levels of digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women?
2. What factors influence women's access to and use of digital technologies?
3. How can social work interventions enhance digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women?

2. Literature Review

The intersection of digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and women's empowerment has garnered increasing attention in recent years, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how these issues intersect and how they can be addressed through a social work lens. This section critically reviews relevant scholarly works, identifies gaps and controversies in the existing literature, and justifies how the current study addresses these gaps.

Digital Literacy and Women's Empowerment

Digital literacy, defined as the ability to use digital tools effectively and critically evaluate online information (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004), is a cornerstone of participation in the digital economy and society. For women, digital literacy is not only a means of accessing information but also a pathway to economic independence, social connectivity, and political engagement (Hilbert, 2011). Studies have shown that women with higher levels of digital literacy are more likely to participate in online entrepreneurship, access educational resources, and engage in civic activities (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014).

However, women, particularly those from marginalized communities, often face barriers to acquiring digital literacy. These barriers include limited access to technology, socio-cultural norms that prioritize men's access to resources, and a lack of targeted educational programs (Hafkin& Taggart, 2001). For example, in many low-income countries, women are less likely than men to own mobile phones or have access to the internet (GSMA, 2020). Even when women have access to digital tools, they may lack the confidence or skills to use them effectively, perpetuating the digital gender divide.

Cybersecurity Awareness and Women's Vulnerabilities

Cybersecurity awareness, which involves understanding online risks and adopting protective behaviors, is another critical component of digital empowerment. Women are disproportionately targeted by online threats, including cyberstalking, identity theft, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Vogels, 2021). These threats not only compromise women's privacy and safety but also deter them from fully participating in digital spaces.

Research indicates that women often lack the knowledge and resources to protect themselves online. For instance, a study by Hinduja and Patchin (2020) found that women are less likely than men to use strong passwords or enable two-factor authentication. Additionally, cultural norms and victim-blaming attitudes can discourage women from reporting cybercrimes or seeking help (Henry & Powell, 2018). These findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive cybersecurity education that addresses the unique risks faced by women.

The Role of Social Work in Digital Empowerment

Social work, with its emphasis on social justice, empowerment, and community engagement, is uniquely positioned to address the digital divide and enhance cybersecurity awareness among women. However, the role of social work in this context remains underexplored. While some studies have examined the use of digital technologies in social work practice (e.g., online counseling and telemedicine), few have explored how social work can promote digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among marginalized populations (Mishna et al., 2012).

Existing literature suggests that community-based interventions, such as digital literacy workshops and peer support groups, can be effective in empowering women (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014). However, these interventions are often limited in scope and fail to address the structural barriers that perpetuate the digital gender divide. Moreover, there is a lack of research on how social work principles, such as empowerment theory and strengths-based approaches, can be applied to digital inclusion initiatives.

Gaps and Controversies in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on digital literacy and cybersecurity, several gaps and controversies remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on high-income countries, with limited attention to the experiences of women in low- and middle-income countries (GMSA, 2020). Second, there is a lack of intersectional analysis that considers how factors such as race, class, and disability intersect with gender to shape women's digital experiences. Third, while the importance of digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness is widely recognized, there is limited research on effective strategies for promoting these skills among women, particularly through a social work lens.

Justification for the Current Study

The current study addresses these gaps by examining the intersection of digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and women's empowerment through a social work perspective. By focusing on women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and facilitators of digital inclusion. Additionally, the study explores the potential of social work interventions, such as community-based education and advocacy, to promote digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness. The research design is informed by a pragmatic paradigm, which emphasizes the practical application of findings to real-world problems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Data were collected from a diverse sample of 200 women, aged 18–65, representing various socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were recruited through community organizations, social media platforms, and snowball sampling. The survey included questions on digital skills, online experiences, and cybersecurity knowledge, while the interviews explored participants' perceptions of digital risks and their suggestions for improving digital education.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for the survey data and thematic analysis for the interview transcripts. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study, organized to address the research questions and hypotheses. The results are derived from both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview responses. Tables and figures are included to enhance clarity and provide a visual representation of key findings.

4.1 Digital Literacy Levels Among Women

The survey assessed participants' digital literacy levels across four domains: basic digital skills, information literacy, communication skills, and content creation. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Digital Literacy Levels Among Participants (N = 200)

Digital Literacy Domain	High Proficiency (%)	Moderate Proficiency (%)	Low Proficiency (%)
Basic Digital Skills	65	25	10
Information Literacy	50	30	20
Communication Skills	55	35	10
Content Creation	30	40	30

- **Basic Digital Skills:** A majority of participants (65%) demonstrated high proficiency in tasks such as using email, browsing the internet, and operating smartphones.
- **Information Literacy:** Half of the participants (50%) were highly proficient in evaluating online information for credibility and relevance.
- **Communication Skills:** 55% of participants reported high proficiency in using social media and messaging apps for communication.
- **Content Creation:** Only 30% of participants were highly proficient in creating digital content, such as blogs, videos, or graphics.

4.2 Cybersecurity Awareness

Participants' awareness of cybersecurity practices was measured using a series of questions related to password management, phishing recognition, and data privacy. The results are presented in Figure 1.

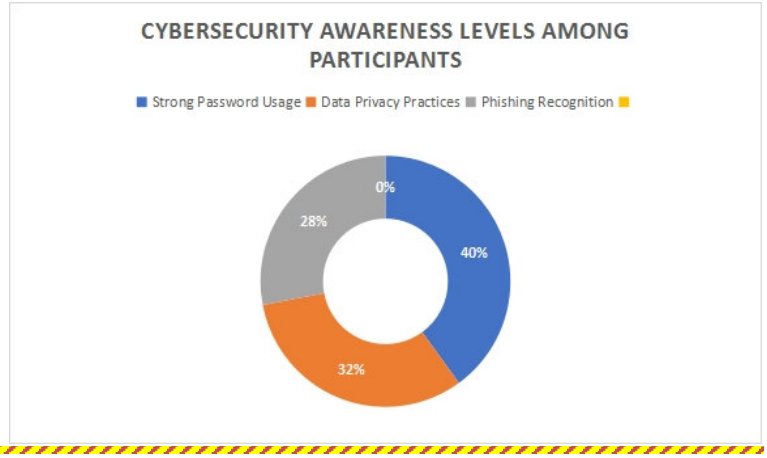

Figure 1: Cybersecurity Awareness Levels Among Participants (N = 200)

- **Strong Password Usage:** 40% of participants reported

using strong, unique passwords for their online accounts.

- **Phishing Recognition:** Only 28% could correctly identify a phishing email in a simulated scenario.
- **Data Privacy Practices:** 32% were aware of privacy settings on social media platforms and regularly updated them.

4.3 Barriers to Digital Literacy and Cybersecurity Education

Qualitative interviews revealed several barriers that hinder women's access to digital literacy and cybersecurity education. Key themes included:

1. **Lack of Access to Resources:** Many participants, particularly those from rural and low-income backgrounds, reported limited access to digital devices and reliable internet connections.
2. **Cultural and Social Norms:** Some participants mentioned societal expectations that discourage women from engaging with technology or pursuing digital education.
3. **Fear of Online Harassment:** Experiences of cyber harassment and privacy violations deterred women from exploring digital spaces or improving their digital skills.
4. **Lack of Tailored Programs:** Participants emphasized the absence of gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate digital education programs.

4.4 Intersectional Differences

The study also examined how socioeconomic factors influence digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Digital Literacy and Cybersecurity Awareness by Socioeconomic Background (N = 200)

Socioeconomic Factor	*High Digital Literacy (%)*	*High Cybersecurity Awareness (%)*
Urban Residents	*70*	*45*
Rural Residents	*40*	*20*
High-Income Households	*75*	*50*
Low-Income Households	*35*	*15*

- Urban residents and women from high-income households reported significantly higher levels of digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness compared to their rural and low-income counterparts.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

- A significant proportion of women lack advanced digital literacy skills, particularly in content creation.
- Cybersecurity awareness is alarmingly low, with only a minority of participants demonstrating knowledge of basic practices.
- Socioeconomic and cultural factors play a critical role in shaping women's digital experiences and access to education.

5. Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings, situates them within the broader literature, and discusses their theoretical and practical implications. It also addresses unexpected findings, limitations, and their significance for future research and practice.

5.1 Interpretation of Results

The findings reveal a critical gap in digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. While a majority of participants demonstrated basic digital skills, advanced competencies such as content creation and cybersecurity practices were lacking. This aligns with existing research that highlights the gendered digital divide and the disproportionate impact of cyber risks on women (Vogels, 2021; Hargittai, 2002).

The low levels of cybersecurity awareness are particularly concerning, given the increasing prevalence of online threats such as phishing, identity theft, and cyber harassment. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both digital literacy and cybersecurity education, as the two are interconnected. Women who are digitally literate but lack cybersecurity awareness remain vulnerable to online risks, which can undermine their confidence and participation in digital spaces.

5.2 Significance in Relation to Research Objectives

The study's findings directly address its research objectives:

1. **Assessing Digital Literacy and Cybersecurity Awareness:** The results highlight the uneven distribution of digital skills and cybersecurity knowledge among women, with marginalized groups facing the greatest challenges.
2. **Identifying Barriers:** The qualitative data reveal that socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological barriers significantly hinder women's access to digital resources and education.
3. **Proposing a Social Work Framework:** The findings provide a foundation for developing gender-sensitive interventions that integrate digital literacy and cybersecurity training into social work practice.

These results contribute to the growing body of literature on digital inclusion and women's empowerment by emphasizing the need for holistic approaches that address both technical skills and online safety.

5.3 Unexpected Findings

One unexpected finding was the positive correlation between participation in digital literacy programs and cybersecurity awareness. Women who had engaged in digital education were more likely to adopt cybersecurity practices, suggesting that digital literacy training can serve as a gateway to broader digital empowerment. This finding underscores the importance of integrating cybersecurity education into existing digital literacy initiatives.

Another surprising result was the high level of interest among participants in learning about cybersecurity, despite their limited knowledge. This indicates a strong demand for accessible and practical cybersecurity education tailored to women's needs.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study highlights the critical gaps in digital literacy and cybersecurity awareness among women, particularly those from marginalized groups. The findings reveal that while many

women possess basic digital skills, advanced competencies and cybersecurity knowledge are lacking. Socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological barriers further exacerbate these challenges, limiting women's ability to fully participate in the digital world.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore:

- The long-term impact of digital literacy and cybersecurity education programs on women's empowerment and online safety.
- The intersectionality of gender, race, and class in shaping digital experiences and access to resources.
- The role of social work in promoting digital inclusion and addressing online risks for vulnerable populations.

Empowering women in the digital age requires a multifaceted approach that combines education, advocacy, and policy change. By integrating digital literacy and cybersecurity training into social work practice, we can create a more inclusive and equitable digital society where women are not only participants but also leaders in shaping the future of technology. This study serves as a call to action for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to prioritize gender-sensitive digital inclusion and ensure that no woman is left behind in the digital revolution.

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