

PREFACE TO THE EDITION

It is with great pleasure that we present the latest issue of the *International Journal of Social Science Humanities Research Studies (IJSSRS)*, a collection of scholarly contributions that critically engage with some of the most pressing social, psychological, cultural, and structural transformations shaping contemporary society. The articles featured in this issue reflect the journal's commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry and socially relevant research that bridges sociology, psychology, social work, gender studies, media studies, and humanities-oriented social analysis.

A prominent thread running through this issue is the profound impact of digital transformation on human relationships, mental well-being, labour structures, and cultural practices. The opening study on urban loneliness among young professionals in Indian metropolitan cities presents a compelling sociological analysis of how hyperconnectivity can coexist with emotional isolation. By situating loneliness within broader processes of migration, weakened social capital, and accelerated urban life, the article offers important theoretical and policy-oriented insights into the changing fabric of urban existence.

Closely aligned with concerns regarding digital life and psychological well-being, the issue also includes a timely examination of doomscrolling among college students. This study explores the psychological consequences of compulsive exposure to distressing online content, particularly its effects on anxiety, sleep disturbances, and cognitive fatigue. In an age where digital media increasingly mediates emotional experience, the article contributes meaningfully to contemporary discussions on youth mental health, digital behaviour, and educational well-being.

The issue further expands its engagement with mental health through an important contribution focusing on community-based mental health interventions for elderly populations in rural India. Approaching the topic from a social work perspective, the study highlights the need for grassroots, culturally grounded, and community-oriented approaches that address the growing vulnerabilities of ageing populations. By emphasizing intersectoral coordination, frontline health engagement, and family-centred care, the article underscores the importance of inclusive and localized mental health frameworks.

Another significant contribution examines the gendered dimensions of India's expanding gig economy. Through a feminist and labour-oriented analysis, the article critically evaluates how digital labour platforms simultaneously create opportunities and reproduce structural inequalities for women workers. Issues of safety, unpaid care work, occupational segregation, and algorithmic invisibility are thoughtfully explored, making the study highly relevant to ongoing debates concerning labour rights, digital economies, and gender justice in contemporary India.

The issue concludes with a thought-provoking exploration of religion in the digital age, particularly in post-pandemic India. The study analyses how religious practices, spiritual communities, and devotional participation have increasingly migrated to online platforms, creating hybrid forms of religious engagement that blend tradition with technological mediation. By examining livestreamed rituals, digital spiritual communities, and devotional content economies, the article contributes significantly to the evolving scholarship on digital religion and mediatized spirituality.

Taken together, the articles in this issue demonstrate the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary social realities. They reveal how technological change, shifting social structures, demographic transitions, and cultural adaptation continue to reshape individual and collective life in complex ways. More importantly, these studies reaffirm the vital role of social science and humanities research in interpreting, critiquing, and responding to these transformations with scholarly depth and social sensitivity.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all contributing authors for their valuable research contributions, to the reviewers for their rigorous academic engagement, and to the editorial and advisory boards for their continued support in maintaining the scholarly standards of IJSSRS. We hope that this issue will stimulate meaningful academic dialogue, inspire future research, and contribute constructively to interdisciplinary scholarship and public understanding.

Dr. Manoj T R
Chief Editor

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Urban Loneliness in the Age of Hyperconnectivity: A Sociological Examination of Social Isolation Among Young Professionals in Indian Metropolitan Cities

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Abstract

The paradox of unprecedented digital connectivity coexisting with rising rates of social isolation defines the contemporary urban experience, particularly for young professionals navigating India's rapidly transforming metropolitan landscapes. This article examines the sociological dimensions of urban loneliness among young working professionals (aged 22–35) in Indian metropolitan cities, drawing on a systematic synthesis of existing literature, secondary data analysis, and theoretical frameworks. Employing a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship from 2010 to 2025 across sociology, urban studies, and digital sociology, alongside reports from public health and urban research institutions. The analysis reveals four interlocking dimensions of urban loneliness: structural displacement caused by labour migration, the erosion of community-based social capital, the paradoxical effects of digital hyperconnectivity, and the time-poverty culture endemic to high-pressure urban work environments. Findings suggest that despite extensive digital networks, young professionals frequently experience emotional isolation marked by superficial relationships, weakened familial bonds, and limited civic engagement. The study draws on Durkheimian anomie, Wirth's urbanism thesis, Putnam's social capital framework, and Bauman's liquid modernity to interpret these patterns. The article concludes that urban loneliness is best understood as a structurally produced social condition rather than an individual psychological deficit, calling for multi-level interventions encompassing urban planning, workplace policy, mental health infrastructure, and digital citizenship education. Implications for sociological theory and urban policy in the Indian context are discussed.

Keywords:- Urban Loneliness, Social Isolation, Hyperconnectivity, Young Professionals, Indian Metropolitan Cities, Digital Sociology, Social Capital, Anomie.

Introduction

The contemporary urban condition presents a striking paradox: never before in human history have individuals possessed such extensive technological means of staying connected, yet rarely have they reported feeling so profoundly alone. This phenomenon is particularly visible among young professionals in Indian metropolitan cities, who constitute one of the most digitally connected demographics in the world while simultaneously exhibiting growing indicators of social isolation, emotional disconnection, and psychological distress. The dissonance between objective connectivity and subjective loneliness has emerged as one of the defining sociological puzzles of the early twenty-first century, demanding renewed scholarly attention to the structural foundations of social life under conditions of advanced urbanism and digital saturation.

India is presently undergoing one of the largest urban transformations in human history. According to the latest United Nations urbanization projections, India's urban population is expected to add nearly 416 million dwellers between 2018 and 2050, surpassing the combined urban additions of China and Nigeria. This demographic shift is accompanied by unprecedented internal migration, with young professionals from smaller towns and rural districts converging upon metropolitan hubs such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Delhi-NCR, Chennai, Pune, and Kolkata in pursuit of employment, education, and aspirational lifestyles. While such mobility has driven significant economic growth, it has simultaneously dismantled traditional kinship-based support structures and reconfigured the social fabric of urban India in ways that scholars are only beginning to understand.

Concurrently, the proliferation of digital communication technologies smartphones, social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, and workplace collaboration tools has transformed the texture of everyday social interaction. Young professionals in Indian metros now spend a substantial portion of their waking hours mediated by digital interfaces, both at work and during leisure. Yet emerging evidence from public health research, mental health helpline data, and urban sociology studies suggests that loneliness and feelings of social disconnection have intensified rather than diminished in this hyperconnected environment. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath further amplified these tendencies, normalizing remote work, weakening physical workplace community, and prolonging periods of relative social isolation.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks: What sociological factors explain the rise of urban loneliness among young professionals in Indian metropolitan cities, and how do classical and contemporary social theories help us understand this phenomenon? Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry:

- What structural conditions of urban life and labour mobility contribute to social isolation in this demographic?
- How does digital hyperconnectivity reconfigure rather than resolve the experience of loneliness?
- What theoretical and policy responses might mitigate the social and psychological costs of urban loneliness?

The article makes three contributions. First, it brings together fragmented strands of literature on urbanism, social capital, digital sociology, and Indian metropolitan studies into a coherent analytical framework. Second, it foregrounds the specifically Indian dimensions of a phenomenon often theorized through Western experiences. Third, it offers a sociologically grounded set of policy directions that move beyond individualizing or pathologizing accounts of loneliness. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature; Section 3 outlines the methodological approach; Section 4 presents the findings organized around four key themes; Section 5 discusses theoretical and policy implications; and Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Classical Sociological Foundations

The sociological study of loneliness and social disconnection has its roots in the foundational works of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists who sought to make sense of the rapid transformations of industrial modernity. Émile Durkheim's analysis of anomie, articulated most powerfully in *Suicide* (1897), described a state of normative deregulation in which the moral and social bonds linking individuals to their communities are weakened or fragmented. For Durkheim, anomie was not an individual pathology but a structural condition produced by the breakdown of integrative social institutions. Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) similarly captured the shift from densely woven, kinship-based rural communities to impersonal, contractual urban associations. Louis Wirth's seminal essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' (1938) extended these insights, arguing that the size, density, and heterogeneity of urban populations produce a distinctive set of social relationships characterized by superficiality, anonymity, and instrumentalism. These classical formulations remain remarkably relevant for understanding the loneliness experienced in contemporary Indian metros, where the very conditions Wirth described density without intimacy, proximity without community are vividly reproduced.

Social Capital and Civic Decline

Robert Putnam's influential thesis in *Bowling Alone* (2000) drew sociological attention to the erosion of social capital in late modern societies. Putnam documented declining participation in voluntary associations, weakening neighbourhood ties, and a generational shift toward more privatized, home-centred lifestyles. While Putnam's empirical analysis focused on the United States, subsequent research has identified analogous patterns in urbanizing societies across Asia. In the Indian context, the rapid expansion of gated residential communities, the decline of street-level public sociality, and the thinning of caste- and kinship-based mutual support networks among migrants have produced what some scholars term a 'thin sociality' in metropolitan life. The implications

for loneliness are direct: where bridging and bonding social capital is weak, individuals lack the embedded relationships that buffer against isolation.

Liquid Modernity and Identity

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' provides a further theoretical lens. Bauman argued that under conditions of late modernity, social bonds, identities, and commitments have become increasingly fluid, provisional, and easily dissolved. Relationships are valued for their instrumental utility and emotional convenience rather than their durability. Young professionals navigating high-mobility career trajectories, frequent geographical relocations, and shifting peer groups exemplify this liquid condition. While liquidity offers individual freedom, it also produces an existential precarity in which deep attachments become difficult to form and sustain, a structural prerequisite for loneliness.

Digital Sociology and the Connectivity Paradox

A burgeoning body of work in digital sociology has examined the social consequences of pervasive digital communication. Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011) influentially argued that digital technologies promise companionship without the demands of friendship, fostering relationships that are 'sippable' rather than substantive. Empirical research has documented associations between heavy social media use and increased reports of loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, though causal directions remain debated. Particularly relevant is the concept of 'ambient awareness' the perception of constant social presence through digital signals which can paradoxically intensify feelings of exclusion when one's own engagement appears comparatively meagre. Studies of young Indian professionals consistently find high rates of smartphone dependency, social comparison behaviours, and 'fear of missing out' (FOMO), all of which are implicated in subjective loneliness.

The Indian Urban Context

Despite the global proliferation of loneliness research, dedicated sociological scholarship on urban loneliness in India remains comparatively sparse. Existing studies have tended to approach the subject through public health or psychiatric frameworks, focusing on prevalence rates among the elderly. Younger working populations, particularly migrant professionals, have received less systematic attention. Recent contributions have begun to address this gap by examining the loneliness of women migrants in IT hubs, the psychosocial costs of long working hours in metropolitan corporate settings, and the role of paying-guest accommodation cultures in shaping residential sociality. However, an integrated sociological account that links structural conditions, cultural transformations, and digital practices is still emerging. The present article seeks to contribute to this developing scholarship.

Methods

This study adopts a critical literature review methodology combined with a thematic analysis of secondary sources. Such an approach is appropriate for synthesizing dispersed scholarship across multiple disciplines and for generating conceptual insight into a multi-dimensional social phenomenon. The methodology proceeded in four stages.

First, a systematic literature search was conducted in major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the Indian Citation Index. Search terms included combinations of 'urban loneliness', 'social isolation', 'young professionals', 'India', 'metropolitan', 'social capital', 'digital connectivity', and 'urbanization'. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed publications between January 2010 and August 2025, with selected classical works included for theoretical grounding.

Second, inclusion criteria specified studies that engaged sociologically or socio-psychologically with loneliness, isolation, or weakened social ties in urban contexts, with priority given to scholarship focused on India, South Asia, or comparable urbanizing societies. Exclusion criteria filtered out clinical-only studies, opinion pieces, and works without methodological transparency. After screening, sixty-eight publications were retained for in-depth analysis.

Third, supplementary secondary data were drawn from publicly available sources including the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the National Mental Health Survey of India (NIMHANS), the Census of India, and reports from research organizations such as the Centre for Social Research, the Observer Research Foundation, and the National Institute of Urban Affairs. These sources provided demographic, migratory, and mental health context.

Fourth, analysis followed a thematic synthesis procedure. Codes were developed inductively through close reading and iteratively refined into broader analytical categories. Four major themes emerged: structural displacement, erosion of social capital, the digital connectivity paradox, and time-poverty in urban work culture.

These themes structure the findings presented in the next section. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval; however, principles of accurate citation, intellectual honesty, and balanced representation of competing scholarly perspectives were strictly observed throughout.

Results

Structural Displacement and the Migrant Professional

The first dominant theme to emerge from the analysis is the structural displacement experienced by young professionals who migrate from smaller towns and rural districts to metropolitan centres. Migration severs everyday access to extended family, neighbourhood networks, and place-based identities. While digital communication maintains a degree of contact with origin communities, qualitative studies consistently report that this contact tends to be informational rather than emotionally restorative. Migrant professionals frequently describe a sense of being 'rooted nowhere' neither fully integrated into their new urban environments nor meaningfully embedded in their communities of origin. This double dislocation produces a distinct form of loneliness that is invisible to standard sociometric measures of network size or contact frequency.

The cultural script of metropolitan migration in India also tends to emphasize individual ambition, self-sufficiency, and the deferral of relational investment until career milestones are achieved. Among young professionals in IT, finance, and consulting sectors, marriage, deep friendship, and community involvement are often discursively positioned as projects to be undertaken 'later', producing prolonged periods of relational thinness during the formative years of adult life.

Erosion of Community-Based Social Capital

The second theme concerns the erosion of community-based social capital in metropolitan India. Urban residential patterns have shifted markedly in recent decades, with the proliferation of high-rise apartment complexes, gated colonies, and paying-guest accommodations replacing the more porous, street-oriented neighbourhoods of earlier generations. While these new residential forms offer security and amenities, they reduce the density of incidental, low-stakes social interaction what urban sociologists term 'public familiarity' that historically anchors a sense of belonging. Reported neighbour-acquaintance rates among young apartment-dwellers in metros are strikingly low, with many respondents in available studies reporting that they do not know the names of their immediate neighbours.

Workplace sociality, traditionally a key compensating source of belonging for migrant professionals, has also been transformed. The expansion of remote work, hybrid models, and project-based gig employment has reduced the duration and depth of workplace relationships. While colleagues remain reachable digitally, the embodied co-presence that fosters trust, mutual care, and informal solidarity has been thinned.

The Digital Connectivity Paradox

The third theme directly addresses the central paradox motivating this study: the coexistence of intensive digital connectivity with rising loneliness. The analysis suggests that digital communication reconfigures, rather than resolves, the conditions of social belonging. Three mechanisms appear especially salient. First, digital connection often substitutes for, rather than supplementing, face-to-face interaction, displacing forms of co-presence that are emotionally restorative. Second, the curated, performative nature of social media interaction encourages comparison and impression management, producing 'connected isolation' in which individuals feel surrounded by others' apparent fulfilment without finding spaces for the disclosure of their own struggles. Third, the volume of weak-tie digital contact can crowd out the cultivation of strong-tie intimacy, leaving individuals with extensive but shallow networks.

Importantly, these findings do not support a technologically deterministic narrative. Digital tools can also support meaningful relationships and partial substitutes for absent in-person contact, particularly for migrants distant from family. The decisive factor lies in how digital practices articulate with broader structural conditions of urban life rather than in technology itself.

Time-Poverty and Urban Work Culture

The fourth theme highlights the time-poverty endemic to high-pressure metropolitan work cultures. Long working hours, lengthy commutes, on-demand work expectations, and weekend professional commitments leave many young professionals with limited discretionary time for relationship cultivation. Unlike economic poverty, time-poverty is socially patterned and concentrated among those at particular career stages, in particular sectors, and in cities with the most intense urban-economic pressures. Time-poverty undermines the unhurried, repeated, low-pressure interactions through which durable friendships and community ties are built. In a structural sense,

the very labour conditions that make metropolitan migration economically attractive simultaneously erode the relational ecology that would protect migrants against loneliness.

Discussion

The findings carry several important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they support a structural-sociological framing of urban loneliness, in contrast to dominant individual-psychological accounts. Loneliness, on this reading, is not primarily a private failing of social skill or resilience but a socially produced condition rooted in patterns of migration, residential design, labour organization, and digital practice. This perspective aligns with renewed scholarly calls to treat loneliness as a public sociological problem rather than a clinical disorder.

The four themes identified structural displacement, eroded social capital, the connectivity paradox, and time-poverty together constitute what might be termed a 'lonely urbanism' particular to fast-growing metropolitan economies. Each theme corresponds to a different point of intervention in social policy. Migration-induced displacement points to the need for more deliberate community-building infrastructure for migrants, including inclusive civic spaces, language and cultural orientation programmes, and migrant welfare initiatives at municipal level. The erosion of community-based social capital invites attention to urban design pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, mixed-use zoning, accessible parks and plazas, and public libraries that facilitate spontaneous social encounter. The digital connectivity paradox suggests that digital citizenship education, beginning in schools and continuing into workplaces, should equip individuals to use digital tools without crowding out embodied sociality. Finally, time-poverty points to labour-market reforms reasonable working hours, predictable schedules, parental leave, and meaningful disconnection rights as essential infrastructure for relational well-being.

These implications dovetail with a growing global recognition of loneliness as a public health priority. Several governments, notably the United Kingdom and Japan, have established ministerial or institutional responsibility for loneliness. India's policy response remains comparatively underdeveloped, despite the demographic and cultural specificities that make its metropolitan experience distinctive. The findings of this study suggest that an Indian policy agenda on urban loneliness should be deeply intersectoral, engaging urban development, labour, health, education, and digital governance simultaneously.

The discussion would be incomplete without acknowledging the study's limitations. As a literature-based analysis, it depends on the quality and coverage of available secondary scholarship, which remains uneven for the Indian context. Empirical generalizations about prevalence and intensity must therefore be drawn with caution. The study also focuses on a specific demographic young metropolitan professionals and findings should not be extrapolated uncritically to other populations such as the elderly, the urban poor, or rural residents, each of whom face distinct configurations of social isolation. Future research should address these limitations through primary mixed-methods studies that combine survey-based prevalence estimates with ethnographic depth, ideally across multiple metropolitan sites.

Conclusion

This article has examined urban loneliness among young professionals in Indian metropolitan cities through a sociological lens, drawing on classical and contemporary theory and a critical synthesis of recent scholarship. Four interlocking dimensions structural displacement, erosion of community-based social capital, the digital connectivity paradox, and time-poverty were identified as constitutive of a distinctive 'lonely urbanism' shaping the lives of young metropolitan workers. Together, these findings support an understanding of loneliness as a structurally produced social condition rather than an individual psychological deficit, with significant implications for sociological theory and public policy.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, the sociological study of loneliness in India must move beyond elderly-centric frames to include the relational predicaments of younger, mobile, digitally embedded populations whose experiences are increasingly central to the urban future. Second, theoretical engagement with classical perspectives Durkheim, Wirth, Tönnies remains productive when paired with the analytical resources of contemporary digital sociology. Third, the policy response to urban loneliness must be intersectoral, treating the phenomenon as a problem of urban design, labour regulation, mental health infrastructure, and digital culture simultaneously.

Several avenues for future research are warranted. Multi-city ethnographic studies would help map the variation in loneliness experiences across different metropolitan contexts within India. Longitudinal designs could trace how loneliness shifts across the life-course of migrant professionals. Comparative work between Indian cities and metropolitan centres in other rapidly urbanizing societies China, Indonesia, Nigeria, Brazil would illuminate the global structural conditions producing contemporary urban isolation. Studies focused on the design and evaluation of community-building interventions could provide an evidence base for policy. Finally, gender-

disaggregated analyses are critical, given the distinct loneliness pathways shaped by gendered expectations, safety concerns, and care responsibilities. By advancing such an agenda, sociology can contribute to making the metropolitan futures that young professionals are building more habitable, connected, and humane.

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The Psychological Impact of Doomscrolling: Examining Anxiety, Sleep Disturbances, and Cognitive Fatigue Among College Students

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Abstract

Doomscrolling, the compulsive consumption of negative online news and social media content, has emerged as a prominent behavioural pattern among college students worldwide. This article examines the psychological consequences of doomscrolling, with particular focus on anxiety, sleep disturbances, and cognitive fatigue in young adult populations. Drawing on a systematic synthesis of psychological literature published between 2018 and 2025, the study integrates findings from cognitive psychology, sleep science, and digital media research. The analysis reveals that habitual doomscrolling is associated with elevated state anxiety, intrusive negative thinking, and a heightened threat-vigilance cognitive style. Sleep research consistently demonstrates that pre-bedtime exposure to distressing news content disrupts sleep architecture, reduces total sleep time, and impairs sleep quality. Cognitive fatigue manifests through reduced attention span, impaired working memory, and difficulty with sustained academic concentration. The study draws on theoretical frameworks including negativity bias, the variable reward schedule of social media, and Bandura's social cognitive theory to interpret these findings. Several moderating factors, including pre-existing mental health vulnerability, social comparison tendencies, and sleep hygiene practices, shape individual susceptibility. The article concludes that doomscrolling represents a significant public mental health concern for the college-going population, calling for evidence-based interventions including digital literacy education, university wellness programmes, and individual self-regulation strategies. Implications for clinical practice and university policy are discussed.

Keywords:- Doomscrolling, Anxiety, Sleep disturbance, Cognitive fatigue, College students, Digital media psychology, Negativity bias, Social media.

Introduction

The compulsive scrolling through streams of distressing online news and social media content, a behaviour now widely known as doomscrolling, has emerged as one of the most distinctive psychological phenomena of the digital age. While the term gained popular currency during the COVID-19 pandemic, when global audiences spent extended periods consuming pandemic-related and crisis news, the underlying behavioural pattern has persisted and arguably intensified in the years that followed (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Subsequent global events, including geopolitical conflicts, climate disasters, economic uncertainty, and political polarization, have continued to fuel an environment in which negatively valenced information is abundant, easily accessible, and algorithmically amplified across digital platforms (Hilliard & Cooper, 2024).

College students represent one of the populations most exposed to and most affected by doomscrolling behaviours. Several converging factors explain this elevated vulnerability. First, this age cohort exhibits the highest rates of smartphone use and social media engagement among adult populations (Pew Research Center, 2023). Second, college years coincide with a developmentally sensitive period of identity formation, social comparison, and emotional regulation skill development, during which adverse digital exposures may have outsized psychological consequences (World Health Organization, 2023). Third, students typically lack the structured family routines and adult-supervised contexts that often serve as protective factors in adolescence, while not yet possessing the workplace structures that often constrain adult media use. Fourth, the academic environment itself imposes demands for sustained attention, working memory, and emotional resilience, making any erosion of these capacities particularly consequential (Carrier et al., 2015).

Despite the popular salience of doomscrolling and its evident relevance to student well-being, integrated psychological scholarship on the phenomenon remains in an early stage. Much of the existing literature treats doomscrolling under broader rubrics such as problematic internet use, social media addiction, or news consumption, without attending to its specific cognitive, affective, and physiological consequences (Andreassen, 2015; Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2018). Furthermore, the bulk of the evidence base derives from Western, largely North American student samples, with comparatively limited investigation in South Asian, including Indian, populations whose cultural, educational, and digital ecosystems differ in important respects (Sharma & Sahu, 2021; Verma & Kumar, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present article asks:

- what are the psychological consequences of habitual doomscrolling for college students, and through what mechanisms do these effects unfold?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the analysis. First, how is doomscrolling associated with anxiety symptoms and threat-vigilant cognitive styles?
- Second, what evidence links doomscrolling, particularly when it occurs in the late-evening hours, with sleep disturbance?
- Third, how does doomscrolling contribute to cognitive fatigue, and with what implications for academic functioning?

The article makes three contributions. First, it synthesizes a fragmented body of psychological research into a coherent account of doomscrolling and its consequences for college students. Second, it situates this synthesis in relation to established theoretical frameworks in cognitive, clinical, and digital media psychology. Third, it identifies practical implications for university wellness programmes, clinical practice, and individual self-regulation. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, with attention to theoretical foundations and empirical findings. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents the synthesized findings. Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications. Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature review

Theoretical Foundations

Several theoretical frameworks are useful for understanding the psychological dynamics of doomscrolling. First, the concept of negativity bias, well established in cognitive and evolutionary psychology, describes the human tendency to attend more closely, react more strongly, and remember more vividly negative information compared with positive information of equivalent magnitude (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). From an evolutionary perspective, this bias enhanced survival by directing attention to threats. In the contemporary digital environment, however, negativity bias interacts with content algorithms that preferentially surface high-arousal, threat-relevant, or emotionally provocative material, producing a feedback loop in which user attention to negative content shapes future exposure (Alter, 2017).

Second, behavioural theories of variable reward schedules, drawing on the work of Skinner (1953) and developed extensively in research on gambling and digital design (Alter, 2017), illuminate the compulsive quality of doomscrolling. Social media feeds and news streams provide intermittent, unpredictable rewards in the form of novel, emotionally arousing content. Such schedules are well known to produce persistent, hard-to-extinguish behavioural patterns, even when the rewards themselves are negatively valenced (Wood & Neal, 2007).

Third, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and related constructs of vicarious learning, social comparison, and self-efficacy help explain the affective consequences of prolonged exposure to negative social and political content. Witnessing distress, conflict, and adversity at scale, often involving identifiable individuals,

can erode self-efficacy beliefs, induce vicarious traumatic stress, and reshape one's mental model of the social world toward greater perceived danger and hopelessness.

Fourth, contemporary research on the attention economy emphasizes that user attention is the primary commodity exchanged in digital platforms, and that platform design is optimized to maximize time-on-platform rather than user well-being (Alter, 2017; Newport, 2019). Doomscrolling can be understood as one consequence of this structural condition, in which user vulnerabilities to negativity bias and variable rewards are systematically exploited.

Doomscrolling and Anxiety

Empirical research on the relationship between negative news consumption and anxiety has accumulated rapidly, particularly since 2020. Cross-sectional studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic documented robust associations between time spent consuming pandemic-related news and elevated scores on anxiety, depression, and stress measures (Keles et al., 2020; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Subsequent longitudinal investigations have added evidence that habitual doomscrolling is not merely a correlate of anxiety, but may contribute to its development through repeated activation of threat-related cognitive schemas (Bodroza et al., 2023; Hilliard & Cooper, 2024). Particularly noteworthy are findings linking doomscrolling to a generalized perception of the world as dangerous and unpredictable, a cognitive style strongly associated with generalized anxiety disorder.

College student samples have shown some of the strongest associations between doomscrolling and anxiety symptomatology. Studies conducted in North American, European, and Asian universities consistently report that students who engage in frequent doomscrolling exhibit higher levels of state anxiety, more intrusive negative thoughts, and greater perceived stress compared with their lower-engagement peers (Sharma & Sahu, 2021; Vahedi & Saiphoo, 2018; Verma & Kumar, 2022). Notably, these associations persist after controlling for total social media use, suggesting that the content character of doomscrolling, rather than digital exposure per se, is the active variable (Bodroza et al., 2023).

Sleep and Digital Media Exposure

The relationship between digital media use and sleep is among the most robustly established findings in contemporary digital health research. Multiple meta-analyses have documented that pre-sleep screen exposure is associated with delayed sleep onset, reduced total sleep time, and impaired sleep quality (Levenson et al., 2016). The pathways are multiple, including blue-light suppression of melatonin, cognitive arousal through engaging content, and social-emotional activation through interactive features (Levenson et al., 2016).

Doomscrolling appears to compound these effects. The emotional arousal produced by distressing news content prolongs cognitive processing into the sleep-onset period, increases nocturnal awakening, and elevates physiological stress markers (Price et al., 2023). Among college students, who often consume digital media in bed in the absence of adult supervision and structured bedtimes, the consequences for sleep architecture can be especially pronounced (Verma & Kumar, 2022). Reduced sleep, in turn, is associated with diminished academic performance, impaired emotional regulation, and increased vulnerability to mental health problems, creating a cyclical relationship between doomscrolling, sleep, and well-being.

Cognitive Fatigue and Attention

Cognitive fatigue, characterized by reduced attentional capacity, slower processing speed, and impaired working memory after periods of intensive cognitive engagement, has become a focus of growing research interest in the digital era. Sustained exposure to fragmented, attention-demanding digital content has been linked to reductions in sustained attention, increased difficulty with deep reading, and weaker cognitive control (Carrier et al., 2015; Newport, 2019). Doomscrolling, with its combination of high cognitive demand, emotional arousal, and self-perpetuating engagement, is particularly fatiguing.

For college students, cognitive fatigue carries direct academic costs. Tasks requiring sustained focus, such as reading complex academic texts, writing extended analytical essays, and preparing for examinations, are precisely those most undermined by attentional fragmentation. Research has begun to document associations between high social media use, doomscrolling behaviours, and lower academic performance, though disentangling causal pathways remains methodologically challenging (Twenge et al., 2018).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding evidence base, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, doomscrolling has often been studied indirectly as a subset of broader social media or news consumption behaviours, rather than as a phenomenon with distinctive psychological signatures. Second, the bulk of the evidence is cross-sectional,

limiting inferences about causal direction. Third, integrative analyses linking the affective, somatic (sleep), and cognitive consequences of doomscrolling within a single framework are rare. Fourth, most empirical work has been conducted in Western contexts, with relatively limited investigation among South Asian college populations. The present article seeks to address the integrative gap through a structured synthesis of the available literature.

Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, designed to synthesize empirical and theoretical scholarship on the psychological consequences of doomscrolling among college students. The approach is appropriate where existing research is multidisciplinary, dispersed across journals, and methodologically heterogeneous.

The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured database search was conducted in PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined doomscrolling, negative news consumption, social media use, and smartphone use, with anxiety, depression, sleep, sleep disturbance, attention, cognitive fatigue, and college students or university students. The search window covered January 2018 to August 2025, capturing both pre-pandemic foundational work and the surge of post-2020 research on doomscrolling specifically.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies examining digital media use and psychological outcomes in college or young adult populations. Theoretical and review papers in cognitive, clinical, and digital media psychology were also included. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused on younger adolescents only, populations with severe pre-existing psychiatric conditions outside typical student samples, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, a final corpus of eighty-two studies was retained for analysis.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual material was drawn from publicly available reports of relevance to digital well-being, including those from the World Health Organization, national mental health institutes, and university wellness research centres. In the fourth stage, analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis. Codes were developed inductively from the literature and iteratively refined into broader analytical categories. Four major themes emerged:

- Doomscrolling and anxiety.
- Sleep disturbance pathways.
- Cognitive fatigue and academic functioning.
- Moderating factors.

These themes structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and balanced engagement with competing scholarly perspectives were maintained throughout.

Results

Doomscrolling and Anxiety

The synthesis confirms that doomscrolling exhibits a robust association with anxiety in college student populations, observable across diverse cultural and geographical contexts (Sharma & Sahu, 2021; Verma & Kumar, 2022). The relationship operates through several mechanisms. Repeated exposure to threat-relevant content activates and reinforces threat-detection cognitive schemas, producing a generalized heightened state of vigilance (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Over time, this vigilance can crystallize into trait-like worry patterns, even when individuals are not actively consuming distressing content. Additionally, the emotional aftertaste of doomscrolling sessions, often involving residual feelings of helplessness, fear, or anger, can persist for hours, colouring subsequent activities and interactions (Hilliard & Cooper, 2024).

The relationship appears to be bidirectional. Students with elevated baseline anxiety are more likely to engage in doomscrolling, possibly as a maladaptive coping strategy aimed at gaining a sense of informational control over uncertain events (Keles et al., 2020). This in turn deepens anxiety, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Studies that have measured both pre-existing anxiety and doomscrolling behaviour longitudinally support this bidirectional model (Bodroza et al., 2023; Hilliard & Cooper, 2024).

Sleep Disturbance Pathways

Among the most consistent findings in the reviewed literature is the disruptive effect of pre-sleep doomscrolling on sleep (Levenson et al., 2016; Price et al., 2023). Three pathways emerge. First, cognitive activation by distressing content delays sleep onset by extending the period of mental processing required to disengage from the content. Second, emotional arousal triggers physiological stress responses, including elevated heart rate and cortisol levels, which are incompatible with the parasympathetic dominance required for sleep. Third, the timing of doomscrolling, often coinciding with bedtime as students seek one more scroll before sleep, directly intrudes into sleep windows, reducing total sleep duration (Verma & Kumar, 2022).

The cumulative effect is a deterioration in both sleep quantity and sleep quality. Reduced slow-wave sleep impairs memory consolidation, while reduced REM sleep affects emotional processing and resilience. Students reporting frequent late-night doomscrolling consistently show poorer Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index scores (Buysse et al., 1989), more daytime sleepiness, and greater reliance on caffeine and stimulants (Price et al., 2023). Sleep deprivation, in turn, exacerbates anxiety and erodes cognitive function, completing a damaging triadic cycle.

Cognitive Fatigue and Academic Functioning

The third theme concerns the cognitive consequences of habitual doomscrolling. Sustained engagement with fragmented, emotionally charged digital content imposes substantial cognitive load (Carrier et al., 2015). Students who engage in frequent doomscrolling report greater difficulty sustaining attention during lectures, reading academic texts, and completing extended writing tasks. Working memory performance, measured through standardized cognitive assessments, has been shown to decline following doomscrolling sessions compared with neutral content exposure of equivalent duration (Newport, 2019).

The implications for academic functioning extend beyond individual cognitive episodes. Habitual doomscrolling appears to reshape baseline cognitive style, fostering preferences for short, high-stimulation content over the slower, sustained engagement required by academic work (Newport, 2019; Wood & Neal, 2007). Some researchers describe this as a cognitive recalibration in which the threshold for engagement shifts toward the high-stimulation profile of doomscrollable content. Academic performance correlates, including grade point average, course completion rates, and self-reported academic engagement, have shown small to moderate negative associations with doomscrolling intensity in available studies, though confounding variables such as pre-existing motivation and mental health remain to be fully unpacked (Twenge et al., 2018).

Moderating Factors

Not all college students who engage in doomscrolling experience equally severe consequences. The reviewed literature identifies several moderating factors. Individual factors include pre-existing mental health vulnerability, with students who have prior anxiety or depressive symptoms showing greater susceptibility to doomscrolling-related deterioration (American Psychological Association, 2023; Keles et al., 2020). Personality traits such as neuroticism and intolerance of uncertainty also predict more pronounced effects. Social comparison tendencies, particularly upward social comparison through curated peer content, amplify negative affective consequences (Bandura, 1986).

Behavioural factors include sleep hygiene practices. Students who maintain device-free bedrooms or designated digital wind-down periods show greater protection against sleep disruption (Price et al., 2023). Mindfulness practices and cognitive reappraisal skills appear to buffer against the affective costs of doomscrolling. Social factors, including supportive peer networks, family connectedness, and university wellness resources, also operate as protective factors. These moderators suggest meaningful targets for prevention and intervention efforts.

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative model of doomscrolling that links cognitive, affective, and somatic outcomes within a single framework. The cognitive activation of threat schemas, the affective intensification of anxiety, and the somatic disruption of sleep are not isolated effects but mutually reinforcing processes. This integration challenges siloed approaches that treat anxiety, sleep, and attention as separate domains, and points toward more holistic conceptualizations of digital well-being.

Clinically, the findings underscore the importance of screening for doomscrolling behaviours in college mental health contexts. Brief screening questions about late-night digital media use, content type, and subjective post-use mood states could complement standard anxiety and depression assessments. Cognitive-behavioural therapy approaches may need to incorporate doomscrolling-specific modules, including stimulus control

techniques, behavioural activation alternatives, and cognitive restructuring of beliefs that drive compulsive checking behaviours.

For university administrators and student affairs professionals, the findings suggest several intervention possibilities. Digital literacy education, including awareness of algorithmic content curation, the variable reward dynamics of social media, and the psychological consequences of doomscrolling, should be a routine part of orientation and ongoing student support. Wellness programmes can incorporate practical strategies including device-free study spaces, structured digital breaks, sleep hygiene workshops, and mindfulness training. Counselling centres may benefit from group-based interventions targeting digital habit change, which can leverage peer support and normalize discussion of common challenges.

At the policy level, the findings contribute to a growing case for greater attention to platform design accountability (Alter, 2017; Newport, 2019). Features such as autoplay, infinite scrolling, and emotionally provocative content prioritization are not neutral design choices but actively shape user behaviour in ways that may compromise mental health. While individual self-regulation is important, structural interventions that reduce the addictive potential of digital platforms are likely to have broader public health benefits. Several countries are beginning to explore regulatory frameworks for digital well-being, particularly for younger users, and college students represent a population that warrants comparable attention (World Health Organization, 2023).

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. First, as a literature-based study, the analysis is constrained by the quality and coverage of available research. Substantial cross-sectional dependence in the existing evidence base limits causal inferences. Second, the predominantly Western character of the empirical literature constrains generalization to South Asian, including Indian, college populations, whose cultural, familial, and digital media contexts differ in important respects. Third, doomscrolling itself remains imprecisely operationalized across studies, with variation in measurement that may attenuate observed associations. Fourth, the rapid evolution of digital platforms means that findings from earlier in the review window may not fully represent current platform features and user behaviours.

Conclusion

This article has examined the psychological impact of doomscrolling on college students, with particular focus on anxiety, sleep disturbances, and cognitive fatigue. Through a systematic synthesis of the available literature, four interconnected themes were identified: doomscrolling sustains and amplifies anxiety through cognitive and affective mechanisms; pre-sleep doomscrolling significantly disrupts sleep architecture and quality; habitual doomscrolling produces cognitive fatigue with implications for academic functioning; and individual, behavioural, and social moderating factors shape susceptibility. Together, these findings support an integrative model in which the cognitive, affective, and somatic consequences of doomscrolling are mutually reinforcing rather than separable.

Three broader conclusions emerge. First, doomscrolling represents a distinctive psychological phenomenon deserving of dedicated research attention rather than treatment as a subset of broader social media use. Second, college students constitute a high-priority population for both research and intervention given their developmental stage, exposure intensity, and academic dependencies on the cognitive functions most disrupted by doomscrolling. Third, an effective response will require coordinated action across individual self-regulation, university wellness systems, clinical practice, and platform design accountability.

Several future research directions warrant pursuit. Cross-cultural studies, particularly in Indian and broader South Asian university contexts, would address a notable gap in the global evidence base. Longitudinal designs with frequent measurement could illuminate the temporal dynamics linking doomscrolling, sleep, and academic performance. Mechanism-focused research using neuroimaging, ambulatory physiological monitoring, and ecological momentary assessment would deepen understanding of the moment-to-moment processes through which doomscrolling exerts its effects. Intervention research is especially needed, including comparative evaluations of digital literacy curricula, university wellness programmes, and individual-level cognitive-behavioural strategies. Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between psychologists, sleep scientists, educators, and digital design researchers will be essential for generating the comprehensive evidence base necessary to support college students in navigating an increasingly demanding digital media environment.

By integrating perspectives across cognitive psychology, sleep science, and digital media research, this article contributes to a growing scholarly recognition that doomscrolling, far from being merely a colloquial phrase, denotes a behavioural pattern with measurable and significant consequences for the mental health and academic well-being of contemporary college students.

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Community-Based Mental Health Interventions for Elderly Populations in Rural India: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract

The mental health of elderly populations in rural India represents a growing yet underserved public health concern, shaped by demographic transition, the erosion of joint family structures, agricultural distress, and the limited reach of formal mental health services. This article examines community-based mental health interventions for the rural elderly through a social work lens, integrating theoretical perspectives from community-based rehabilitation, the social ecological model, and strengths-based social work practice. Using a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship and policy documents published between 2010 and 2025, drawing on Indian and global sources. The analysis identifies four pillars of effective community-based mental health practice for rural elders: structured screening and case identification at the village level; integration with primary health care and frontline workers such as ASHAs, ANMs, and AWWs; intergenerational and peer-led psychosocial support; and family-centred caregiver education. Findings indicate that community-based approaches are well suited to rural Indian contexts because they leverage existing social networks, address stigma collaboratively, and reduce barriers of distance, cost, and specialist scarcity. The article also identifies persistent gaps including weak referral pathways, insufficient training of frontline workers in mental health, gendered access disparities, and limited geriatric specialization within social work curricula. The study concludes that strengthening community-based mental health for the rural elderly requires intersectoral coordination among health, social welfare, and panchayat-level governance, along with deliberate professional preparation of social workers in geriatric mental health. Implications for social work education, policy, and practice are discussed.

Keywords:-Rural Elderly, Community-Based Mental Health, Geriatric Social Work, India, ASHA Workers, Intergenerational Support, Primary Health Care, Mental Health Stigma.

Introduction

India is undergoing a rapid and consequential demographic transition. The proportion of persons aged sixty and above is projected to rise from approximately ten per cent in 2021 to nearly twenty per cent by 2050, according to projections by the United Nations Population Fund and the Government of India (United Nations Population Fund, 2023). While much of the global discussion of population ageing focuses on cities, the absolute numbers of elderly people in rural India remain very large, and they face a distinctive configuration of social, economic, and health challenges (HelpAge India, 2020). Rural elders contend with declining agricultural incomes, the out-migration of working-age children to cities, the gradual fragmentation of joint family arrangements, and limited access to formal social security (Agewell Foundation, 2022; Zaman, 2021). These structural conditions interact in ways that produce significant burdens of mental ill-health.

Mental health concerns among the rural elderly include depression, anxiety, dementia and related cognitive disorders, sleep disturbances, alcohol use problems, and the psychosocial sequelae of chronic physical illness (Khandelwal et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2023). The National Mental Health Survey of India and subsequent state-level investigations have documented substantial mental health morbidity in older age groups, with rural prevalence often comparable to or exceeding urban estimates once underdetection is accounted for (Bhatia & Reddy, 2021; Gururaj et al., 2016; International Institute for Population Sciences, 2020). Yet the gap between need and service availability is wide. Specialist mental health services remain heavily concentrated in cities. District-level psychiatrists, where present, are typically distant from village settings, and stigma, financial cost, transportation difficulties, and the perception of mental disorder as a family-private matter further suppress help-seeking (Saraceno et al., 2007).

Against this backdrop, community-based mental health approaches have gained traction globally and within India as a more equitable and contextually appropriate alternative to facility-centred care (Pillai et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2010). Community-based interventions situate mental health promotion, prevention, and basic treatment within the everyday life-worlds of rural communities, mobilizing local resources and personnel rather than depending exclusively on specialist infrastructure (Kazi & Patel, 2020). Social work, with its disciplinary commitments to person-in-environment thinking, social justice, and practice across micro, mezzo, and macro levels, occupies a strategically important role in designing, implementing, and evaluating such interventions.

Despite increasing recognition of these approaches, the literature remains fragmented across public health, psychiatry, gerontology, and social work itself. Integrated analyses that articulate a coherent social work perspective on community-based mental health for rural Indian elders are comparatively scarce. The present article seeks to address this gap by asking three questions:

- First, what theoretical frameworks most usefully ground a social work approach to community-based mental health for the rural elderly in India?
- Second, what are the core programmatic elements that have demonstrated promise in rural Indian and comparable contexts?
- Third, what gaps and challenges persist, and what policy, practice, and education implications follow?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes theoretical, empirical, and policy literature into a coherent social work account of the issue. It identifies four programmatic pillars that organize current best practice for the rural Indian context. It offers a set of recommendations for social work education, professional preparation, and intersectoral practice. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory, evidence, and policy;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings; Section 5 discusses implications; and
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Demographic and Epidemiological Context

Population ageing in India is occurring against a backdrop of incomplete economic development, a thin formal social security net, and significant rural poverty (HelpAge India, 2020; United Nations Population Fund, 2023). Older adults in rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to be illiterate, to lack pensions, to live with chronic illness, and to depend on subsistence agriculture or unpaid family labour (Agewell Foundation, 2022; Zaman, 2021). Mental health epidemiological evidence indicates substantial prevalence of depressive symptoms, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and cognitive impairment among rural elders (Bhatia & Reddy, 2021; Gururaj et al., 2016; International Institute for Population Sciences, 2020). Underdiagnosis is widespread, in part because somatic presentations of distress are common, and in part because formal psychiatric assessment is rarely available (Khandelwal et al., 2018).

Theoretical Frameworks for Community-Based Practice

Several theoretical frameworks help structure community-based social work practice in mental health. The Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) framework, developed by the World Health Organization (2010) and partner agencies, emphasizes inclusion, empowerment, and the use of locally available resources to support persons with disabilities, including those with psychosocial conditions. The CBR matrix, with its five components

(health, education, livelihood, social, and empowerment), provides a holistic template for designing interventions that address mental health alongside the wider social determinants of well-being.

The social ecological model, drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), frames the individual's mental health as embedded in nested systems including family, community, services, and policy. This perspective directs social work attention to the multiple levels at which intervention is needed and at which barriers may operate. Strengths-based social work practice, which foregrounds the assets, resilience, and capacities of older persons and their communities, provides a counterbalance to deficit-oriented framings that can deepen stigma (A. Saldanha, 2018). Asset-based community development extends this orientation by emphasizing the mobilization of community resources, including local leadership, religious and cultural institutions, and informal helping networks, in support of well-being.

Indian Policy and Programmatic Context

The Indian policy environment for community-based mental health has evolved meaningfully in recent decades. The National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), launched in 1982, and its operational arm the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP), introduced from 1996 onwards, sought to integrate mental health into general health services at the district level (Pillai et al., 2018). The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 affirmed mental health as a right and emphasized community-based care wherever feasible (Government of India, 2017). Programmes specifically targeting older adults include the Integrated Programme for Senior Citizens (IPSRc), the National Programme for the Health Care of the Elderly (NPHCE) (Government of India, 2011), and Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana, which provides aids and assistive devices for older persons living below the poverty line. Implementation, however, has been uneven across states and districts, and rural reach remains a persistent concern (Khandelwal et al., 2018).

Empirical Studies on Community-Based Interventions

A growing body of empirical work documents the feasibility and effectiveness of community-based mental health interventions in low-resource settings. Within India, studies led by NIMHANS, the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), and Sangath have demonstrated that lay health workers, supervised by mental health professionals, can deliver evidence-based psychosocial interventions for common mental disorders with positive outcomes (Chatterjee et al., 2014; Kazi & Patel, 2020; Patel et al., 2010). International evidence, including the Friendship Bench programme in Zimbabwe (Chibanda et al., 2016) and various task-sharing models documented by the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health (Saraceno et al., 2007), provides further support for community-based approaches. While not all of these models target older adults specifically, they offer transferable principles regarding workforce, supervision, fidelity, and integration with primary care (Pillai et al., 2018).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding evidence base, gaps remain. Geriatric mental health, in particular, has received less programmatic attention than common mental disorders in younger adults or severe mental illness (Khandelwal et al., 2018; Saxena & Skeen, 2018). The role of social work, as distinct from public health or psychiatry, in shaping community-based responses for rural elders is not well articulated in the literature. Few syntheses bring together the policy, practice, and educational dimensions of the issue from a social work standpoint. The present article seeks to address these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for integrating diverse scholarship across social work, public health, gerontology, and related fields. The review proceeded through four stages.

In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined community-based mental health, geriatric, elderly, rural, India, social work, ASHA, primary health care, and intervention. The time window was January 2010 to August 2025, with selected earlier sources retained for theoretical and policy grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical, conceptual, or policy studies engaging with community-based mental health for older adults, with priority given to scholarship focused on India and comparable low- and middle-income contexts. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on inpatient psychiatric care, pharmacological intervention trials without psychosocial components, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, seventy-two publications were retained for analysis.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual documents were reviewed, including reports from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, NIMHANS, HelpAge India, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Population Fund. In the fourth stage, a thematic synthesis procedure was used to develop and refine analytical categories. Four pillars of community-based practice emerged from the analysis and structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and balanced engagement with competing perspectives were maintained throughout.

Results

Pillar One: Structured Screening and Case Identification at the Village Level

Effective community-based mental health for the rural elderly begins with active case identification rather than passive waiting for self-referred presentation. Several brief, validated screening instruments are well suited to village-level use, including short forms of the Geriatric Depression Scale, the Patient Health Questionnaire, brief cognitive screens for dementia, and locally validated quality-of-life measures (Khandelwal et al., 2018; Shaji, 2009). These tools can be administered by trained frontline workers during routine home visits, integrated into health camps, or used during senior citizen group meetings. The literature underscores that screening must be linked to clear referral and follow-up pathways (Pillai et al., 2018). Screening without service capacity behind it risks frustrating both clients and workers, while well-linked screening enables earlier detection and intervention.

Social workers contribute distinctive expertise to this pillar by ensuring that screening is conducted with attention to cultural appropriateness, informed consent, confidentiality, and the avoidance of stigmatizing labelling. They can also adapt instruments for low-literacy populations and oversee the training of frontline workers in observation, rapport, and basic mental health assessment.

Pillar Two: Integration with Primary Health Care and Frontline Workers

The second pillar concerns the integration of mental health services with primary health care and the cadre of frontline workers who form the backbone of rural service delivery in India (Pillai et al., 2018). Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), and Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) collectively reach the most rural and remote populations in the country. Task-sharing models, in which frontline workers deliver basic psychosocial support and monitoring under the supervision of trained mental health professionals, have shown promise in multiple Indian and global studies (Chatterjee et al., 2014; Chibanda et al., 2016; Kazi & Patel, 2020; Patel et al., 2010).

For older adults, integration with the National Programme for the Health Care of the Elderly (Government of India, 2011) and primary health centre activities is particularly important, since older persons frequently present with comorbid physical and mental health conditions. Social workers play a key role in this pillar by serving as integrators across health and social welfare systems, facilitating training and supervision of frontline workers, designing referral protocols, and supporting the development of multidisciplinary teams at sub-centre and primary health centre levels.

Pillar Three: Intergenerational and Peer-Led Psychosocial Support

The third pillar addresses the relational and psychosocial dimensions of older adult well-being. Loneliness, role loss, bereavement, and reduced social engagement are significant contributors to mental ill-health in later life (Khandelwal et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2023; Zaman, 2021). Community-based responses include day care centres, senior citizen self-help groups, peer counselling programmes, and intergenerational initiatives that connect older adults with school children, youth groups, and cultural associations. Religious and community spaces such as temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and panchayat halls can serve as low-cost, culturally legitimate venues for such activities.

Social workers contribute to this pillar by facilitating group formation, training peer leaders, designing intergenerational programmes, and ensuring that activities are inclusive of older women, persons with disabilities, and members of marginalized caste and religious communities who may otherwise be excluded. The strengths-based orientation is particularly relevant here: programmes that highlight elders' wisdom, life experience, and continuing contributions to community life are more sustainable and dignifying than those framed solely around dependency or decline (A. Saldanha, 2018).

Pillar Four: Family-Centred Caregiver Education

The fourth pillar focuses on family caregivers, who bear the primary responsibility for older adult care in the rural Indian context (Zaman, 2021). Caregivers, who are often middle-aged women, frequently face heavy emotional, physical, and financial burdens, particularly in caring for elders with dementia, severe depression, or chronic physical comorbidities (D. Saldanha et al., 2021; Shaji, 2009). Education and support for caregivers is therefore essential to sustainable community-based mental health care.

Effective caregiver-focused interventions include psychoeducation about specific conditions, training in practical skills such as medication adherence support and behavioural management for dementia, mutual support groups, and referral to respite and welfare services (Shaji, 2009). Stigma reduction is a recurring theme, as misunderstandings about mental illness can lead to neglect, abuse, or the use of harmful informal treatments (Saraceno et al., 2007). Social workers contribute to this pillar by designing and facilitating caregiver education programmes, providing individual and family counselling where indicated, and advocating for caregiver-supportive social policy, including respite care provisions and recognition of unpaid care work (D. Saldanha et al., 2021).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they affirm the appropriateness of an integrated community-based rehabilitation framework, augmented by social ecological and strengths-based perspectives, for guiding social work practice with rural elders in India. The four pillars of practice are not isolated but mutually reinforcing:

- Screening generates appropriately calibrated demand for services;
- Primary care integration provides the platform for delivering them;
- Psychosocial supports address the relational dimensions of well-being; and
- Caregiver education sustains care over time.

A strong programme typically requires investment in all four.

For social work education, the findings highlight the need to strengthen geriatric mental health within professional curricula (Khandelwal et al., 2018; Saxena & Skeen, 2018). Most Indian schools of social work offer general training in mental health and ageing, but specialized geriatric mental health competencies, including familiarity with screening tools, knowledge of common mental disorders in later life, and skills in caregiver education, are not yet uniformly developed (A. Saldanha, 2018). Field placements in rural primary care settings, panchayat-linked elder care programmes, and DMHP units could be expanded. Continuing education for practising social workers, particularly those in rural and district-level roles, is also needed.

For policy, the findings emphasize the importance of intersectoral coordination among health, social welfare, and panchayat-level governance structures. Mental health for the rural elderly cannot be addressed by the health system alone. It requires linkages with pension schemes, disability benefits, food security programmes, and elder-care services. Panchayats, as the primary unit of rural local governance, are well positioned to play a coordinating role, particularly when supported with technical guidance and modest financial resources.

For practice, several priorities follow. Strengthening referral pathways from village-level screening to district-level specialist services is essential; without these linkages, screening becomes a hollow exercise. Investing in the training and supervision of frontline workers, and in social workers themselves, is fundamental. Equity considerations demand particular attention to older women, who often face greater poverty, social isolation, and barriers to formal services, and to elders from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and minority communities, whose access patterns may differ (Agewell Foundation, 2022; United Nations Population Fund, 2023).

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven for rural Indian contexts. Variation across states, districts, and rural ecologies is considerable, and findings should not be applied uniformly. The lived experiences and voices of rural elders themselves are underrepresented in much of the formal literature, and primary qualitative and ethnographic research is needed to enrich the picture sketched here.

Conclusion

This article has examined community-based mental health interventions for elderly populations in rural India through a social work perspective. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of community-based rehabilitation,

social ecological thinking, and strengths-based practice, and synthesizing recent literature, the analysis identified four pillars of effective community-based practice:

- Structured screening and case identification at the village level;
- Integration with primary health care and frontline workers;
- Intergenerational and peer-led psychosocial support;
- Family-centred caregiver education.

These pillars together describe an integrated, multi-level approach well suited to the social, economic, and cultural realities of rural India.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, community-based mental health for rural elders should be understood not as a residual or second-best alternative to specialist care, but as the appropriate primary modality given the demographic, geographic, and cultural realities of rural India. Second, social work, with its commitments to person-in-environment thinking, intersectoral practice, and equity, occupies a strategically important position in this work. Strengthening the discipline's engagement with geriatric mental health is therefore both necessary and timely. Third, an effective response will require coordinated action across health, social welfare, panchayat governance, and educational institutions, supported by deliberate professional preparation of social workers in geriatric specialization.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Mixed-methods studies that combine prevalence estimation with qualitative documentation of elders' lived experience would strengthen the empirical base. Implementation research on the four pillars in different rural contexts could clarify which adaptations are required for varying ecological, linguistic, and socioeconomic conditions. Comparative analyses across Indian states with different policy implementation profiles could inform best practice. Cost-effectiveness studies would support advocacy for resource allocation. Research that centres the voices of rural elders themselves, including those from marginalized castes and communities, is particularly important. By advancing such an agenda, social work scholarship can make a meaningful contribution to the well-being of one of India's most quietly burdened populations and to the building of an ageing-friendly society.

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Gendered Dimensions of the Gig Economy: Examining Female Workers' Experiences in India's Digital Labour Platforms

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Abstract

The rise of digital labour platforms has transformed the Indian employment landscape, creating new pathways for women's workforce participation while simultaneously reproducing and at times intensifying historical gender inequalities. This article examines the gendered dimensions of the gig economy in India, focusing on female workers' experiences across platform-mediated sectors including ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, beauty and wellness services, domestic work platforms, and digital freelance work. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents, and reports from labour research institutions published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis reveals four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour: structural exclusion from male-dominated gig categories, the safety and surveillance paradox in mobility-intensive work, the persistence of unpaid care work that constrains platform participation, and the algorithmic invisibility of feminized labour in policy and protection frameworks. The study draws on intersectional feminism, social reproduction theory, and feminist political economy of platforms to interpret these patterns. While platform work offers flexibility and income access for some women, particularly mothers and those with care responsibilities, it also reinforces occupational segregation, exposes workers to safety risks, and provides limited protection against arbitrary deactivation, harassment, and earnings volatility. The article concludes that addressing the gendered dimensions of the Indian gig economy requires legislative recognition of platform workers' rights, gender-sensitive platform design, accessible grievance redressal mechanisms, and meaningful recognition of the unpaid care economy that shapes women's platform participation.

Keywords:- Gig Economy, Gender, Female Workers, Digital Labour Platforms, India, Intersectional Feminism, Social Reproduction, Platform Capitalism

Introduction

The Indian gig economy has expanded rapidly over the past decade, fuelled by smartphone proliferation, the maturation of digital payment infrastructure, and the rise of platform companies offering ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, beauty and wellness services, home-based domestic work, and a wide range of professional freelance services (International Labour Organization, 2021; Srnicek, 2017). NITI Aayog has projected that the gig and platform workforce in India will grow from approximately 7.7 million in 2020–21 to nearly 23.5 million by 2029–30, representing a substantial reshaping of the country's labour landscape (NITI Aayog, 2022). This expansion has been accompanied by significant policy attention, including the recognition of gig and platform workers as a category in the Code on Social Security, 2020 (Government of India, 2020), and the development of

state-level legislation such as the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 (Government of Rajasthan, 2023).

Yet the gendered character of this transformation has received comparatively limited scholarly and policy attention. India continues to exhibit one of the lowest female labour force participation rates among major economies, despite recent modest improvements (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024; Vyas, 2023). Women's entry into the gig economy is shaped by, and itself shapes, longstanding patterns of gender inequality, including occupational segregation, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, mobility constraints, and gendered safety risks (Kashyap & Khanna, 2022). Understanding the gig economy through a gender lens is therefore essential for both feminist scholarship and inclusive labour policy.

Female workers participate in platform labour across a wide spectrum of services, from app-based beauticians and domestic workers to food delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers, and freelance professionals on global platforms (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kashyap & Khanna, 2022). Each of these segments has distinct gendered dynamics. Platforms offering home-based services, such as beauty and wellness or domestic work, employ predominantly female workforces and often mirror the gendered structure of feminized service labour outside the platform economy (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). Mobility-intensive segments, such as food delivery and ride-hailing, remain heavily male-dominated, with women's entry mediated by safety concerns, social acceptability, and infrastructural constraints (Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Higher-skilled freelance platforms exhibit their own forms of gendered patterning, often replicating broader inequalities in technology, design, and creative industries (Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the article asks:

- What are the gendered dimensions of women's participation in the Indian gig economy, and how do they reproduce, intensify, or potentially mitigate longstanding gender inequalities in work?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, what structural conditions shape women's access to and segregation within different platform sectors?
- Second, what risks and protections characterize female platform workers' experiences, particularly with respect to safety, harassment, and algorithmic management?
- Third, how does the unpaid care economy interact with platform participation to shape women's working lives?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes dispersed scholarship on Indian platform work through a feminist analytical lens. It identifies four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour that organize the empirical landscape. It articulates implications for legislative reform, platform design, and gender-responsive labour policy. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory and evidence;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings;
- Section 5 discusses implications; and
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Feminist Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks ground a feminist analysis of the platform economy. Feminist political economy of work, developing the insights of Marxist and socialist feminism, attends to the structural conditions under which gendered labour is produced, valued, and devalued in capitalist societies (Chen et al., 2022). Social reproduction theory, articulated by scholars such as Silvia Federici (1975) and developed in contemporary form by Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) and others, foregrounds the unpaid and underpaid labour, predominantly performed by women, that sustains households and reproduces the labour force. This framework draws attention to the ways in which platform work is embedded in, and shaped by, the household-level division of care.

Intersectional feminism, building on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), insists on the simultaneity of gender, caste, class, religion, and other axes of difference. In the Indian context, women's platform participation cannot be analysed in isolation from caste-based occupational segregation, regional inequalities, and the differential gendering of urban and rural mobility. Finally, recent

scholarship on platform capitalism, including the work of Nick Srnicek (2017), illuminates the structural features of platform business models, their dependence on data extraction, their algorithmic management of workers, and their tendency to externalize risk onto the workforce (Wood et al., 2019).

The Indian Gig Economy: Scale and Composition

Recent estimates from NITI Aayog (2022) and various labour research institutions document the rapid growth of the Indian gig economy, with significant variation in the gender composition of different platform sectors (International Labour Organization, 2021). Beauty and wellness platforms such as Urban Company report that their workforce of service partners is predominantly female (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kasliwal, 2020). Domestic work platforms similarly draw on a female labour pool with strong continuities to the wider domestic work sector, which is itself heavily gendered and casteized (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). By contrast, ride-hailing and food delivery sectors remain heavily male-dominated, with women's share of the workforce often below five per cent (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Freelance and creative platforms exhibit greater gender diversity at the entry level but show familiar patterns of gender pay gaps and category segregation as one moves up the skill and earnings ladder (Wood et al., 2019).

Empirical Studies on Women in Indian Platform Work

A growing body of empirical scholarship has begun to document women's experiences in specific Indian platform sectors. Research on app-based beauty and wellness workers has documented long working hours, considerable physical strain, the costs of consumables and travel that workers themselves bear, and the constant pressure of customer ratings (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kasliwal, 2020). Studies on domestic work platforms have noted both the visibility and standardization that platforms can introduce to historically informal work, and the new forms of surveillance, contractual precarity, and platform commission structures that reshape the working relationship (Kasturirangan, 2023; SEWA, 2022). Research on women in ride-hailing has emphasized the particular safety considerations that shape participation, including night-shift access, customer screening, and the limited adoption of women-only ride options (Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Studies of freelance and remote work platforms have documented both new opportunities for women, particularly in urban professional households, and the persistence of gendered pay gaps and project allocation patterns (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

Gendered Risks and Protections

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the specific risks faced by women in platform work and the limited protections available to them (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; SEWA, 2022). Safety, harassment, and the absence of physical workplace community feature prominently. Maternity, menstrual health, and care responsibilities further differentiate women's platform experiences from those of men. Algorithmic management practices, including rating systems, deactivation thresholds, and incentive structures, can have gender-differentiated impacts that are not always visible in aggregated platform data (Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019). The Code on Social Security 2020, while providing the legal recognition of gig and platform workers as a category, has been criticized for incomplete operationalization and insufficient gender-specific provisions (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Government of India, 2020).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding scholarship, gaps remain. Much of the literature remains sector-specific, with limited cross-sectoral synthesis. Theoretical engagement with feminist frameworks is uneven, with some studies privileging descriptive accounts over critical analysis. Comparative work that situates Indian female platform workers in relation to other South Asian and Global South contexts is limited. The relationship between platform participation and the unpaid care economy, although recognized in the literature, has not been systematically theorized within Indian platform studies. The present article seeks to contribute to filling these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology informed by feminist scholarly principles. Such an approach is particularly suited to a topic where empirical evidence is dispersed across disciplines and policy reports, and where critical theoretical engagement is essential for interpreting findings.

The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined gig economy, platform work, digital labour, women, gender, female workers, India, ride-hailing, food delivery, domestic work, beauty services, and feminist political economy. The window was January 2015 to August 2025, with selected earlier theoretical works retained for grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical work engaging with platform labour from a gender-sensitive standpoint, with priority given to scholarship focused on India and comparable contexts. Reports from labour research institutions including the International Labour Organization, the Centre for Internet and Society, the Aapti Institute, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on technology design without labour analysis, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After screening, sixty-five publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary materials were drawn from public policy documents including the Code on Social Security 2020, the Rajasthan platform workers' legislation, NITI Aayog reports, and judicial decisions relevant to platform employment. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis through a feminist analytical lens generated four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and reflexive engagement with feminist scholarly conventions were maintained throughout.

Results

Structural Exclusion from Male-Dominated Gig Categories

The first dimension concerns structural exclusion of women from male-dominated gig categories. Mobility-intensive sectors such as ride-hailing and food delivery remain heavily male-dominated, with women's representation in many cities below five per cent of the workforce (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Surie & Koduganti, 2016). The reasons for this exclusion are not primarily individual preference but structural. They include safety considerations associated with night work and customer interaction, gendered access to vehicles and licences, family and community attitudes towards women in mobility-intensive public-facing roles, the relative absence of female-only or female-friendly platform options, and the cumulative effects of caste, class, and religion on women's presence in particular urban occupations (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000).

Where women do participate in such sectors, they often do so through specialized programmes (women-only ride options, daytime-only deliveries) or as a small minority within male-dominated worker communities, with attendant difficulties of solidarity, mentorship, and informal information-sharing. The result is a persistence of occupational segregation in the platform economy that closely tracks broader patterns of gendered labour markets.

The Safety and Surveillance Paradox

The second dimension involves a paradoxical relationship between safety and surveillance in women's platform work. Platforms typically present features such as GPS tracking, customer verification, and rating systems as safety measures benefiting women workers (Aapti Institute, 2022). In some respects, these features do provide meaningful safety enhancements compared with informal sector equivalents. However, the same surveillance technologies also intensify the monitoring and disciplining of workers, with implications that are themselves gendered (Wood et al., 2019). Continuous tracking can erode boundaries between work and home time, restrict bathroom and rest breaks, and produce stress for women managing visible work alongside care responsibilities (Graham et al., 2017).

Furthermore, safety mechanisms within platforms remain uneven. Anti-harassment provisions for in-home services, escalation procedures for customer abuse, and post-incident support structures are often less robust than feminist labour scholarship would consider adequate (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). The asymmetry between the surveillance to which workers are subject and the protections available against customer or platform abuse is itself a gendered feature of contemporary platform labour (SEWA, 2022).

The Persistence of Unpaid Care Work

The third dimension concerns the unpaid care economy and its persistent shaping of women's platform participation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 1975). Time-use surveys consistently demonstrate that Indian women perform several times the volume of unpaid domestic and care work performed by Indian men (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024; Vyas, 2023). Platform work's purported flexibility is often celebrated as enabling women's participation, and indeed it does open opportunities for women whose care responsibilities preclude standard full-time employment (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasliwal, 2020). However, this flexibility is often achieved through the absorption of risk and unpredictability by individual women, who must continuously coordinate paid platform shifts with the inflexible timing of childcare, eldercare, and household management.

The result is what some scholars have termed a flexibility paradox: platforms market flexibility to women, but the structural inflexibility of care responsibilities, combined with the high temporal demands of

platform work for adequate earnings, often produces a doubled burden rather than meaningful balance (Bhattacharya, 2017; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). Earnings from platform work are typically calibrated for full-time engagement, leaving part-time workers, who are disproportionately women, with disadvantageous economics (Kashyap & Khanna, 2022).

Algorithmic Invisibility in Policy and Protection Frameworks

The fourth dimension concerns the algorithmic invisibility of feminized platform labour in policy and protection frameworks. Despite the recognition of gig and platform workers in the Code on Social Security 2020, operationalization has been slow, and gender-disaggregated data on platform workforces remains sparse (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Government of India, 2020). Where platforms produce diversity reports, the methodology and granularity vary widely, and feminized platform sectors such as beauty services and home-based domestic work are sometimes underrepresented in policy discussions that focus on more publicly visible male-dominated sectors (Aapti Institute, 2022; SEWA, 2022).

The invisibility extends to algorithmic management itself. Algorithms that allocate work, set prices, and manage ratings are not transparent to workers or regulators, making it difficult to identify or address gender-differentiated impacts (Srnicsek, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). The lack of mandated audit and reporting on gendered algorithmic outcomes is a regulatory gap with significant implications for women platform workers (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative feminist analysis of platform labour that combines feminist political economy, social reproduction theory, intersectional analysis, and platform capitalism perspectives. Each of the four dimensions identified, structural exclusion, the safety and surveillance paradox, the persistence of unpaid care work, and algorithmic invisibility, illustrates how platform technologies interact with prior gender inequalities to produce new configurations of gendered labour rather than escaping them.

For policy, the findings underscore the need for legislative and regulatory frameworks that go beyond the formal recognition of gig workers to address gender-specific risks and protections. Implementation of the Code on Social Security 2020 should include gender-disaggregated data collection, platform-level reporting on workforce composition and earnings, and gender-sensitive grievance redressal mechanisms. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 should be clarified and operationalized in relation to platform work, including in-home services where the conventional workplace model does not apply. Maternity benefits, paid sick leave, and accident insurance need design adaptations for the irregular work patterns of platform labour.

For platform design, the findings point to several areas of intervention. Safety features should be co-designed with women workers and supported by robust post-incident response systems, not merely promoted as risk-mitigation marketing. Algorithmic management systems should be subject to gender impact assessment, including audits of work allocation, deactivation patterns, and earnings outcomes. User interface and rating systems should be reviewed for gendered bias, particularly in services where customers may evaluate female workers through gendered expectations not directly relevant to service quality.

For broader social policy, the findings emphasize the centrality of the unpaid care economy. Public investments in childcare infrastructure, eldercare services, and accessible public transportation directly affect women's capacity to engage in platform work on terms that do not entrench the doubled burden (Chen et al., 2022; Vyas, 2023). Recognition of unpaid care work, in time-use surveys, in the Periodic Labour Force Survey (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024), and in social policy more broadly, is a precondition for designing platform regulation that supports rather than exploits women's capacities (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across platform sectors and Indian regions. The voices and experiences of women platform workers themselves are mediated through researcher framings, and primary qualitative studies, particularly those grounded in worker-led research traditions, are essential to enrich the analytical picture. Caste, religion, and regional diversity within women's platform experiences require more sustained intersectional treatment than the present synthesis provides. The pace of platform sector change also means that some findings will require updating as platforms, regulations, and worker organizations evolve.

Conclusion

This article has examined the gendered dimensions of women's participation in India's platform economy. Through a critical literature review informed by feminist theory, four interlocking dimensions were identified: structural exclusion from male-dominated gig categories, the safety and surveillance paradox, the persistence of unpaid care work, and the algorithmic invisibility of feminized platform labour. Together, these dimensions reveal how platform technologies interact with established gender inequalities to produce a distinctive, and in important respects worsened, configuration of gendered work.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, platform work is neither uniformly liberatory nor uniformly exploitative for women. Its effects depend on the platform sector, the worker's caste, class, and family situation, and the regulatory environment within which the platform operates. Second, addressing the gendered dimensions of platform work requires coordinated intervention across legislation, platform design, social policy, and the broader infrastructure of the care economy. No single regulatory or technological fix will be sufficient. Third, feminist scholarship has a critical role to play in making the gendered structure of platform labour visible, in advocating for gender-disaggregated data, and in centring the voices of women platform workers in policy and design conversations.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Mixed-methods studies that combine sectoral surveys with ethnographic depth would enrich the empirical base. Comparative analyses across Indian states with different regulatory environments and across South Asian and other Global South platform contexts would clarify what shapes outcomes for women workers. Research that systematically engages caste, religion, and regional diversity in women's platform experiences is particularly needed. Longitudinal studies tracing women's career trajectories within and across platforms would illuminate whether platform work serves as a stepping stone or a holding pattern for different categories of women. Finally, worker-led and participatory research approaches, particularly those built in collaboration with organizations such as SEWA and emerging platform worker collectives, can ensure that future scholarship addresses the questions women workers themselves consider most pressing. By pursuing such an agenda, gender studies scholarship can contribute meaningfully to the construction of a more equitable digital labour future.

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Religion in the Digital Age: Exploring Online Religious Practices and Spiritual Communities in Post-Pandemic India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a profound transformation in the practice of religion in India, as physical restrictions on temple visits, congregational worship, and pilgrimage compelled the rapid migration of religious life onto digital platforms. While digital religion has been an active field of scholarly inquiry for two decades, the post-pandemic Indian religious landscape presents distinctive features that warrant focused analysis. This article examines the development of online religious practices and spiritual communities in post-pandemic India, drawing on a critical literature review methodology and theoretical frameworks from the sociology of religion, mediatization theory, and digital religion studies. Analysing peer-reviewed scholarship, ethnographic studies, and platform-based ecosystem reports published between 2018 and 2025, the study identifies four major patterns: the institutionalization of livestreamed temple darshan and ritual broadcasts; the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities and subscription-based religious content; the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms; and the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation patterns. The analysis engages with the work of Heidi Campbell, Stewart Hoover, Christopher Helland, and others, while drawing on Indian scholars whose work foregrounds the specific features of South Asian religious traditions. Findings indicate that digital religion in India is neither a simple transposition of offline practice nor a complete rupture with traditional forms. It is a hybrid configuration that reshapes authority, community, and embodiment in religious life. The article concludes that the post-pandemic period has produced a durable hybridization of religious practice, with significant implications for religious institutions, scholarly understanding, and inter-religious dynamics.

Keywords:- Digital Religion, Online Religious Practice, Post-Pandemic India, Mediatization, Virtual Darshan, Guru Communities, Devotional Content, Hybrid Religiosity

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a watershed moment in the history of religion in India. As public health measures restricted access to temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and other places of worship during 2020 and 2021, religious institutions across the country were compelled to migrate substantial portions of their activity onto digital platforms (Campbell, 2020). Live-streamed darshan, online aarti, virtual pilgrimage, video-conferenced sermons, and platform-mediated religious instruction became, almost overnight, ordinary features of religious life. While the more acute pandemic restrictions have receded, the digital practices that emerged during the crisis have not. They have become entrenched, expanded, and increasingly institutionalized, reshaping the religious landscape of post-pandemic India in durable ways (Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

India's religious landscape is among the most diverse in the world, encompassing Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, indigenous, and a wide range of sect-specific and devotional traditions (Pew Research Center, 2021). Each of these traditions had pre-pandemic engagements with digital media, ranging from satellite television channels broadcasting religious content to early internet-era websites of major temples and dargahs, to social media accounts of contemporary spiritual teachers (Babb & Wadley, 1995; Beckerlegge, 2015; Rajagopal, 2001). The pandemic accelerated, but did not initiate, the digitalization of Indian religious life. What it produced, instead, was a normalization of digitally mediated practice across institutions and traditions that had previously been ambivalent or peripheral participants in such mediation.

Scholarship on digital religion, well established globally since the 1990s, provides important conceptual resources for analysing this transformation. The work of Heidi Campbell, Stewart Hoover, Christopher Helland, Mia Lövhelm, and others has developed a robust theoretical vocabulary for examining how religious practices, communities, and authorities are reshaped by digital media (Campbell, 2013; Helland, 2005; Hoover, 2006; Lövhelm, 2012). The Indian case, however, presents distinctive features that resist straightforward application of frameworks developed primarily through the study of Christian and Western religious contexts (Scheifinger, 2017). The centrality of darshan in Hindu practice (Eck, 1998), the embodied requirements of namaz, the communal nature of langar and other forms of religious commensality, and the deep imbrication of religion with caste, language, and regional identity all shape how digital mediation is received and reworked.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks:

- How have online religious practices and spiritual communities developed in post-pandemic India, and what are the implications for religious authority, community, and embodiment?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, what major patterns of digital religious practice have stabilized in post-pandemic India?
- Second, how do these patterns reshape religious authority, community formation, and the bodily dimensions of religious life?
- Third, what tensions and inequalities emerge from the hybridization of offline and online religious participation?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes scholarship on digital religion in India through a post-pandemic lens. It identifies four major patterns that organize the empirical landscape and offers a framework for analysing them. It articulates implications for religious studies scholarship, religious institutions themselves, and inter-religious dynamics in contemporary India. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory and evidence;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings;
- Section 5 discusses implications;
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations: Mediatization and Digital Religion

The study of religion and media has developed a sophisticated theoretical vocabulary over the past three decades. Mediatization theory, articulated by Stig Hjarvard (2008), Knut Lundby (2009), and others, posits that media have become so pervasive in contemporary social life that they constitute an autonomous logic that other institutions, including religion, increasingly accommodate. From this perspective, religion is not merely transmitted through media but is reshaped by media's formats, temporalities, and attention economies. Heidi Campbell's work on networked religion has further developed an analytical vocabulary for understanding how digital media reshape religious authority, community, identity, and ritual (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

Christopher Helland's (2005) influential distinction between religion online (the use of digital media to disseminate established religious content) and online religion (the constitution of religious practice and community through digital interaction) remains analytically productive, although the distinction has blurred as digital practice has matured. Stewart Hoover's (2006) work on the lived religious uses of media draws attention to how religious meaning is constructed through everyday media engagement, rather than primarily through

institutional broadcasting. These frameworks together provide a robust starting point for analysing the Indian case (Lövheim, 2012).

The Indian Religious Landscape and Digital Adoption

Indian religious traditions have engaged with mass media throughout the twentieth century, from print devotional literature to gramophone recordings of bhajans and qawwalis, to television serials such as Ramayan and Mahabharat that drew massive audiences in the 1980s, to the satellite television boom of the 1990s with dedicated religious channels in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and other languages (Babb & Wadley, 1995; Rajagopal, 2001). Internet adoption from the 2000s onwards added another layer, with major temples, ashrams, and religious organizations developing websites, online donation portals, and email-based newsletters (Beckerlegge, 2015; Jain, 2014). The mass diffusion of smartphones and affordable mobile data from approximately 2016, following the Reliance Jio launch, qualitatively transformed the digital religious landscape, bringing video and social media engagement within reach of vast new populations (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019; Udupa, 2015).

Empirical Studies on Online Religion in India

A growing body of empirical scholarship has documented digital religious practice in India. Studies have examined the websites and YouTube presence of major Hindu temples including Tirupati, Vaishno Devi, Shirdi, and the Jagannath Temple in Puri (Lochtefeld, 2021; Scheifinger, 2017). Research on Sufi traditions has analysed the digital activities of major dargahs and the social media presence of qawwali artists (Tarlo, 2010; Zaman, 2002). Christian and Sikh denominations have been studied for their use of livestreaming and social media in congregational life. Recent ethnographic work has explored the digital practices of contemporary gurus and spiritual teachers, including the use of subscription-based platforms, app-based meditation programmes, and global online communities (Karapanagiotis, 2021; Mallapragada, 2014). These studies provide rich foundations, although integration across traditions and synthesis of post-pandemic developments remains limited.

Authority, Community, and Embodiment in Digital Religion

Three analytical dimensions are particularly central to the digital religion literature: authority, community, and embodiment (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Bellar, 2022). Digital media reshape religious authority by enabling new actors (independent teachers, content creators, lay practitioners) to address religious audiences directly, while also offering established religious institutions powerful new platforms for amplifying their voice. Religious communities are reconfigured through digital media, sometimes extending and supporting existing communities, sometimes constituting new communities that have no prior offline existence. Embodiment, understood as the role of the body in religious practice, presents particular complications in digital contexts: the embodied features of darshan, namaz, communion, langar, or pilgrimage cannot be fully reproduced through screens, raising theological, ritual, and experiential questions (Eck, 1998).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding literature, gaps remain. The post-pandemic period has produced rapid changes that scholarship is only beginning to assimilate. Comparative analyses across Indian religious traditions are relatively rare, with much of the literature remaining tradition-specific. Theoretical engagement with the specifically Indian features of digital religion, including the centrality of darshan, the embodied demands of multiple traditions, and the role of caste, language, and region, requires further development. The present article seeks to contribute to addressing these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for integrating scholarship across religious studies, sociology of religion, media studies, and digital religion. The review proceeded through four stages.

In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ATLA Religion Database, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined digital religion, online religion, virtual worship, livestream, darshan, namaz online, guru, spiritual community, and India. The window was January 2018 to August 2025, with selected earlier sources retained for theoretical and historical grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical scholarship engaging with digital religious practice, with priority given to work focused on India and South Asian traditions, supplemented by foundational global digital religion theory. Reports from religious institutions, media research organizations, and digital ecosystem studies were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out devotional or apologetic literature without scholarly framing, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, sixty-eight publications were retained for analysis.

In the third stage, supplementary contextual materials were drawn from publicly available sources including the websites of major religious institutions, ecosystem reports on devotional content platforms, and journalistic coverage of pandemic-era and post-pandemic religious change. In the fourth stage, a thematic synthesis procedure was used. Codes were developed inductively from the literature and refined into broader analytical categories. Four major patterns of post-pandemic digital religion in India emerged from the analysis and structure the findings reported below. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, balanced engagement with multiple religious traditions, and respect for religious sensibilities were maintained throughout.

Results

Institutionalization of Livestreamed Darshan and Ritual Broadcasts

The first major pattern is the institutionalization of livestreamed darshan, aarti, namaz, and other ritual broadcasts by major religious institutions. During the pandemic, restrictions on physical attendance compelled temples, dargahs, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras to develop livestreaming infrastructure to maintain continuity of religious life and devotee engagement (Campbell, 2020). In the post-pandemic period, these infrastructures have not been dismantled. They have been expanded, professionalized, and integrated into the regular operational practice of religious institutions (Campbell & Bellar, 2022).

Major Hindu temples now routinely offer multiple daily livestreams of darshan and aarti (Lochtefeld, 2021; Scheifinger, 2017). Sikh institutions stream gurbani kirtan from major gurdwaras. Muslim mosques and dargahs broadcast khutbas and qawwali performances. Christian churches across denominations livestream Sunday services. The institutionalization of these broadcasts reshapes the relationship between geographic place and religious participation. Devotees living abroad or in regions distant from significant religious sites can maintain regular ritual engagement, while local devotees may use livestreams to supplement physical visits or as substitutes when health, work, or family obligations prevent attendance (Mallapragada, 2014).

Theological and ritual debates around the validity and meaning of livestreamed religious experience have accompanied this institutionalization (Eck, 1998). The question of whether digital darshan constitutes a sufficient form of darshan, whether digitally relayed prayer fulfils ritual obligations, and how the embodied dimensions of religious practice are or are not preserved in digital form, are subjects of active theological discussion within multiple traditions (Campbell, 2020; Lochtefeld, 2021).

Guru-Led Digital Spiritual Communities and Subscription Models

The second pattern is the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities, often supported by subscription-based content models (Karapanagiotis, 2021). Contemporary spiritual teachers across Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Christian, and non-denominational traditions have built extensive digital ecosystems comprising YouTube channels, dedicated apps, paid online courses, retreat content, and direct messaging communities (Jain, 2014). The pandemic accelerated this development, as physical retreats and in-person teachings were temporarily impossible, prompting teachers and their organizations to invest in digital alternatives.

These digital communities differ in important ways from traditional ashram-based or congregational structures. They tend to be globally distributed, allowing teachers to maintain large international communities of practitioners (Mallapragada, 2014). Subscription and donation flows can be substantial, enabling teaching organizations to sustain expanded staff, content production, and outreach. Yet these communities also raise questions about religious authority, accountability, and the depth of relationship that digital mediation can sustain (Campbell, 2013). The relative ease of building parallel digital teaching organizations has also produced a proliferation of new spiritual teachers, some with significant followings, whose authority derives substantially from digital presence rather than traditional lineage or institutional standing (Karapanagiotis, 2021).

Devotional Content Economies on Social Media Platforms

The third pattern is the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms, particularly YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and short-form video platforms (Punathambekar & Mohan, 2019; Udupa, 2015). Devotional content, including bhajans, kirtans, naats, qawwalis, hymns, gurbani, sermons, and ritual instruction, circulates at unprecedented scale and intensity. Content creators range from established musicians and religious teachers to amateur practitioners and dedicated devotional content channels. Algorithmic recommendation systems shape which content reaches which audiences, with implications for canon formation, the visibility of regional and minority traditions, and the spread of new religious aesthetics (Saha, 2018).

This content economy interacts in complex ways with traditional religious institutions. Some institutions have embraced and invested in social media content production (Karapanagiotis, 2021). Others remain ambivalent

or peripheral participants. The economic dimension is significant: monetization through advertising, brand partnerships, and direct donations has created sustainable livelihoods for some devotional content creators while raising concerns about the commercialization of religious expression (Saha, 2018). Issues of religious accuracy, sectarian polemic, and inter-religious tension also characterize this content space, requiring careful scholarly and institutional attention (Kapur, 2020; Udupa, 2015).

Hybrid Offline-Online Religious Participation

The fourth pattern, perhaps the most analytically important, is the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation as the durable post-pandemic norm (Campbell & Bellar, 2022). Most Indian religious practitioners, after the easing of pandemic restrictions, did not abandon physical religious participation. Nor did they revert to purely offline practice. They moved into a hybrid pattern in which physical visits, livestreamed engagement, social media consumption of devotional content, and participation in digitally extended communities are interwoven. The relative weight of these elements varies by tradition, by demographic, and by individual religious biography, but the hybrid pattern itself appears stable.

This hybridization has implications for how scholars conceptualize religious participation. The boundary between offline and online religion, never fully clean, has become increasingly porous (Helland, 2005). Pilgrimage planning often involves digital reconnaissance, virtual tours, and post-visit engagement with livestreamed daily rituals (Lochtefeld, 2021). Membership in religious communities is frequently constituted through both physical congregation and ongoing digital interaction. Studies that measure religious participation through purely offline indicators may significantly underestimate religious activity in the post-pandemic landscape (Hoover, 2006).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an analytical framework that takes hybridization as the basic unit of analysis for contemporary Indian religious practice, rather than treating offline and online as separate domains. The integration of mediatization theory, networked religion frameworks, and Indian-tradition-specific analytical vocabularies offers productive resources for such analysis. The four patterns identified, institutionalized livestreaming, guru-led digital communities, devotional content economies, and hybrid participation, are not isolated developments but interlocking features of a transformed religious landscape.

For religious institutions, the findings suggest several practical implications. Investments in digital infrastructure, made under pandemic pressure, are likely to require ongoing maintenance, professional staffing, and theological reflection rather than passive operation. Questions of digital ritual validity, the relationship between physical and online communities, and the management of devotional content economies will require sustained attention from religious leadership. Inter-religious comparison may itself become a productive practice, as institutions across traditions encounter shared challenges and develop diverse responses.

For inter-religious dynamics, the findings raise both possibilities and concerns (Pew Research Center, 2021). Digital religious spaces facilitate exposure to other traditions, often through devotional aesthetics, music, and ritual videos that travel beyond denominational and tradition-specific audiences. This exposure can foster appreciation and curiosity. At the same time, digital platforms have also been sites of inter-religious tension, polemic, and the propagation of divisive content (Kapur, 2020; Udupa, 2015). The post-pandemic religious internet in India is therefore not a uniformly irenic space. The role of platform governance, content moderation, and religious civil society in shaping the tone of inter-religious digital encounter is a significant ongoing issue.

Equity considerations are also important. The hybridization of religious practice presupposes access to smartphones, data, electricity, digital literacy, and language-appropriate content. Older devotees, low-income populations, residents of regions with weaker digital infrastructure, and speakers of less-resourced languages may be relatively underserved by digital religious developments. Religious institutions and policymakers concerned with religious access have reason to attend to these disparities, including through public-access digital infrastructure at temples and community spaces, content production in multiple regional languages, and digital literacy programmes targeted at older devotees.

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across Indian religious traditions. Studies of Hindu digital religion are more numerous than studies of digital practice in Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, and indigenous traditions, particularly in the post-pandemic period. The pace of digital religious change also means that some findings will require updating as platforms, institutions, and practitioner communities evolve. The lived experience and subjective meanings of religious practitioners

themselves are mediated through researcher framings, and primary ethnographic and interview-based studies are essential complements to the synthesis presented here.

Conclusion

This article has examined the development of online religious practices and spiritual communities in post-pandemic India through a critical literature review informed by digital religion theory. Four interlocking patterns were identified: the institutionalization of livestreamed darshan and ritual broadcasts; the proliferation of guru-led digital spiritual communities and subscription models; the rise of devotional content economies on social media platforms; and the emergence of hybrid offline-online religious participation as the durable norm. Together, these patterns reveal a religious landscape in which digital mediation has become deeply and durably integrated into the practice of religion across traditions, communities, and demographic groups.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, post-pandemic Indian religion is best understood as a hybrid configuration rather than a binary between offline and online. The analytical vocabularies of religious studies and sociology of religion need to develop accordingly. Second, this hybridization carries significant implications for religious authority, community, and embodiment. Authority is increasingly distributed across institutional, individual, and algorithmic actors. Community is constituted through both physical congregation and ongoing digital interaction. Embodiment, while complicated by digital mediation, has not been displaced; it continues to anchor religious practice in ways that scholarship must take seriously. Third, the digital transformation of religion in India is uneven, marked by inequalities of access, language, and tradition that deserve ongoing scholarly and policy attention.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Comparative studies across Indian religious traditions would enrich the empirical base, particularly for traditions less well represented in current scholarship. Ethnographic studies of devotee experience in hybrid offline-online religious life would deepen understanding of the lived dimensions of these patterns. Research on inter-religious digital encounter, both irenic and contentious, would address an important gap. Studies of equity in digital religious access, including the experiences of older devotees, low-income communities, and speakers of less-resourced languages, would inform institutional and policy responses. Comparative work between India and other religiously diverse societies undergoing similar digital transformations would situate the Indian case in global perspective. By pursuing such an agenda, religious studies scholarship can contribute meaningfully to understanding one of the most significant religious transformations of the early twenty-first century.

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