

Unbundling Women's Digital Trust



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Background.

The case for studying digital trust from the woman user's perspective is strong. Often restricted to insights around access and usage, there is little known about women's affective, environmental and sociological considerations around digital interaction, particularly in Global South territories like India. Trust operates as a primary contributor to users' decision-making and ultimately their digital adoption. Beyond the rational exercise of weighing potential benefits against risks, the idea of trust helps unlock the more emotional dimensions of decision-making. **A trust perspective reveals deeper knowledge around the true mechanics that sustain and strengthen women's digital adoption beyond basic usage**, and its findings can enable stakeholders across the digital ecosystem to adopt directly relevant strategies for advancing women's inclusion. As governments push for digital public infrastructures to become strongholds for digitally-motivated governance, trust can intervene at these still-initial stages to encourage inclusion at multiple levels of design, development, and implementation.



Beyond the rational exercise of weighing potential benefits against risks, it also helps unlock the more emotional dimensions of decision-making.

This project addresses questions of relevance, safety and security, norms as well as accessibility and digital literacy. It offers an ontology to think about the intellectual and practical underpinnings of the trust question, a method for uncovering the nuances of participants' affective relationships with technology, and insights that point to larger trends and patterns around women's digital attitudes and behaviours in an oft-understudied Global South context. In addition to situating trust as a lever for improving women's digital experiences, the intention is also to unpack the implications of infusing gender intentionality in the digital ecosystem for increased trust.

Approach.

This 2-year exploratory study captures the ebbs and flows of trust and aspects that surround it – from ideas of user self-confidence and reliance on technology to the technological and software conduits underneath online safety and privacy. **In addition to secondary research for context-setting and ecosystem engagement, the research was primarily conducted using participatory and human-centred design methods.** The participatory research, led by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), engaged 332 women, 178 men, 217 adolescent girls, and 80 adolescent boys in rural and urban locations across Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra and Jharkhand. The in-depth human-centred design activities were conducted with 91 women across the same locations.

The research will culminate in five outputs:

- Digital trust report
- Digital Trust Community of Practice convenings
- Ontology of digital trust
- Stakeholder Recommendations
- Trust assessment tool

SECONDARY RESEARCH	PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH	HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN	ECOSYSTEM ENGAGEMENT
Literature review	Recce visits	HCD tool-based in-depth interactions	Expert interviews
Policy mapping	Participatory Vulnerability Analysis activities	Thematic coding	Digital Trust Community Meet
	Key informant interviews	Persona mapping	Ontology testing

Insights.

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Women's digital trust is built through a series of decisions, elaborated upon in the decision-making dimension of the ontology. It relies on a combination of factors comprising platform value, care system, and user resilience:



PLATFORM VALUE

Platform value is understood as the user's perception of the digital platform's ability to meet their particular needs and desires.



CARE SYSTEM

Care system is envisioned as the user's perception of factors that create protective boundaries for safe exploration and from the risks of using the digital platform.



USER RESILIENCE

User resilience is conceived of as the user's perception of their ability to tolerate the risks of using the digital platform, should existing safeguards be inadequate.

DETERMINANTS OF DECISION-MAKING	BARRIERS	LIMITERS	ENABLERS	DRIVERS
Platform value	Gendered perceptions of user eligibility	Platforms not designed for low-network contexts	Informing decisions via others' opinions	Personally appealing and inclusive platform features
Care system	Poor safeguards against online harms and impact on reputation	Lack of inclusive design	Support from state intermediaries	Avenues for safe exploration of platforms
User resilience	Self-culpability and predicting mistake-making	Inadequate information and silence in digital interactions	Support from household figures	Alternative channels for digital participation

Recommendations and Pathways for Enhancing Digital Trust.

The following provides a snapshot of the recommendations further detailed in the digital trust report. The recommendations tie together learnings from women's digital experiences, suggestions from the literature review and overall analysis in the form of a stakeholder-based playbook on building, enhancing and maintaining women's digital trust. These stakeholders primarily comprise state actors, private tech builders, grassroot action bodies and the broader research community.

- 1 Design for the realities of shared access** by developing platform locks, creating mechanisms for guest users, and improving customisable functions for different user profiles.
- 2 Institute gender-sensitive safety mechanisms** by investing in transparent, user-forward grievance redressal mechanisms, and options that increase user control, such as women-first interactions and disappearing or temporary content.
- 3 Design for gender-based attitudes to digital risks** by deploying reassuring language, enabling first-time users to engage in a trial-and-error interaction, and establishing technical standards for reciprocity, particularly on payment platforms.
- 4 Create accessible thresholds and pathways** for relatable engagement by following principles of graceful degradation to improve usability in low-network settings, and increasing speech-to-text and voice-recognition pathways, among other changes.
- 5 Increase engagement and learning formats** to increase digital safety and retention by incorporating gamification and customisation in essential service platforms, and simulating journeys before users undertake actions in real time.
- 6 Create long-term impact** around gender-based digital skilling programmes by instituting post-programme mentorship/buddy initiatives and ensuring more of women trainers in digital skilling programmes.
- 7 Combine established media** consumption patterns with digital campaigns for greater reach by collaborating with trusted public figures and celebrities, and integrating calls to action in communications around schemes and platforms.



8 **Design strong messaging** around claims of independent usage by sharing stories of women who have overcome digital harassment and centring the messaging on online privacy as a critical tool for empowerment.

9 **Create trust-fostering digital environments** for intermediaries by recognizing and celebrating the contributions of intermediaries in supporting hesitant digital users, and providing visually engaging explainer videos for training content.

10 **Build reflexive, responsive and reliable government digital services** by collaborating with existing helplines under the Ministry of Women and Child Development to create therapeutic 'sounding boards', and offering limited functions even in low-network settings.

11 **Enhance gender-intentional data quality** to create targeted trust interventions by investing in research on gender-intentional privacy and safety features and developing pedagogical interventions to increase women's digital resilience.

»»» In spotlighting the woman user at the centre of the digital question, this work invites ecosystem stakeholders to not only reflect on gender intentionality as a lens, but embody it as an active approach to the narrative, design, development, and delivery of digital solutions.