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One-click at a time: Empowering mothers for their adolescent children's educational expenditures through social media usage

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Abstract

Mothers play a significant role in deciding their adolescents' educational expenditures. They increasingly rely on the Internet for information search and building online support networks to enhance their confidence. Thus, we use the psychological empowerment theory in this study to examine the association between social media use and educational expenditures. Through two studies, we show how a mother's use of social media (active/passive use) significantly impacts adolescent children's educational expenses via dimensions of psychological empowerment. We further demonstrate that the two dimensions of psychological empowerment differentially drive this relationship: intrapersonal (relying on the self) and Interactional (leveraging the community) empowerment. We discover that active (passive) social media use increases mother' intrapersonal (interactional) empowerment. We also find that cross-cultural differences play a role in psychological empowerment's effect on educational expenditures, where intrapersonal empowerment is vital in the United States, and interactional empowerment is more relevant in India. Our key contributions to literature are three-fold: we establish the relationship between a mother's social media use and educational expenditures for their adolescent children, identify predictors of different dimensions of psychological empowerment, and present evidence for cross-cultural differences in the empowering role of social media.

KEYWORDS

education, empowerment, India, mothers, social media use

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that a woman with access to the Internet is better able to manage her pregnancy or periods because she has access to information that she previously found difficult to gather (Karasneh et al., 2020; Sayakhot & Carolan-Olah, 2016). The access to information (in any context) empowers her psychologically (Morahan-Martin, 2004). A psychologically empowered woman feels bold and courageous to take action with less hesitation and more confidence. This could be spending more on her health (e.g., by buying nutritional products or apps which track her health) or taking initiatives because she

sees a market gap (e.g., entrepreneurial tendencies) (Hossain et al., 2020; Karasneh et al., 2020; Sayakhot & Carolan-Olah, 2016). Applying this to an educational context, in this paper, we suggest that a mother who uses social media effectively is likely to feel psychologically empowered which increases her confidence to spend more on her children's education.

Unlike traditional media (e.g., T.V. and radio), the Internet, particularly social media, offers opportunities for dynamic interaction between the source and receiver of information. It has enabled access to information and the ability to respond to incoming information by sharing and connecting with others (Labrecque et al., 2013). Consumers become empowered through interaction, learning, and engagement (Tajurahim et al., 2020). Consumer empowerment is

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suggested to positively impact consumer outcomes, such as the delivery of banking services, tourism industry services, and product designs (Hartmann et al., 2018; Ouschan et al., 2006). Empowerment also affects personal outcomes such as an enhanced awareness of Internet privacy issues (Bandara et al., 2020), increased engagement in pro-environmental behaviour (Hartmann et al., 2018), and improvement in personal health outcomes (Ouschan et al., 2006).

Prior research in economics has firmly established that an empowered woman has greater access and control over resources and can positively affect outcomes (e.g., health, nutrition, school choice) for herself and her family (Bloom et al., 2001; Roushdy, 2004). Vijayalakshmi et al. (2021) suggest that in addition to traditional demographic factors such as a mother's education level and household income, a non-demographic factor, a mother's psychological empowerment has a positive impact on her children's educational expenditures.

Psychological empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000) offers a comprehensive measure to capture mothers' status and sense of power. Psychological empowerment is a multidimensional construct that 'includes people's self-perceptions of control in the socio-political contexts that are important in their lives, actions taken to exercise that control and critical awareness of socio-political environments and systems' (Christens & Lin, 2014; p. 213). This definition can be expressed by three components: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural (Zimmerman, 1995). Intrapersonal empowerment involves self-belief in creating change, whereas interactional empowerment focuses on creating social change through community support (Speer, 2000). Finally, the behavioural component captures the actions taken from feeling empowered. In this study, we consider education-related decisions to measure behavioural empowerment.

Our study draws primarily from two streams of literature: social media use and consumer empowerment. Empowerment can be induced by external environmental cues, stimuli, or information on the Internet. Mothers report relying on social media and other online sources for informing their decisions (Moon et al., 2019), including those related to their adolescent children's education. Through social media, mothers gain knowledge from the information gathered, which becomes instrumental in their ability to build self-confidence (Pires et al., 2006). For instance, social networking sites offer new moms a place to express themselves and share information about their journeys in identity transition, thus building self-confidence (Phillips & Broderick, 2014). This kind of expression on social media sites through reacting, responding, tagging, and sharing content is known as active social media use (Burke et al., 2010). In comparison, passive use (or consumption) of social media is the attention paid to others' posts on their feed and viewing others' profiles. Essentially, active or passive use of social media provides opportunities to enhance one's skills, thus facilitating decision-making (Pires et al., 2006), and this relationship comes to life via different dimensions of psychological empowerment (Li, 2016).

Given this background, the research questions for our study are: (a) How does a mother's social media use influence her decisions on adolescent children's educational expenditures? (b) What role does psychological empowerment play in this relationship? and (c) Do these relationships differ for individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures? This last research question (c) becomes particularly important and stems from (b), as we differentiate two critical dimensions of psychological empowerment: intrapersonal (focus on the self) and interactional (focus on the individual in relation to their community). To differentiate the impact of the dimensions of empowerment, we conducted two studies in the United States (U.S.) and India, respectively. The intrapersonal and interactional dimensions, thus, parallel the main aspects of individualistic (U.S.) and collectivistic (India) cultures (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005).

In Study 1, we surveyed mothers in the U.S. using a Qualtrics panel. To understand how social media may empower mothers in India, we conducted Study 2. Across both studies, we show that the active use of Facebook in the U.S. and the passive use of WhatsApp (which started as a messaging app but has developed into a popular social media platform outside the U.S.) in India can increase educational expenditures. Moreover, this happens via intrapersonal empowerment in the U.S. and interactional empowerment in India.

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on consumer empowerment (Hartmann et al., 2018; Nam, 2020; Ouschan et al., 2006; Schneider-Kamp & Askegaard, 2021; Shankar et al., 2006) and social media use in various ways. First, while the link between social media use and leveraging community for change (interactional empowerment) has been suggested (Li, 2016; Tajurahim et al., 2020; Yuksel et al., 2016), this relationship has not been explicitly established with evidence. Online spaces give a new meaning to the community as they exist beyond geographical boundaries and offer opportunities for everyone to find support (Cappellini & Yen, 2016). The Internet influences the individual- and collective-self and, hence, consumption decisions (Labrecque et al., 2013). In this paper, we demonstrate how both dimensions of psychological empowerment (interactional and intrapersonal) impact educational expenditures based on the dominating culture of the country. In particular, we find that the process of empowering mothers differs between the U.S. and India; that is, empowered decisions are explained by intrapersonal empowerment (leveraging the self) in the U.S. and interactional empowerment (leveraging the community) in India. Second, our findings highlight the need to focus on the type of social media use, passive vs. active, rather than Internet *access* to better understand consumer behaviour. Third, we show how a mother's social media usage can affect spending on adolescent children's education.

In the next section, we discuss relevant research on educational expenditures across countries, mothers' social media use and draw from the psychological empowerment literature to assist our investigation of the empowering mechanisms of social media, leading up to our key hypotheses. We also consider cultural differences in psychological empowerment to test the generalizability of our model. Methods and data collection for two studies conducted in the U.S. and India are consequently presented. We conclude with a general discussion section where we highlight the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Parents consider education a long-term investment and an equalizer that will help future generations prosper (Hill & Lai, 2016). The decision on the proportion of a family's budget to allocate for children's education is probably a joint decision between the husband and the wife. However, studies have indicated that mothers, compared with fathers, play a more critical role in their children's wellbeing (Korupp et al., 2002). Since mothers rather than fathers spend significantly more time with their children, this finding is consistent across the globe (Sani & Treas, 2016). Hence, mothers often are the key decision-makers regarding their children (Moon et al., 2019), including education-related expenditures (Titus et al., 2017). Further, research suggests that when mothers (vs. fathers) are involved, they are likely to spend more on their children (Roushdy, 2004); here, education. Therefore, in this study, we focus on the role of mothers.

The relationship between school spending and learning outcomes has been an ongoing debate, despite many sources of evidence showing a positive correlation between spending and performance. Through a meta-analysis, Jackson (2020a, 2020b) found strong support for a causal relationship between general education spending and student performance. It is not surprising to find that the cost of raising a child is number three in household expenses, following spending on housing and food (Lino et al., 2017). In the U.S., spending on children is highest but with wide variation before school age (depending on whether child care is needed), followed by teenage years of 15–17 (Lino et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is widely accepted that postsecondary education leads to higher earnings and occupational attainment (Card, 1999). For these reasons, and since parents tend to think it is the appropriate time to supplement children's education with additional resources and coaching, we focus on adolescent children in this study. Further, we focused on educational expenditure on adolescent children in our studies since it is also an indicator of educational outcomes (Kingdon, 2005), educational attainment, and skill level (Saha, 2013).

2.1 | Education expenditures in the U.S. and India

To help generalize the empowering role of social media use, we consider two diverse cultures and economies—the U.S. and India. While we elucidate the differences between the cultures in the following pages, these two countries have one thing in common—reduced government spending on education. This has resulted in parents having to spend from their pockets. Such a setting is ideal for our paper as we investigate the factors that may influence private spending on education.

Investments on children in modern societies come from two primary sources: private investments by individual households and public investments by governments (Kornrich et al., 2020). Unequal spending on education among parents in the U.S. and India has led to societal concerns such as lower intergenerational mobility and higher future inequality (Corak, 2013; Patel & Annapoorna, 2019; Rivera, 2016;

Schneider et al., 2018). In the U.S., recent spending on education, including childcare, learning-related activities, and enrichments, has seen a much wider variation among families than 40 years ago (Kornrich, 2016; Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013). While there has been an increase in higher education tuition in the U.S., federal spending on public schools for primary and secondary education has decreased (Jackson, 2020a, 2020b). The consequences of the reduction in school spending are evidenced by a decrease in math and reading scores nationally by 3.9% (Jackson, 2020a, 2020b). Compared with many other countries, the U.S. ranks among the lowest in governmental spending on primary and secondary education (Kornrich et al., 2020). Parents are covering for the shortage in spending as the U.S. Consumer Expenditure Survey reported that parents' most prominent area of spending on children is education (Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013).

The recommended public educational expenditure for India is 6% of its GDP. However, successive governments have spent only about half of the suggested amount (Patel & Annapoorna, 2019). Consequently, the burden of educational expenditures, even in India, has been transferred from the state to the private individual. Interestingly, southern Indian states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu have better educational expenditures and outcomes than the northern states because of the inclusion of women in economic growth plans (Asadullah & Yalonetzky, 2012). These findings direct us toward the need to understand mothers and what influences their choices.

Most studies have considered critical factors such as income and parents' level of education when examining spending on children's education and student school performance (Folbre, 2008; Hao & Yeung, 2015; Kornrich, 2016; Lareau, 2011). We argue that parental social media interactions will critically influence their decisions regarding money allocation and determine the amount spent on their adolescent children's education. We suggest this because access to information or communities on the Internet contributes to building an empowered woman. Empowerment refers to feeling confident about oneself and actions and/or being in a position to leverage one's community to achieve their goals. Such confidence and self-belief are reflected in the actions the individual takes to improve one's own or their family's position. In particular, we suggest that a mother empowered from social media use is likely to spend more on the education on their adolescent children.

2.2 | Impact of social media on mothers

Literature on media socialization shows that mass media and advertising can affect attitudes and behaviours, leading to women's empowerment. Similar to cable T.V., social media may also serve as a means for mothers to develop their intellectual understanding of the social environment and acquire the knowledge and resources required to produce a change (Li, 2016). Tajurahim et al. (2020) found that social media significantly impacted consumer empowerment even after controlling for personality factors and an individual's self-efficacy.

Depending on the type/level of interactions and activities that mothers conduct on social media, they can be broadly determined as

passive or active users of the media (Li, 2016). Burke et al. (2010) were among the earliest to propose examining social media use by differentiating between passive and active users. Passive users tend to be spectators rather than creators/critics/collectors and have lesser engagement with the content or other users (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). Consumers who participate in social media by actively consuming, contributing, or creating content tend to have more control/power over the market processes (Li, 2016). Similarly, in our study, we capture active social media use as reacting and responding to social media posts, while passive media use is captured as merely reading without any engagement with others. Such differential social media use has led to significant variation in the emotional and functional outcomes.

Several studies have focused on the impact of passive and active social media use on wellbeing, including recent meta-analyses or reviews (Liu et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2019). While the findings are mixed and continue to be debated, most studies have found that passive social media use correlates with reduced wellbeing compared to active social media use (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). In consumer research, most studies have suggested that increased social media use leads to higher product involvement and purchase intention (Kamal et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012). Active social media use increases peer communication and strengthens relationships with them (Wang et al., 2012). People are more likely to find the information helpful, trustworthy, and credible when it comes from their peers (Hutter et al., 2013; McClure & Seock, 2020). However, it also increases social comparison and status-based consumption (Kamal et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012), which increases the consumption of goods and a positive attitude toward expenditures. While these studies have been conducted in the context of products, we extend this line of thinking to an educational context, where mothers are often the key decision-makers on behalf of the family and rely on information from their social networks and other mothers (Moon et al., 2019).

2.3 | Psychological empowerment

Khader (2016) considered empowerment as individuals' ability to do what they desire and be how they wish. The relationship between involvement and consumption is determined by the consumer's empowerment or belief that their actions can bring about the desired changes. Consumer empowerment is a state where consumers can pursue their rational or economic interests using their skills and knowledge of the market (Tajurahim et al., 2020). High consumer empowerment resulted in high involvement in purchasing eco-friendly food (Nam, 2020) and motivated consumers to adopt pro-environmental behaviour (Hartmann et al., 2018). Similarly, privacy empowerment enabled consumers to display control, autonomy, critical awareness, and privacy efficacy about their digital information (Bandara et al., 2020). Overall, empowerment improves subjective wellbeing, self-esteem, and mental health at an individual level and reduces risky behaviours in individuals (Christens & Lin, 2014).

Researchers have drawn from various fields (marketing, economics, and psychology) to define consumer empowerment and have

highlighted that empowerment should consider not just the outcomes but also the processes. Empowerment does not occur until individuals perceive themselves as empowered (Riquelme et al., 2018). For example, the behaviour of 'not choosing' after accessing available information is also an indicator of an empowering decision (Ioannidou, 2018). Hence we turn to psychological empowerment as our focusing lens since it captures two things over and above other definitions of empowerment (refer Hartmann et al., 2018)- (a) it measures the process of empowerment and not just the outcome, and (b) it considers both the individual and the community/collective relations in the enactment of empowerment (Ioannidou, 2018).

Individuals with high intrapersonal empowerment will show higher self-efficacy, perceive themselves to be competent, and desire to control activities around them (Leung, 2009; Li, 2016; Zimmerman, 1995). An individual's self-confidence and belief in control over their environment tend to motivate them to take action to achieve their goals (Hanson & Yuan, 2018). Conversely, a person with high interactional empowerment is likely to believe in the community's power to bring about change and cultivate interpersonal relations and collective action to achieve the desired change (Li, 2016). Interactional empowerment emphasizes how one relates to their environment, whereas intrapersonal empowerment focuses on building personal cognitive-level abilities (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2015). A person could be high on the intrapersonal component and low on the interactional component (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment, a psychological process, occurs at an individual level but can be enabled by structural mechanisms (Hanson & Yuan, 2018). In external intervention, we consider the empowering role of social media because earlier studies have indicated that media exposure significantly increases empowerment (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011).

3 | DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

3.1 | Predicting mother's intrapersonal and interactional empowerment through social media use

Social media has been suggested to develop an individual's psychological empowerment (Leung, 2009), which aligns with the notion that the degree of empowerment depends on consumers' ability to gain and assess new information (Pires et al., 2006). Active use of social media involves writing and sharing on social media platforms and allowing individuals to express themselves and their experiences thoughtfully, thus increasing a sense of control over their lives (Barak et al., 2008). Knowledge helps fuel the co-creation and sharing of information, thus enabling empowerment (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2015). The authors highlight that Internet skills may strongly correlate with self-esteem and self-confidence. Riquelme et al. (2018) indicated that mere access to social media does not lead to empowerment, as access may not necessarily define usage or meaningful use. By sharing and writing, the individual changes from a gatherer to a conveyor of information, from dependent to independent (Barak et al., 2008). Similarly, confidence is

increased when an active social media user receives positive feedback from others (Riquelme et al., 2018).

Thus, the active use of the Internet increases confidence and expectations of success (Hu & Leung, 2003). This self-confidence results from an individual's ability to access and use information per their needs (Hu & Leung, 2003), thus increasing their self-efficacy and perceived competence, creating feelings of empowerment, particularly intrapersonal empowerment (Leung, 2009; Li, 2016). However, passive users are less likely to engage with others on social media and, hence, have fewer opportunities to improve their abilities and confidence. In summary, online engagement (active rather than passive) increases self-efficacy and self-esteem, creating feelings of empowerment, particularly intrapersonal empowerment (Li, 2016).

One often overlooked aspect of psychological empowerment is our understanding of how community participation can enable feelings of empowerment (Christens & Lin, 2014). Empowerment via the Internet can also occur at a group or community level, not just at an individual level (Dolničar & Fortunati, 2014). Speer (2000) noted that an individual's sense of power, based on access to information, can be derived from increased interactions with others. Social media enables such interactions with a broader reach. Consumer engagement, which includes consulting family and friends or telling others about their experiences, captures interactional empowerment (Tajurahim et al., 2020).

Hu and Leung (2003) recommended that an organization seeking to empower its employees should provide opportunities for building relationships among them. Engagement with others helps individuals feel more empowered and motivated (Yuksel et al., 2016). In deliberately formed relationships within a community, people may be more willing to share their vulnerable side, fostering intimacy and group bonds (Barak et al., 2008). Such engagement helps build a shared faith, social integration, and commitment to the group's cause (Barak et al., 2008; Riquelme et al., 2018). Engaging with others in virtual communities through photos and comments helps mothers develop a sense of belongingness and power as many relationships are deliberately formed (e.g., breast cancer survivors) (Riquelme et al., 2018). Even a passive activity such as liking a brand's Facebook page is likely to make consumers more engaged with the brand community (Beukeboom et al., 2015). Social connections through online groups also help gain emotional support (Mo & Coulson, 2012). For instance, blogging may increase community engagement and hence psychological empowerment (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Interactional empowerment also occurs when individuals can mobilize resources for the community and improve their standing, thereby power and control, in decision-making in their local communities (Christens & Lin, 2014).

Being part of a group and feeling needed builds an individual's sense of empowerment and self-worth (Christens & Lin, 2014). Angulo-Ruiz and Pergelova (2015) argued that personal competence is as critical as the surrounding environment in which competence is nurtured. Further, a natural communication style in social media communities increases perceptions of connectedness among the users (Beukeboom et al., 2015). Yuksel et al. (2016) found that social media enhances the social interaction aspect (considered an empowering element), which finally influences behavioural intention.

Petrovčič and Petrič (2014) and Li (2016) found that active users exhibit higher interactional empowerment as they engage with others and build a community for themselves. In contrast, passive use positively relates to social-interactive engagement (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). That is, the experience of being part of a community may lead one to passively engage on the Internet (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017). While passive social media users may affiliate and belong to a community group, they mainly consume the information and resources provided by others in the group and do not play an active role in developing the information or engaging with other members (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the knowledge gained from observing others and their decisions is also empowering (Wathieu et al., 2002). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 1.** Mothers' active (but not passive) social media use positively predicts intrapersonal empowerment.

> **Hypothesis 2.** Mothers' (a) active and (b) passive social media use positively predicts interactional empowerment.

3.2 | Psychological empowerment and educational expenditures

Self-efficacy (a dimension of intrapersonal empowerment) may be critical for positive psychosocial outcomes (Mo & Coulson, 2012). These outcomes are possible because the dimensions of intrapersonal empowerment (perceptions of competence, knowledge, and control) prompt a proactive approach to life (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2015). A person with intrapersonal empowerment may have self-belief and feelings of control, which encourage them to successfully pursue their goals (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012). Having a sense of control and self-efficacy allows individuals to believe they can influence a situation and handle it more confidently (Yoo, 2017). Moreover, power results from the availability of choice and an individual's ability to flexibly make and reject options according to their requirements (Wathieu et al., 2002). In the case of mothers and their decision-making, a mother with higher intrapersonal empowerment is likely to believe that she is competent and will demonstrate confidence in making decisions related to her adolescent children's education. Such a belief may lead to increased educational expenditures (an empowered behaviour) as mothers may believe that spending could help achieve the required education-related outcomes.

However, interactional empowerment motivates mothers to take collective action (Peterson et al., 2005) or initiate joint changes to demand better school facilities (Speer, 2000). Given that educational expenditure can be interpreted as an individual action, we expect intrapersonal empowerment to be more strongly associated with educational expenditures than interactional empowerment. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3.** A U.S. mother's intrapersonal (vs. interactional) empowerment will lead to higher (vs. lower) adolescent children's educational expenditure.

3.3 | Cultural differences in psychological empowerment

Western nations focus on an individual's growth and development, which resonates with intrapersonal empowerment. In Eastern countries, the emphasis is on achieving group goals, maintaining harmony with others in their group or community, and joint decision-making (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Fock et al., 2011). For instance, in India, high value is placed on social relations and family attachments (Viswanathan et al., 2010). Similarly, Kordrostami et al. (2018) found that Iranian parents use innovative mediation techniques to manage children's media consumption, such as distraction mediation, which is not part of Western research vocabulary. Such fundamental differences in cultures have led researchers to suggest that the general sense of empowerment works differently across nations (Fock et al., 2011; Robert et al., 2000). Cultural norms at a societal level are likely to impact empowerment at an individual level (Zheng, 2019). For example, collectivist cultures may emphasize interactional rather than intrapersonal empowerment (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005).

The cultural ideology in India supports the fact that success comes from engaging with a group. Moreover, exercising personal power may disrupt relations and societal structures (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Decisions are embedded in a group context, ensuring cooperation and harmony among all its members (Fock et al., 2011). Further, India is a high power-distance culture compared with the U.S. Researchers have found that in high power-distance cultures, the empowerment process and its influence on decision outcomes may not be as straightforward as suggested in low power-distance cultures (Hui et al., 2004). For example, in high power-distance cultures, employees expect instructions from their superiors rather than taking the initiative and making decisions independently. Individuals in high power-distance cultures generally feel less comfortable exercising their power and may not be positively perceived by society. In fact, in some incidences, individuals with intrapersonal empowerment may show poorer organizational outcomes (Hui et al., 2004).

Few studies have considered the cross-cultural impact of psychological empowerment, and even fewer have considered the multiple dimensions of psychological empowerment. Given India's collectivistic and high power-distance culture, we expect interactional empowerment to have a more decisive impact on educational expenditures, unlike in the U.S. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

> **Hypothesis 4.** *Interactional (vs. intrapersonal) empowerment will increase Indian mothers' investment in their adolescent children's education.*

4 | DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Two separate survey studies were conducted, one in U.S. and one in India. The participants and data collection process are described, and measurement scales and instruments used for data collection are presented below. See Table 1 for a summary of key similarities and differences in data and methodology between the two studies.

TABLE 1 Comparison of data collection and methodology in Study 1 (India) and Study 2 (U.S.)

	Study 1 (U.S.)	Study 2 (India)
Participants		
Sample size	182	301
Sample qualifications	Mothers with at least one child in the age range of 11–17	
Data collection service	Qualtrics	Local marketing research firm
Data collection method	Online self-administrated survey	Personal-assisted digital survey (in person)
Survey instrument		
Language	English	Gujarati and Kannada
Responded to social media platform use	Facebook	WhatsApp
Educational expenditure	Ordinal scale	Ratio scale
Other items and scales	Interval scale	Interval scale

4.1 | Participants

The data in the U.S. were collected through a Qualtrics panel. A total of 425 parents were emailed the survey. Participants were screened to ensure they were at least 18 (not minors), female, and had at least one child between 11 and 17. This resulted in 268 participants who qualified for the survey. The final sample consisted of 182 mothers of adolescents between 11 and 17 years. Sixty-three percent of the children were in the 9th/10th/11th grade. Some participants were excluded because they did not meet quality check requirements (e.g., choosing a fixed answer to a question or straight-lining), which were applied uniformly across the studies.

For a face-to-face method of data collection in India, a local marketing research firm was hired. Data were collected from two states in India, Gujarat, and Karnataka. The two states were chosen because of their geographic distribution (west and south India, respectively) and variance in other demographic indicators such as sex ratio (919 vs. 973 females per thousand males, respectively). One of the authors in this study collaborated with the hired marketing research firm and oversaw the data collection process in the field. The digital survey was created in English and later translated, with the help of the marketing research agency, into the two prominent dialects of Gujarati and Kannada, respectively, used in the two targeted states.

The data were collected by field administrators using a tablet. During the survey process, members other than the participant were asked to leave the room to avoid influencing the participant's response. Mothers with at least one child aged between 11 and 17 qualified for the survey. Overall, 317 participants (163 from Gujarat) were recruited to participate in the study, and 301 responses (153 in Gujarati and 148 in Kannada) were used for this survey after removing incomplete responses.

The average age of the 301 respondents was 38.5 years (SD = 6.23); 38% of the mothers had one child, and 37% had two children. Further, over half of the sample (60.1%) had a secondary school or lower level of education, with most mothers (41.2%) reporting secondary grade (grades 8–12) as the highest education received. Only 20.6% of the participants received an undergraduate degree. Note that this sample's educational levels were much lower than the academic level of the representatives from the U.S. sample. Most children (78.7%) were enrolled in a private school, whereas only 20.6% were enrolled in a public school, which is starkly different from the U.S. sample, where most of the students were enrolled in public schools. The children's mean age was 13.75 (SD = 2.15), and the modal age was 11 (21.6%).

4.2 | Measurement scales

4.2.1 | Social media usage

To understand how social media use affects empowerment, we captured active or passive use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or other social media sites via survey questions (Li, 2016). Passive use (3 items; $\alpha = .88$) was determined by statements such as 'I read the forwards' and 'I read group messages'. Active use (4 items; $\alpha = .89$) was established by the response to statements such as 'I respond to friends' group messages' and 'I participate in my child's school message groups'. These statements were scored on a 5-point 'never' to 'always' scale. The mean score was calculated for passive use and active use. Given the popularity of WhatsApp in India and other countries outside the U.S., we adapted the social media use scales by Li (2016) to measure active or passive WhatsApp use.[1]

4.2.2 | Empowerment

Li (2016) and Leung (2009) referred to intrapersonal empowerment as demonstrating self-efficacy, control, and perceived competence. An example item used to measure self-efficacy (5 items; $\alpha = .90$) includes 'I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events'. Control (2 items; $r = .50$) was measured using items such as 'I enjoy making my own decisions', and perceived competence (3 items; $\alpha = .88$) was measured using items such as 'I am often a leader in groups'.

Interactional empowerment was measured through collective action and interpersonal relationships. An example item for collective action (3 items; $\alpha = .68$) is 'Power in the online community lies in the relationships between people', and interpersonal relationships (3 items; $\alpha = .71$) were measured using items such as 'Only by working together can people get power to exert influence in the online community'. The level of agreement toward these statements was recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree (Leung, 2009; Li, 2016).

Additional variables, including family income and the mother's education, were captured.

4.2.3 | Educational expenditure

We recorded U.S. parents' responses to the question 'How much do you spend on education for your oldest teenage child last year?' and measured them on an ordinal scale of 'less than $250' with increments of $250 up to '$2000 and more'.

In India, this was measured by assessing the money spent on school fees (₹) for the oldest child between 11 and 17 years. As it was a personnel-administered survey, it was easier to gather specific expenditure data (compared with the online survey conducted for Study 1).

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Results of Study 1 from the U.S.

5.1.1 | Descriptive statistics

The average age of the U.S. mothers who participated in the study was 40 years, and 63.2% of the participants had an annual household income of $75,000 or less. Further, 50% of the respondents worked a full-time job, while 36% of the mothers did not work for wages—56% of the respondents held at least a college degree, 27% of the mothers had only one child, 86% were white, and 75% of the mothers were married when they took the survey. The majority (87%) of the parents reported having adolescents attending school enrolled in grades between 7 and 11. Of the 182 participants, 98% of the mothers owned a smartphone, and all participants had access to some form of social media. Among them, 90% of the participants used social media regularly, while others occasionally used it. See Table 2 for details.

5.1.2 | Regression results

We tested the model using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2013) with a bootstrap of 5000 samples. Model 4 is a mediation model that accommodates multiple mediators (here, dimensions of empowerment). We included income as a covariate. In Hypothesis 1, we suggested that active use led to intrapersonal empowerment (self-efficacy, perceived competence, and control). In Hypothesis 2, we suggested active and passive use increased interactional empowerment (collective action and interpersonal relationships). We found some support for our hypotheses as active use led to higher self-efficacy (β (CI) = .22 [.04, .40]) and perceived competence (β (CI) = .24 [.03, .44]) but had no significant effect on control (β (CI) = .07 [−.10, .23]), partially supporting Hypothesis 1. Instead, we found that passive use had a significant impact on control (β (CI) = .18 [.03, .34]). Next, we found that passive use significantly impacted interactional variables but not active use. Passive use led to higher collective action (β (CI) = .19 [.05, .33]) and interpersonal relationships (β (CI) = .19 [.07, .32]), supporting Hypothesis 2b. We found partial support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 (Figure 1).

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of survey Study 1 (U.S.) and Study 2 (India)

|	Study 1		Study 2	
	Mean (SD)	Alpha	Mean (SD)	Alpha
Active use (4 items)	2.83 (1.07)	.88	4.14 (.97)	.88
Passive use (3 items)	3.13 (1.10)	.85	3.90 (.90)	.88
Self-efficacy (5 items)	3.47 (.96)	.92	4.19 (.92)	.93
Perceived competence (3 items)	3.14 (1.13)	.88	3.30 (1.26)	.89
Control (2/3 items)	3.97 (.88)	.50**	4.15 (1.14)	.90
Collective action (3 items)	3.46 (.80)	.68	3.15 (1.50)	.93
Interpersonal relationship (3 items)	3.67 (.74)	.71	3.04 (1.52)	.94

**Correlation significant at $p < .001$.
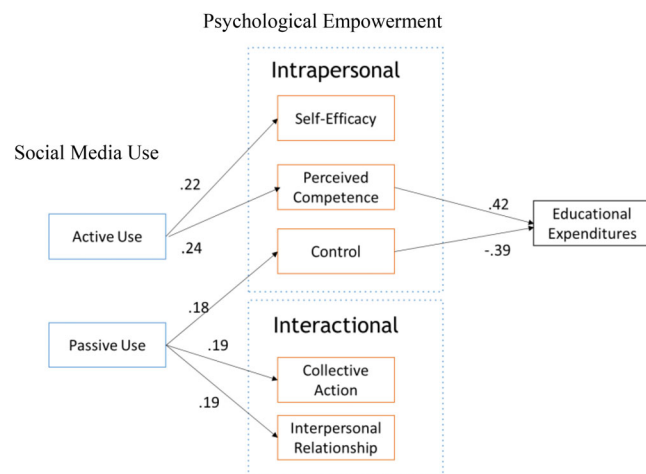
FIGURE 1 Psychological empowerment as a mediator; results from Study 1 (U.S.)

In Hypothesis 3, we predicted that intrapersonal empowerment would lead to higher education expenditures among U.S. mothers. In support of our hypothesis, we found that perceived competence, a key dimension of intrapersonal empowerment, led to increased educational expenditures (β (CI) = .42 [.04, .80]) (Figure 1). There is no effect of interactional empowerment on educational expenditures (collective action: $p = .30$; interpersonal relationship: $p = .49$), as expected. However, self-efficacy did not significantly increase educational expenditures ($p = .81$). Control somewhat reduced educational expenditures ($p = .08$). While income had a significant impact on educational expenditures (β (CI) = .13 [.00, .26]), its effect was still smaller than that of psychological empowerment. We did not find any indirect effect of Internet use on educational expenditures. Overall, Hypothesis 3 is also partially supported. Details of the other insignificant relationships can be found in Table 3.

5.2 | Results of Study 2 from India

5.2.1 | Descriptive statistics

The percentage of Indian mothers who did not earn an income for the household was about 57%, while approximately 40% were employed. On the other hand, 97.5% of fathers were employed and earned an income. The mean annual educational expenditure was ₹ 44,242 (SD = 39,856), indicating a wide variance in the socioeconomic status in our sample. Overall, 42% of the surveyed mothers stated that WhatsApp as their primary social media option, while 5.3% mentioned that they use it but not regularly. Nearly 70% of WhatsApp users are a part of their child's school or other education-related groups. Furthermore, 34% of these mothers either only or primarily used WhatsApp for this purpose. A majority (89%) also use WhatsApp to share and receive daily news.

5.2.2 | Regression results

Like Study 1, we tested the hypothesis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2013) with a bootstrap of 5000 samples. Income was included as a covariate. We found that active WhatsApp use led to higher self-efficacy (β (CI) = .52 [.31, .72]) and control (β (CI) = .49 [.33, .64]) but had no significant effect on perceived competence (β (CI) = .12 [−.15, .39]). Instead, we found that passive use had a significant impact on perceived competence (β (CI) = .35 [.08, .63]). Replicating findings from the previous studies, we found that passive use alone had a significant impact on interpersonal relationships (β (CI) = .34 [.01, .67]) and a marginally significant effect on collective action (β (CI) = .27 [−.04, .59]). Once again, we found partial support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. See Figure 2.

In Hypothesis 4, we predicted that interactional empowerment (collective action and interpersonal relationships) of Indian mothers would lead to higher education expenditures. Indeed, we found that a collective action led to higher educational expenditure (β (CI) = 7234.16 [236.44, 14231.88]), supporting Hypothesis 4. However, self-efficacy (component of intrapersonal empowerment) reduced educational expenditure (β (CI) = −12845.87 [−200033.42, −5658.33]). We further found that active use also indirectly reduced educational expenditure through self-efficacy (β (CI) = −6641.31 [−12266.28, −1866.72]) and that income had a significant impact only on educational expenditure (β (CI) = .03 [.01, .05]). See Figure 2. Details of the other relationships can be found in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Regression results of Study 1 (U.S.) and Study 2 (India)

IV	DV	Study 1: US data		Study 2: India data	
		Estimate	p value	Estimate	p value
Active use	Self-efficacy	**0.22**	**.02**	**0.52**	**.00**
	Perceived competence	**0.24**	**.03**	0.12	.37
	Control	0.07	.43	**0.49**	**.00**
	Collective action	0.11	.14	0.08	.61
	Interpersonal relationships	0.07	.31	0.08	.62
Passive use	Self-efficacy	0.09	.30	−0.03	.80
	Perceived competence	0.17	.10	**0.35**	**.01**
	Control	**0.18**	**.02**	**0.09**	**.00**
	Collective action	**0.19**	**.01**	**0.27**	**.09**
	Interpersonal relationships	**0.19**	**.00**	**0.34**	**.05**
Active use	Educational expenditure	0.02	.93	2788.45	.52
Passive use		0.15	.48	3312.98	.40
Self-efficacy		−0.05	.81	**−12,845.87**	**.00**
Perceived competence		**0.42**	**.03**	1251.57	.66
Control		**−0.39**	**.08**	−1995.59	.66
Collective action		0.29	.30	**7234.16**	**.04**
Interpersonal relationships		0.20	.49	−4479.99	.19
Control variable					
Income	Educational expenditure	**0.13**	**.05**	**0.03**	**.01**

Note: Bold indicates statistically significant value with $p < .10$.
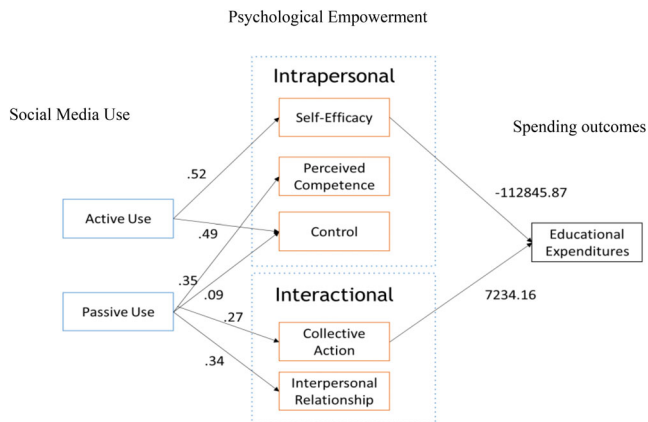
FIGURE 2 Psychological empowerment as a mediator; results from Study 2 (India)

6 | DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 suggest that active use of social media among U.S. mothers increases perceived competence, leading to increased investment in adolescent children's education. Alternatively, passive use of social media increases the perception of control, belief in collective action and strengthens interpersonal relationships. However, none of the factors arising from passive use leads to increased investment in adolescent children's education. In partial contradiction to our expectations (Hypothesis 2), we found that passive, rather than active, social media use significantly influenced control, an intrapersonal empowerment variable.

We find in Study 2 that passive use of social media by Indian mothers increases interactional and intrapersonal empowerment, but only active use increases intrapersonal empowerment. That is, active use of social media increases higher self-efficacy and control. Passive use of social media, on the other hand, increases perceived competence, belief in collective action and strengthens interpersonal relationships. However, we found that interactional, rather than intrapersonal, empowerment drives educational expenditures in India. Focusing on psychological empowerment provides insight into how and why social media has a differential impact on different cultures. Specifically, we found that interactional (vs. intrapersonal) empowerment positively affects educational expenditures in collectivist cultures such as India. Moreover, active use reduces educational expenditures with increased self-efficacy in India, while passive use increases educational expenses through increased collective action, posing some interesting implications.

7 | CONCLUSION

7.1 | Main findings

Consumers use information from the Internet to resist authority and build expertise (Schneider-Kamp & Askegaard, 2021). The Internet

has decentralized power, and some of it has transferred from large institutions to consumers. Consumers use this power to question and comment on top-down diktats (Shankar et al., 2006). Essentially, Internet empowers its users to take actions with belief and confidence. In the case of mothers in India, we find that social media use enables mother's decisions in spending on children's education, feeling confident that such an action will pay-off in the long-run. The power of Internet is even more evident in women with lower autonomy.

As of January 2020, India had close to 700 million Internet users, and 40% were women (Statista.com, 2021), whereas the U.S. had 288 million, and 90% were women. Traditionally, women in India are excluded from family-related decisions. Despite their significant contributions to family members wellbeing, Indian women enjoy limited rights, and their views are rarely acknowledged (Olivier, 2011). Our study demonstrates the cost, where a less empowered mother may not negotiate higher investments for her child's education, thus limiting the child's future earnings potential and the family's growth and wellbeing. We further demonstrate that this outcome can be changed through a mother's increased use of social media. Indian mothers can better exercise the freedom to organize collective action and develop relationships (interactional empowerment). Such empowered outcomes can shift their role in the household, as seen with increased educational expenditures.

7.2 | Implications for theory

From a theoretical standpoint, we extend the psychological empowerment theory to explain and build a theory on media use. Psychological empowerment is a broad theory that accounts for an individual's abilities and influences of their surroundings (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2015). A mother's level of psychological empowerment could affect a child's marketplace purchase tendencies, such as materialism or brand associations. Studies have also highlighted the wide variance of the impact of social media use on individuals (Beyens et al., 2020). Recent studies have explored individual difference factors such as personality (Pagani et al., 2011), focusing on self, and social identity expressiveness to provide insights into such variance. In another conceptual paper (Verduyn et al., 2022), factors such as demographics (gender and age) and traits such as social comparison tendency were proposed to explain the varying impact of social media use. These papers highlight the possibility that active vs. passive use could have different effects based on a user's background. Similarly, in our study with the U.S. (vs. India) sample, we found that a mother's active (vs. passive) use of social media results in the likelihood of spending more on her child's education. More importantly, we find that levels of empowerment induced by social media mediate this outcome and that the form of empowerment triggered varies by the cultural orientation (individualistic vs. collectivist) where intrapersonal empowerment has a positive relationship with educational expenditures in the U.S. while

TABLE 4 Comparing results of Study 1 (U.S.) and Study 2 (India)

Similarities between India and the U.S.

Active use of social media → self-efficacy (a dimension of intrapersonal empowerment)

Passive use of social media → collective action, interpersonal relationships (dimensions of interactional empowerment)

Differences between India and the U.S.

India	*The United States*
• Active use of social media → control	• Active use of social media → perceived competence
• Collective action → increased children's educational expenditures	• Perceived competence → increased children's educational expenditures
• Active use → self-efficacy → reduced children's educational expenditures	• Active use → increased children's educational expenditures

interactional empowerment has a positive relationship with educational expenditures in India.

Our findings are consistent with Robert et al. (2000) 's multinational study on the effects of empowerment in the workplace. The authors found that empowerment was negatively associated with job satisfaction in India compared to Mexico, the U.S., and Poland. Robert et al. (2000) also suggested that individualism and power distance explain these cross-cultural findings. In our data from the U.S., increased educational expenditures by mothers from active social media use is mediated by intrapersonal empowerment (perceived competence). In India, the relationship between passive media use and educational expenditures is mediated by interactional empowerment (collective action and interpersonal relationships). See Table 4 for a summary of the comparisons.

By extending the theory of psychological empowerment to examine educational expenditures, we show that psychological empowerment plays a critical role in other consumer empowerment contexts than previously studied, namely, climate protective behaviour (Hartmann et al., 2018), goal-directed behaviour (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012), retail energy markets (Ioannidou, 2018), or corporate social responsibility (Lee et al., 2021). These studies emphasize the role of the individual dimension or intrapersonal dimension of psychological empowerment in influencing consumer choices while acknowledging the importance of interactional empowerment. By testing and demonstrating how interactional empowerment affects consumer choices, our study contributes to consumer empowerment literature. Fock et al. (2011) argued that it is essential to understand how each dimension of psychological empowerment influences decisions and behaviours. Intrapersonal empowerment examined in this study, which most studies have generically referred to as 'empowerment', takes the view from an individualistic and Western standpoint of empowerment. However, as discovered in Study 2, we found that consumption decisions in India are influenced via communal engagement rather than by individual-based empowerment. Thus, our study

motivates researchers to treat a consumer not just as an individual but as an individual embedded in a societal context and use the societal levers to achieve their goals.

7.3 | Implications for marketers and society

A critical implication of this study is the broader societal need to encourage mothers to have a lead voice in making critical decisions such as education expenditure for their children. In particular, mothers who actively interact on social media, even small or one-to-one relational social media interactions, could be converted to empowered mothers making critical decisions that may increase the mobility of their future generation. We found that active social media use increases self-efficacy and competence (intrapersonal empowerment), while passive use creates a sense of belonging (interactional empowerment). Being informed and networked can empower mothers to have a more significant say in the decision-making process within the household. More importantly, we demonstrate that social media can play a crucial empowering role, compensating for the lack of formal education or income level, which earlier studies have shown to predict spending strongly. For Indian mothers, the capacity for collective voice and action has emerged as vital for addressing the multiplicity of constraints underpinning their disadvantaged societal position. It can have direct economic payoffs, allowing mothers to realize economies of scale to their productive efforts and contribute to more sustainable livelihoods (Pandolfelli et al., 2008). The long-term implications of reducing inequality for future generations can result from empowering mothers, regardless of their current social status. Here, where the ceiling is created through income and education status, we showed that encouraging social media use and increasing education spending can potentially shatter such social barriers.

Social media use can be increased by helping users develop a positive attitude toward its usage (Ju et al., 2021). This can be created by simplifying the social media interface and making it useful for the customer. Further, as more consumers use a particular social media channel, network effects will draw other customers, similar to the case of WhatsApp in India (Ju et al., 2021).

Other implications for businesses could be demonstrated through women entrepreneurs. Social media networks may compensate for gender-specific deficits of real-world networks. Furthermore, marketers and policymakers seeking to make a difference in consumers' lives could begin by encouraging and providing means for women to participate in social media actively. For instance, our findings support the intentions of Google's 'Internet *Saathi*' program, working on expanding women's digital literacy.

7.4 | Limitations and future research

In this study, we have focused on educational choices. Nevertheless, empowerment is contextual and shaped by an individual's environment. It can vary from one life situation or life role to another (Hu & Leung, 2003).

Therefore, it is possible that a mother feeling empowered to make educational decisions may not feel the same about health decisions or vice versa. Future studies should examine this framework in other contexts. A drawback of empowerment is that feelings of power may lead to people acting without deliberating their actions (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Some of these actions might not be desirable. Thus, future research should consider the negative impact of empowerment. While we consider social media use in this study, media literacy may determine its ability to use it. In the future, researchers could consider media literacy and its impact on social media use and empowerment. Another limitation of the study is that we collected data on different social media platforms in the U.S. and India based on popularity. Future studies could consider examining one common platform or the inclusion of multiple platforms across countries.

The dynamics of the gender roles are critical in the decision-making process, and the husbands' position was not considered in this study. It would be beneficial to consider their spouses' role in future studies to paint a complete picture of decision-making in the household. Another limitation of this study is the focus on WhatsApp in India and Facebook in the U.S. These are examples of the most widely used social media platforms in each country. While it might be worth considering different forms of social media, it would also be necessary to extend our findings from those in this study to others to generalize our conclusions further.

Similarly, even within the U.S., it is essential to examine the subtleties between ethnicities, such as the wide academic gaps between students from different races. Hence, it is imperative to understand parents' role (including investing in education) in driving these observed outcomes in their children. Future research should examine how social media can empower mothers, especially those considered underrepresented minorities, as informed by the psychological empowerment theory observed in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTE

[1] In India and other Asian countries WhatsApp is a popular social media tool and one of the most widely used social media messaging applications globally. Two billion people use WhatsApp, surpassing 1.3 billion Facebook users (Ovide, 2020). WhatsApp, owned by Facebook, is a personal messenger app with private and group chat options. Moreover, there are 400 million WhatsApp users in India, which is significantly more than the 350 million Facebook users (Singh, 2020). Schools have formed parent groups on WhatsApp, and teachers use the groups as a platform to share information on homework, school-related activities, among other things (Attari, 2017).

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