

# DIGITAL ILLUSTRATIONS AS A MEDIUM OF SOCIAL AWARENESS, WITH RELATION TO WOMEN'S ISSUES

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Received 21 April 2022

Accepted 09 June 2022

Published 14 June 2022

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.121](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.121)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

Digital illustration, a dominant form of digital art, has been an accessible and widespread means of expression. This has become a vital tool to propagate ideas owing its popularity to its highly intelligible nature. Digital illustrations have enlarged the prospects of artistic creation and constitute a field in which we see possibilities for future research. The paper surveys how people of Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh, aged between 16 to 27 years perceive the idea of spreading awareness related to women through digital illustrations on social media. The study explores and brings conclusions through surveys and interviews about the potential of digital illustrations in instigating awareness by bringing attention to the challenges faced by women. Visual communication is the strongest medium to communicate in the present era. The study finds that the art of digital illustration has the ability to provoke unconventional thoughts in an ever-growing social media user base. However, the study also finds that for digital artists, recognition for their original work remains challenging.

**Keywords:** Digital Illustrations, Digital Artists, Social Awareness, Women Issues, Social Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, several Indian digital artists are mobilizing the public's attention by sharing illustrations related to various social issues. Our research introduces the importance of digital illustrations in addressing the challenges faced by women in Indian society. It's important to understand if a form of art- which has a purpose to fulfil and an audience to positively impact, manages to succeed. For this, it will be necessary to not just find out about the audience's perspective, so as to see how they perceive illustrations on social issues but to also get aware of the intention of these artists. Our key objectives are as follows:

- 1) To understand the perspective of the audience of digital illustrations and find out if it has the potential to stimulate empathy and drive social change.
- 2) To understand the contribution of Indian digital illustrators and their perspective in creating art related to women's issues in India

Humans are visual creatures and are proficient in processing visual information. With the advancements in technology in today's world, it's fair to say that the future of communication is visual and so is the past. Ellis (2018) suggests that visual communication can be traced back to the stone age. The early humans communicated visually, cave paintings and illustrations etched on stones being the oldest known forms, since they had yet to develop verbal skills. In the Palaeolithic period, mankind already illustrated walls and land surfaces to express themselves and share information in context to their everyday lives. Historians are not sure whether they used visuals to communicate with other humans or with their deities. But it has been observed that even early humans have shown a tendency to convey messages or ideas via visuals. Following that human societies throughout the ages have efficiently used different forms of visuals to share ideas and tell stories. The ways of communication and the ability of humans to perceive things changed drastically with evolution, but illustration remains one of the most pertinent methods to convey messages.

In this digital era where technologies have opened new possibilities for art, an illustration is worth many words as our brains require visual stimulations to evoke a memory and emotions. Illustrations are an outlet of creative communication that perform the pivotal function of both informing and entertaining an audience through widespread integration on social media platforms. From painting on cave walls to drawings made on paper, then printing technology, illustrations have gone through their own metamorphosis and now evolved gradually into digital art pieces. They have come a long way from signs on cave walls to highly detailed creations made on graphic tablets.

### **1.1. CONTEXT IN INDIA**

Although digital illustrations entered India years after it got introduced in the west, it didn't take long for digital artists to start giving their Indian touch to illustrations. Social media helped them grow and soon artists started to find the right audience to display their work. Although it's still a fairly new medium to work on, the rise of Indian digital illustrators is constant. The market is now growing with several software's and gadgets dedicated specifically for digital illustrations. Software's like Adobe Illustrator, Corel Draw, and Autodesk Sketchbook; gadgets like graphic tablets, touchscreen laptops marketed as drawing gadgets, and Apple's iPad are some of the well-known gadgets used in this field.

With visual-based platforms like Instagram, artists are finding a comfortable space to not just share their art with the world but to also build an audience and interact with them. It's often said that one needs to learn the art of balance to lead a healthy life. Art on social media also seems to be maintaining such a balance. There are Indian digital illustrators that are focused on engaging their audience with comic arts, drawing their daily lives, or portraying their perspectives through art. On some days they take the audience on a nostalgic stroll and sometimes they just leave the audience with a feeling of being understood. On the other hand, some illustrators use their voices as an artist to talk about important political and social issues. They make the audience aware of issues that may often be overlooked. And their art often

makes even a dark truth appear. These digitally made illustrations don't just visualize ideas but also communicate complex information in an easy-to-understand manner. For years, political cartoonists have been conveying their perspectives and talking about current issues through their cartoons weaved with satire. Therefore, a practice like this is not unique to the digital era.

## **1.2. DIGITAL ILLUSTRATIONS FOR RESISTANCE AND AWARENESS**

Rani (2018) believes that the digital medium has only stretched the boundaries of contemporary art. According to her, digital art involves numerous artistic explorations, and she considers it an art movement of great potential since the virtual medium is more accessible. Digital technology, hence, is a new form of mass communication, not just a tool for combining different art forms.

Sahni (2020) notes that in the digital era, the art of resistance has gone through a revolution. Artists don't have to wait to be a part of an important exhibition now. Instead, they now have a free and open space where they can showcase their works. Since, digitally, the intimidation of censorship does not hinder their artistic practices, several artists are coming forward to use their voices for change. The option of anonymity adds a layer of safety to be able to be brutally honest with their art. With the advent of social media, every artist gets the platform to showcase their work to a much larger audience. This helps digital art create a bigger impact which can be almost instantaneous. Traditional media lacks this kind of swift reach as it takes much more time to be appreciated by the people. Digital Art is an umbrella term for several art forms like digital paintings, webcomics, motion graphics, digital illustrations, etc. This research will focus on digital illustrations in particular.

Dey (2017) believes that art is a powerful means of expression, and it has the power to break barriers, change preconceived notions and bring about great changes. With the increasing popularity of social media, emerging artists have found new ways to make their voices heard and extend support for marginalized communities and unspoken issues. Indian digital illustrators are now creating powerful art on themes ranging from resistance, caste discrimination, political commentary, rights of marginalized communities, feminism, and even art for protest and digital activism. The most recent ones that gained a significant amount of attention and shares in 2020 were illustrations based on protests against, CAA-NRC, Farm Bills, etc. R (2020) in an interview finds that on social media platforms like Instagram, digital illustration artists can use their skills and perspectives to raise awareness about women's issues. And some artists do choose to use their voices in this direction. This includes issues such as domestic abuse, women's safety, female foeticide, menstruation, and many more.

## **1.3. ILLUSTRATIONS AND WOMEN'S ISSUES**

Women have contributed and made the country reach greater heights in almost every discipline where their work has been recognized and appreciated. However, the harsh reality is that women still face challenges in Indian society in terms of gender biases, education, pay parity, domestic violence, sexual harassment, etc. Social media has the potential to bring attention to these issues and tear down old stereotypes that currently exist. Many Indian digital artists are mobilizing the public's attention by sharing illustrations related to the sufferings of women that are under-reported in the conventional media. Artists are making deliberate attempts to shape the public's opinion towards the complex issues that women face in their

everyday lives. Their digital illustrations showcase the vulnerability of victims when they feel broken, abused, beaten down, or trapped. With sensitivity and skill for giving meaningful insights, issues such as dowry deaths, rapes, and female foeticide find a prominent voice in the form of illustrations.

Nayek (2020) finds that many feminist artists of the digital space believe in enhancing the visibility of the subdued and uncomfortable truths about a feminine existence. What needs to be noted is that the social media sites which often turn into a platform for cyberbullying by sexual predators have been utilized as a scope to be 'visible'. We find it extremely appropriate here to acknowledge a few such Indian illustration artists that are popularly known by their social media usernames, such as artists Bakery Prasad, Divya Seshadri, Smish Designs, Illustrious, and Afsaana E Hoor. In this research, we talk in detail with such artists and what pushes them to keep working in this direction. We try to understand the way the audience perceives their digital illustrations.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. QUANTITATIVE APPROACH**

In order to get an unbiased and clear perspective of the audience of online digital illustrations, an online survey was conducted via Google forms. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to honestly represent the perspective of Indian youngsters as a whole. Hence, we conducted the audience survey in our respective states i.e Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand. Youngsters between the age of 16 to 27 were approached through a Random Sampling Method. The selected age group is the most familiar with social media, which is one of the major platforms used for sharing digital illustrations. They also have a developing mindset, so it will be interesting to find out if socially inclined digital illustrations are fulfilling their purpose by positively impacting them in any way. This makes them the ideal sample for this survey. This particular method was used because it allowed all the units in the population to have an equal chance of being selected.

101 youngsters from each state participated in the survey. For this, we circulated our online survey forms among youngsters of the same age group and asked them to spread it further. Apart from sharing the form online, we also sought help from different sources to get a larger number of participants. For Chhattisgarh, college professors were contacted to share the survey form with youngsters from different parts of the state. In Uttarakhand, NGO Aagaaz was contacted to share the survey forms with their existing and former volunteers between the age of 16 to 27. Since this was completely an online research, we also used the geolocation feature on social media platforms and contacted people from the two states. The forms were shared only after confirming the age and location of the approached person.

For the survey, close-ended questions like Yes-No questions, Likert scale, and Multiple-Choice Questions were prepared to better understand the audience's preferences. The main focus was to see the participant's familiarity with digital illustrations and their take on their effectiveness.

Questions asked were of the following type:

'Has a digital illustration ever induced a thought or emotion in you?'

'How often have you come across digital illustrations related to women's issues on social media?'

Among thirteen close-ended questions, one open-ended question was included to find out which women-related issue needs to be addressed through illustrations according to the participants.

## 2.2. QUALITATIVE APPROACH

To cover both sides of the coin, digital illustration artists were also approached to get the artist's point of view. For this, we conducted brief online semi-structured interviews with illustration artists. We used the Purposive Sampling Method for this approach. Our main focus was Indian artists; therefore, we searched for and went through the social media profiles of various illustrators. Later, we segregated them according to the themes that they were found working on and selected the ones that worked on social awareness in any way. Among these, we further filtered illustrators that had worked on women-related issues. Among five artists that were finally selected and approached, two gave us a detailed account of their experience as illustration artists.

In our semi-structured interviews, we asked the illustrators about their inspiration and intention behind creating art on important issues. It's highly unlikely for the whole population to agree with their perspective, therefore we also asked them about the challenges that they face when they make their art publicly available for everyone to see.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

As discussed in the methodology, a total of 202 youngsters participated in the survey and completed the questionnaire. This total population represents the youngsters from Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh, with 101 respondents from each state. [Table 1](#) shows the percentage of female and male respondents from Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh respectively.

**Table 1**

Table 1 Female and male respondents from Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh		
State	Female respondents (in %)	Male respondents (in %)
Uttarakhand	54.5	45.5
Chhattisgarh	59.4	40.6

The objective of the research is to understand how people perceive digital illustrations that they encounter on social media. When we asked the respondents about their preferred choice of social media, 71 and 76 per cent of the sample from Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand respectively, reported that they primarily use Instagram. It was followed by Facebook and Twitter.

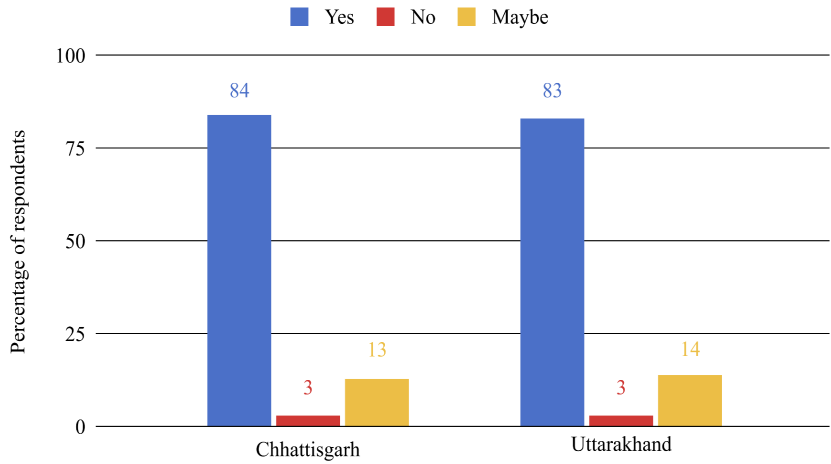
93.1 percent of the sample from Uttarakhand and 84.2 per cent of the respondents from Chhattisgarh admitted that they have seen digital art being used as a tool for social awareness on social media. Even though the majority of our respondents have seen digital art related to social issues on their social media feed, only 24 per cent of the respondents from Chhattisgarh and 23 per cent from Uttarakhand were familiar with any Indian digital artists. In terms of the significance of digital illustrations, 79 per cent of the sample from Uttarakhand agreed that it is a source of infotainment for them (information with entertainment). On the other hand, only 66.3 per cent of the respondents from Chhattisgarh considered that digital illustrations are informative as well as entertaining. Respondents were also asked if they think social media is a good platform to raise social awareness. 93 per cent of the respondents from Uttarakhand and 91.1 per cent from Chhattisgarh

consider that social media is an effective platform to spread awareness. There is no significant difference between the data here.

The respondents were also asked if a digital illustration has ever induced a thought or emotion in them. More than 80 per cent of the respondents from both states answered yes to it. [Figure 1](#) shows the percentage of respondents to the given question.

**Figure 1**

Has a digital illustration ever induced a thought or emotion in you?

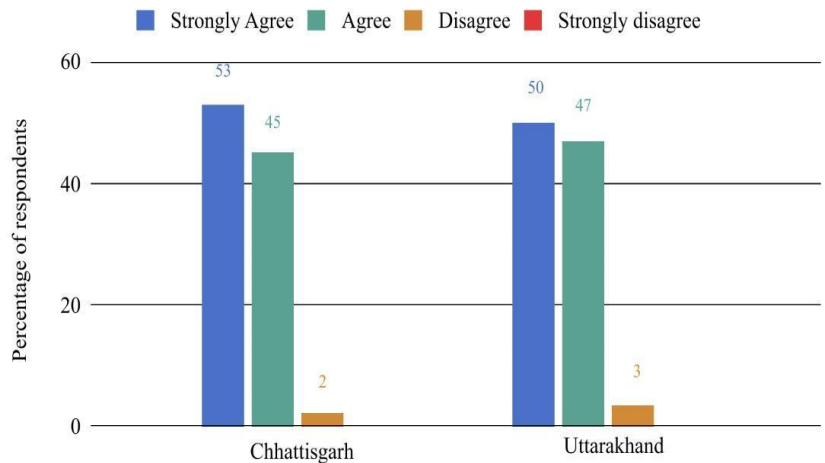


**Figure 1** The graph depicts the responses to one of the questions included in the survey. In this graph, Y-axis depicts the percentage of the respondents while X-axis shows their responses, each bar representing one option each (Yes, No, and Maybe).

We also asked the respondents to tell the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the statement "Digital illustrations addressing women's issues can make a positive difference". The responses are shown in [Figure 2](#).

**Figure 2**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Digital illustrations addressing women issues can make a positive difference."



**Figure 2** The graph depicts the responses to a 4-point Likert scale question.

Y-axis depicts the percentage of the respondents while X-axis shows the state-wise responses, each bar representing one point of the scale to understand whether the audience of digital illustrations agree or disagree with this statement. It should be noted that 0 % of the respondents Strongly Disagreed with the statement.

When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement: "Digital illustration artists play an important role by using their voice to spread awareness and talk about sensitive issues", 98 per cent and 96 per cent of the respondents from Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand agreed with the given statement, respectively. The remaining respondents disagreed.

We also posed an open-ended question to inquire which women-related issues deserve more attention that should be addressed often. The responses show a wide variety of women's issues that have been of major concern for years. The key issues that were mentioned were rape, molestation, domestic violence, education, inequality, menstruation, women's health, and hygiene.

One respondent from Uttarakhand noted that religious and cultural taboos related to menstruation need to be addressed through digital illustrations on social media. A respondent from Chhattisgarh pointed out that female foeticide is a major issue in various parts of society today and it deserves serious attention.

### **3.2. FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEW**

We interviewed two Indian illustration artists- Illustrious and Afsaana E Hoor. Like many artists, they preferred to use their artist pseudonyms or usernames along with their art rather than their original names. They create art on social issues and try to use their voice to talk about challenges faced by women as well.

Artist Tanzeela who is known as Afsaana E Hoor calls herself "a hijabi doodler". Apart from being an illustrator and sharing her art on Instagram, she works as an Art Director in an advertising agency. She creates illustrations on several women's issues and gives her personal touch to them. Most of her characters are hijabi women which is closely linked to her identity. In the interview when we asked her about her inspiration, she replied "I want to tell stories, I want to sketch the reality of women. Often people don't understand the essence of the story or the misery that our gender goes through". When the same question was asked to Illustrious, who is a designer by profession, she said that she is "a thinking artist who would want to be a part of a change in society". She added by saying, "My art would be hollow if it wouldn't reflect the society that I live in and how it affects me".

Illustrious says that her main intention behind making illustrations on social issues is to reach out to as many people as possible and create a positive impact even if it has the power to change merely one person. Although, when it comes to Afsaana E Hoor, her intention is for people to start believing that there is more to her identity than just a scarf or her religion. She says that she expects people to understand that minority women have to go through things on the terms and conditions of their gender and identity. "We are not oppressed or muted", she adds. She wants to use the digital platform as a means of communication with everyone and seek an opportunity to present her case to a larger audience.

Illustrious says that social media helps amplify thoughts since it helps the audience to connect their emotions to a visual and share what they actually have been feeling but haven't been able to express. When we asked her if she ever finds herself censoring her art, she answered, "The way our country has moved in terms of the idea of freedom of expression, it does stop me and makes me filter my

thoughts". She further said that sometimes she tries to package them in a different form since she would like to be a long-term soldier than being shut down because of one post. She also revealed that she faces haters from time to time but chooses to avoid them. She prefers making art that is not "too on the face and has subliminal messaging".

Illustrious says that digital art is faster as compared to the conventional art. Both artists believe that digital illustrations are also easier to reproduce and share. Artist Afsaana E Hoor says that this advantage turns into a drawback when people tend to underestimate the time and energy that goes behind this form of art. She adds by saying, "If it is accessible to a majority of people it usually becomes cheap and then sold without the knowledge of the artist".

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL ILLUSTRATIONS**

Our findings revealed that it was through social media that a total of 88.6% of the sample population were familiar with digital illustrations used as a medium for social awareness. Out of the total sample population of 202 of the two states, the majority of people i.e., 149 participants revealed that Instagram was their preferred choice of social media. It was important to find this out, given that digital art is primarily shared online. With this result, we can confirm which is the most popular platform in current times for the exchange of powerful art. It's safe to say that Instagram is a visual platform mainly focused on images and videos, hence it would be an ideal place for one to find visual storytelling through art. It also makes illustrations easy to share and makes them accessible to all, not just all over India but also all around the world. Different kinds of audiences find such illustrations on their feed or Discover page. This helps artists to create and share illustrations on current issues as well as stay relevant to the audience.

### **4.2. EFFECTIVENESS OF ILLUSTRATIONS BASED ON WOMEN'S ISSUES- THE AUDIENCE'S PERSPECTIVE**

The major question we set out to answer in this study is whether digital illustrations create awareness related to women's issues through social media platforms. Indeed, we found it from the responses to our survey that digital illustrations possess the potential to create and spread awareness. On average, 82% of respondents in the two states believed that it was important to address women's issues through social media. And the majority of the sample confirmed that illustrations depicting the challenges of women can be an effective medium to bring a positive change. Among the 202 respondents, 72.2% of them appreciated digital illustrations as a form of social awareness because it was both entertaining as well as informative. We can therefore say that the audience understands the value of such illustrations. They do not accept it merely for its aesthetic value but go beyond that to acquire the information that the artwork tries to provide. Clearly, visual information tends to appear more appealing and interactive. This makes the audience accept even serious discussions in a presentable format that ends up engaging them. A significant revelation was that although around 97% of people believe that digital illustration artists play an important role by using their voice to raise awareness, only 37.1 per cent of them are familiar with Indian digital illustrators. This shows that even though the audience understands the value of their work, they hardly recognize them. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that illustrations indeed help convey an intended message to the audience more



effectively since it manages to induce a thought or emotion, as the survey results revealed.

### 4.3. DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION ARTISTS AND THEIR PERCEPTION

Figure 3



Figure 3 Art by Illustrious Made for Youth Ki Awaaz Depicting the Sanitary Needs of School-Going Girls from Economically Weaker Sections.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Art by Afsaana E Hoor Depicts the Rise in Domestic Abuse During the Lockdown.

Art by Afsaana E Hoor depicts the rise in domestic abuse during the lockdown.

By interviewing the two artists, we found that both of them share similar challenges when it comes to creating illustrations. There's a significant amount of thought which goes behind creating art on crucial issues since they don't just focus on communicating their thoughts but also take care of the audience's perspective and try not to offend them in any manner. Instead of directly talking about a topic, they tone it down through their depictions of the situation and communicate it accordingly. From this, we understand how artists manage to depict even crucial current issues effectively. We also got to know that while creating art related to women's issues, artists find their inspirations either from the reality around them or their own personal experiences which helps them connect with the audience even more.

Digital illustrations have many pros. For instance, they are accessible to all, easily shareable, and they bridge the gap between the artist and the audience. But it has its fair share of cons since it is easily shared on various platforms, and in several cases, the artists are not even notified or credited for this. Sharing of artworks leads to a wide dissemination of the message linked to it, yet it is unfair when the artists are not given credits and acknowledged for their piece of work. Through the interview, we found that sometimes digital artworks are printed too without the artist's approval for it. It can also be connected to our survey result where we found that many people are aware of digital illustrations getting created for social awareness, but a majority of them are unfamiliar with any Indian digital artists. Even though a few artists are known for the art they create, a large number of digital artists fade into the shadows. Through our discussions with the artists, we realized how this serious issue has been affecting them for a long time and it is still a major concern.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results provide evidence that the audience of both Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand turned out to be familiar with digital illustrations based on social themes such as women's issues. They also agreed with the effectiveness of the medium and believed that the visual nature of digital illustrations makes them both informative and intriguing. It complements our initial assumption that digital illustrations can be an impactful way of communicating complex information. It's this very nature that gives artists the option to talk about the dark truths of society in a manner that leaves the audience with something to think about, without the details appearing too graphic for their eyes. Although it was a significant finding that a majority of the respondents were not aware of any Indian illustration artists in particular. Given that artists go through several challenges to use their voice and become agents of change, it's unfair that they do not get their well-deserved recognition.

We observed the presence of a recurring theme in the work of most Indian illustrators when it comes to women's issues. Their work, although effective, did not cover several themes that still need to be talked about. The survey revealed several themes that have not yet made their debut online in the form of illustrations or at least have not been mainstream to socially aware the masses. It includes themes as serious as marital rape, rape culture, and domestic abuse among many others that we mentioned above. As artist Illustrious says, "Art is a soft but strong medium to bring out women-centric change", and digital illustrations succeed at doing that.

With the ever-growing audience of this digital form of art and with new artists getting inspired to create more work, we see it reaching greater heights and touching themes that still have not been openly talked about.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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