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Professional Female Students in the Digital Age: Cybercrime, Child Abuse Impacts, and Online Justice Quest

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Abstract

As the digital landscape continues to expand, cybercrimes—particularly those involving child sexual abuse—are escalating at an alarming rate. This study investigates the preparedness of professional female students to engage with the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, in promoting online safety and justice in the digital era. Anchored in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Fred D. Davis, the research explores how Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) shape perceptions of digital safety and legal responsiveness within the POCSO framework. By making use of moderation variables such as geography and profession, this study incorporates to the emerging body of literature that interconnects technology acceptance with professional female students and legal participation in digitally emerging society. Employing a descriptive and exploratory research design, the study utilized a quantitative approach, surveying a stratified sample of 420 professional female students from various districts in Kerala through a customized TAM-based questionnaire. Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) confirmed the significance of the identified variables and yielded a predictive model with an R^2 value exceeding required number. Findings reveal that professional students from rural areas and those with lower technological proficiency are less engaged with the Act's implementation and digital protective mechanisms. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted policy reforms, enhanced legal frameworks, and inclusive support systems. It offers actionable recommendations to stakeholders aimed at strengthening digital safety and legal awareness among students especially professional students.

Keywords: Professional female students and digital age, Child sexual abuse online, Cybercrime and POCSO Act, Conviction rates in POCSO cyber-cases, Digital literacy and child protection

Introduction

The digital age, with the rapid proliferation of technologies, has dramatically altered the legal, social and economic arenas and interactions with the world. Though the modern multimedia with its internet facilities has empowered the individuals, particularly women, with educational and social opportunities. As reported by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), [1] it has simultaneously expanded the threats too, especially cybercrime, including child sexual abuse online. Women who take a primary role

for online child safety remain inactive or under-informed or under-equipped to promote the POCSO Act (2012) [2]. It is noticed that the increasing collision of cybercrime and child sexual abuse poses an urgency of relooking at the application and effectiveness of the Act. The circulation of child sexual abuse, cyberbullying and online grooming has become prevalent among children with smartphones and social media as per Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA] [3]. We have the data indicating a sharp increase in cybercrime cases involving children. The studies bring to light that the children become easily attainable targets in the online space as per Banerjee and Mishra [4]. The effectiveness of the act is basically upon the public, especially the professional women as the users and influencers in the family and society, but it is not combating the situation as per Ministry of Women and Child [5]. We can look legally at the intersection of cyber laws under the Information Technology Act (2000) and the POCSO Act (2012), which poses challenges and hurdles in tracking the offenders in the digital world as per Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [6].

Background of the Study

The growth of the digital world has remarkably changed human interaction, entry to information and law implementation dynamics, but it has opened complex challenges in the case of safeguarding children from online child sexual exploitation. The digital platforms are increasingly being used to perpetrate crimes against children as per the report of Interpol [7].

There is a sharp rise in cyber-crime cases involving minors in India being the country of using largest internet users. It is linked to child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) and grooming online as cited in National Crime Records Bureau [8].

The students, the young future professionals can be transformed to the protectors and informants of the crimes against children if we can motivate them in this digital landscape. It is true that many have limited digital literacy and knowledge of the matters related to child safety law frameworks as per the report of UNICEF India [9].

Though the Act was amended in 2019, incorporating penalties for the use of digital media to exploit children sexually, the hurdles in implementation are still an issue due to lack of awareness and inadequate digital engagement with stakeholders, including the young women as per S. Kumar and P. Rani [10].

We know that the role of technology in legal empowerment is critical in the modern age, but for these systems to be effective, they must be perceived as useful and easy, especially for the professionals today. The Technology Acceptance Model helps us to assess these PU and PEU. Applying TAM in a legal-digital context permits a deep understanding of how professional adult women interact with digital tools related to POCSO enforcement as per Davis [11].

Kerala, showing the high literacy rate and gender development indicators, is presented to examine professional young women's preparedness and legal responsiveness in the context of increasing cybercrimes against children even with advanced legal laws as per the report of Joseph & Varghese [12].

LITERATURE REVIEW

POCSO Act, 2012 was enacted to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and it defines various offences with stringent punishment and child-friendly procedures in all the stages of cases. Further POCSO (Amendment) Act, 2019[13], was made with stringent punishment like the death penalty and also demanding a speedy trial and electronic monitoring. Again, POCSO Rules, 2020 (amended) [14] were provided with procedural guidelines like child-friendly mechanisms. It mandated the awareness

programmes, effective involvement of the Child Welfare Committee, police, special courts and psychological support and compensation to victims. Even with all these framed laws, it poses new challenges due to the increasing prevalence of cybercrimes relating to minors. The increase of cybercrimes with digital technologies has made gaps in the legal and judicial system, exposing the need for a better framework to address online child protection. The intersection of cybercrime, child sexual abuse and the POCSO Act has been examined by the literature review.

Online Child sexual exploitation and cyber-Offences

It is reported by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) that the number of cybercrimes involving minors across India accelerated by 20% during the last two years, and the rise is in child pornography, online grooming and cyberbullying as per the report of National Crime Record Bureau [15]. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights [16] made the special observation that children are becoming the easily attainable targets as they are unaware of the risk in digital interactions. It is also noticed from the studies that children are likely to share their very personal information and engage in online character. Finally, the digital interaction leads to vulnerable sexual abuse and exploitation as per the report of Sharma & Soni [17]. Due to technology development, the anonymity enables the offenders to exploit the minors without detecting the identity and create an extra layer of complexity in the investigation and trial as per Sha [18].

Legal framework and cybercrimes under the POCSO Act.

Even with the criminalisation of publication, transmission and possession of child sexual abuse materials with the POCSO Act (2012) and Information Technology Act (2000), the scholars evaluate with the opinion that the enforcement remains weak. Facebook, and Instagram have become major platforms for sexual predators, who engage the children by pretending to be mentors and friends (Banerjee and Mishra, 2020). Thus, the inadequacies of present laws in invoking the technological complexities of digital offences, especially the problems in detecting the offenders who operate in the anonymous digital arena, are the concerns of today as per Gosh & Roy [19].

The acute challenge is the gap between the cyber laws and the practicalities of policing cybercrimes, and thus the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (14 C) has been given to address the issue but still faces significant lack of resources[20] and qualified personnel as per the reports of Ministry of Electronics and information Technology and Ministry of Home Affaires [21]. Judicial proceedings are also due because of due to lack of digital evidence as per the observation of Ghosh and Roy [22]. The victims of cyber sexual abuse often withdraw from social interactions due to judgement from peers and the community, as per the National Commission for Women [23].

Emerging Trends in Cyber-Child Exploitation in India.

Today the younger generation is more involved in the use of mobile-apps, gaming platforms and social media, and further, it leads to the exploitation of children. The Gupta and Kaur's research [24] depicts that vulnerability is at a higher pace in rural areas, but awareness about online safety remains limited.

Challenges in law enforcement in Cyber-POCSO cases.

Sing and Mehta [25] reveal that institutional shortcomings lead to significant delays in the handling of the cases, and it leads to poor conviction rates. Thus, there are a lot of gaps in knowledge in enforcement

agencies.

Cybercrime and Mental Health of Child Victims.

The psychological impact on child victims is a serious and lifelong concern. The study finds that children who are subjected to online sexual exploitation often experience suicidal thoughts and post-traumatic stress as per the report of Patel and others [26]. There are a lot of gaps in the support system for the victims.

The Role of AI Tools to Prevent Online Exploitation.

The use of AI tools is not much used in detecting the offenders and preventing the exploitation. There is also danger of privacy concerns. So, there is ongoing support from the government and non-governmental organizations as per the report of Reddy and Kumar [27].

Increasing digital literacy to combat cyber offences.

Let us encourage the digital literacy programme in rural and semi-rural areas. The children in these areas are more vulnerable, and it is suggested to have digital and legal literacy both in hand in hand. They have to integrate the cyber-crimes and cyber security as per the report of the Rao and Jain [28].

Legal awareness about the law and safety.

The legal provisions alone are not enough, but there is a lack of awareness and engagement among the public, very especially with young adult women, who are often primary carers and first responders in child sexual abuse cases as per both reports of Kumar and R. Sing [29] & [30] Thus, others observe that lack of awareness and its applications in a digital context stand as the major problems for effective enforcement of the law as per the observation of Joseph & Varghese[31]. Further, it is found that digital literacy takes an import role in empowering women to respond to online threats and it is found that women with higher digital competence are more responsive to recognize threats and responds to child abuse and cybercrime online. The role of participation is also restricted according to rural and semi-urban areas in dealing with cyber-legal spaces as per the report o the Bhattacharya and Basu [32]. This difference affects the women's online safety and more over their ability to promote and protect the children against cyber abuse as per the report of UNICEF India [33].

Gaps in literature review

a. Digital gaps and cyber safety limitations
b. Legal drawbacks: The implementation of law remains inconsistent, leading to fewer convictions.
c. Gendered legal participation and acceptance of technology. There is a lack of technological focus at professional young women.
d. Institutional Encounters: there is a lack of resources for the law enforcement agencies and child-sensitive procedures.
e. Psychological effect; the support system for victims is very crucial in POCSO cases.
f. Socio-Economic Consequences: The economic burden, political pressure and social pressure lead to less conviction and reporting.

Objective of the study

This study is taken for the preparedness and engagement of young women at the increase of cybercrime

against children in Kerala even at the existence of POCSO Act (2012). The research introspects to a deeper understanding of how digital literacy, legal awareness and perceptions formed by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) affect their responsiveness to online threats and child protection mechanisms as per the observation of Davis [11].

1. To assess how the digital literacy, legal awareness and perceptions shaped by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (PU & PEU) influence young women's responsiveness to online threats and child protection mechanisms as per the deliberation of Davis [11]
2. To assess the influence of moderating variables such as geographic location and professional background in shaping women's access and responsiveness to digital safety information and child protection systems as per the observation of Joseph and M. Varghese [12].

Significance of the study

In the age of increasing digital connectivity, one of the biggest threats to child safety and human rights is online child sexual abuse. The law frameworks were designed, but their effectiveness is limited to the awareness and active participation of society, particularly women, who often serve as the first respondents in child protection as per the report of United Nations Office on Drugs an Crime & National Crime Record Bureau [1] & [8]

This study became is significant for various reasons;

1. It is connecting the gender-legal engagement gap in the growing challenge of cybercrimes against children.
2. Legal frameworks have started to use empirical application of the TAM. This cross disciplinary innovation brings out a new idea through which the digital and legal interventions can be evaluated by policymakers and legal practitioners as per the observation of Davis [11]. It will enhance a safer digital environment for children and enhance the efficacy of the POCSO Act.
3. The study can provide insights about strategies for child protection and campaigns for legal literacy. Because of it, the professional women with their geographical setting and location will be more accessible and effective.
4. The study can support the stakeholders and policy framers with a predictive model using actionable variables as per Sing and Banerjee [30]
5. It recommends that the women who are primary carers can improve the digital safety of the children.

Statement of problem

Though there are meritorious advancements in the legal framework for the protection of children in India, India still remains a country disturbed by the rise of online child sexual abuse, and adding to it, the professional women continue to be inconsistent with actual engagement in legal and technological protection measures.

Scope of study

Focusing particularly on young professional women in Kerala, this study is based on the intersection of gender, digital safety and legal engagement. Thus, it is making use of the hypothesis of PU and Perceived PEU from TAM to check how it influences women's engagement with digital legal mechanisms as per vision of Davis [11].

The scope contains the following:

1. The population of adult professional female students
2. Geographical focus of a few districts of Kerala,
3. Thematic focus such as digital literacy, POCSO Act engagement, online child sexual abuse
4. awareness and perceived legal readiness.

Thus, it will promote the academic guidance on child protection policies, digital strengthening of women and legal technology integration.

Delimitations of the Study.

The following are the limitations of the study:

1. Geographical limitation within the state of Kerala.
2. Sample specified with young professional female students
3. Self-reported data, as in self-administered questionnaires.
4. It has got a narrow legal focus, though it touches on cybercrime broadly.

Research Questions

Q1: How does digital literacy affect an adult woman's responsiveness to online threats of child sexual abuse against children and their protection under the POCSO Act, 2012?

Q2: How do perceptions of PU and PEU influence young professional female students engagement with digital child protection mechanisms ?

Q3: How does geographic location influence adult women's access to and use of digital safety and information on child protection?

Q4: How is professional female students responsiveness to child protection mechanisms affected by professional background?

Hypothesis of the Study

The following hypotheses are formulated for empirical testing based on the TAM and literature review:

- H1. Increased responsiveness to online threats is positively associated with higher digital literacy.
- H2. Young professional female students' willingness to engage with digital child protection tools is highly affected by PU and PEU.
- H3. The relationship between digital literacy and responsiveness is influenced by the professional background, with urban adult women demonstrating greater responsiveness than rural women.
- H4. Professional female students' responsiveness to child protection systems is significantly affected by professional background, with employed women showing higher engagement than non-employed women.

Research methodology

A descriptive and exploratory research design is employed in this study. It intended to assess the digital engagement and legal literacy of professional young female students in Kerala. The quantitative research approach is employed. It focuses on identifying the relationships between variables, PU, PEU and Moderators. Adult professional women in Kerala are the target population for this study. The sample is stratified to make sure that participants are represented from diverse geographic locations and professional backgrounds (health care, education, IT and social service, etc.). A sample size of 420 women was selected

(including buffer) as per the formula as per Solving [34]. A structured questionnaire as cited by Davis [34] with appropriate customization, is used to collect the data. The survey was conducted directly. Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) is used to analyse the data to test the relationship between PU and PEU. And MRA is also used to assess the moderators' impact on the equation / model to see their significance. The analysis has two purposes: the identification of significant predictors of women's engagement with digital legal frameworks and the assessment of the impact of geographic location and professional background as moderating variables literacy and engagement.

Analysis and Discussion

The regression analysis reveals that both PU and PEU significantly influence the dependent variable Y (presumably representing readiness or acceptance of a system, based on common TAM terminology). We can say that regression model is statistically substantial as it shows it (F= 805.96, P <0.001). It points out that in the outcome variable, PU and PEU together explain a significant portion of the variance. The R-square value is 79.29%. Thus, this model brings a large proportion of variability in Y. It is adjusted and predicted R-squared values (79.19% and 79.03%, respectively) and shows high model reliability and predictive capability.

The P -Value of PU and PEU (p<0.001), **refer 'Pic I'** give bellow, has got effective impact on Y. It shows that they are significant drivers of acceptance.

Multicollinerarity is not a concern here. The VIF values are 2.38 for predictors and they are very much within the acceptable limit (VIF < 5).

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Adj SS	Adj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Regression	2	356.23	178.117	805.96	0.000
PU	1	45.99	45.991	208.11	0.000
PEU	1	38.96	38.962	176.30	0.000
Error	421	93.04	0.221		
Lack-of-Fit	233	64.91	0.279	1.86	0.000
Pure Error	188	28.13	0.150		
Total	423	449.27			

Model Summary

S	R-sq	R-sq(adj)	R-sq(pred)
0.470105	79.29%	79.19%	79.03%

Coefficients

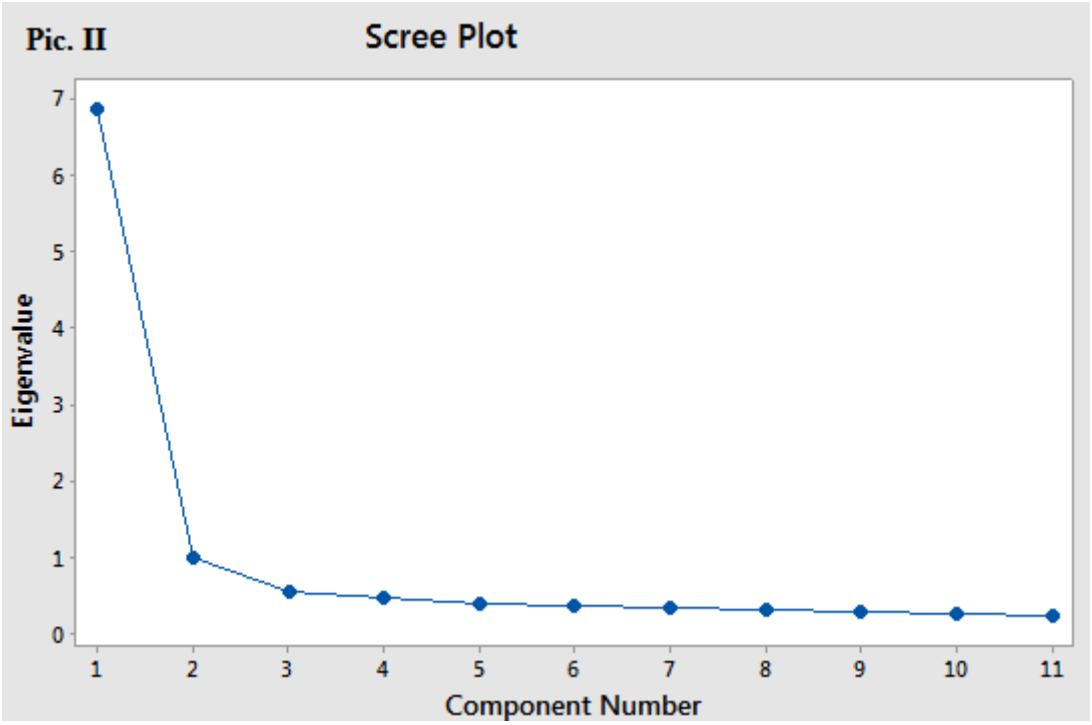
Term	Coef	SE Coef	T-Value	P-Value	VIF
Constant	0.142	0.125	1.13	0.257	
PU	0.4607	0.0319	14.43	0.000	2.38
PEU	0.4255	0.0320	13.28	0.000	2.38

Regression Equation

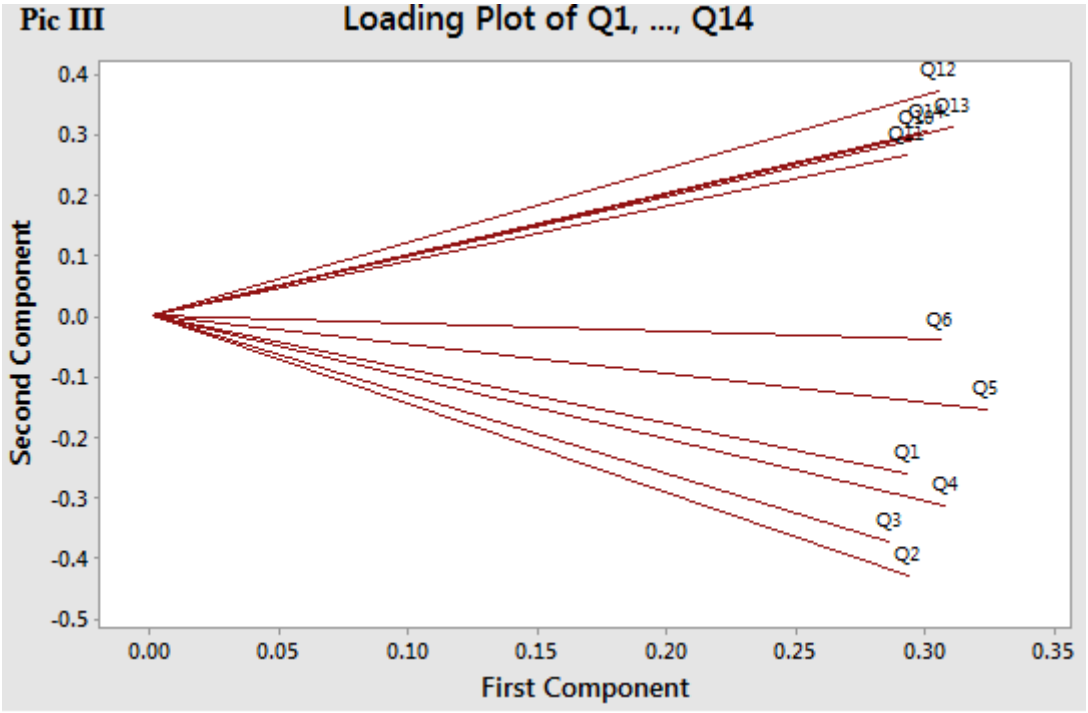
Y = 0.142 + 0.4607 PU + 0.4255 PEU

PIC I - MRA

We shall see that the eigen value, **refer 'Pic II ',** indicate that there are two factors (>=1) which affects the readiness. Further the loading plot indicates that the variables are aligned to the two factors closer to above cut of 0.3 See the '**Pic- III'**



Similarly;



With Moderators:

Regarding academic branch,

The multiple regression analysis demonstrates that Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEU) significantly predict the outcome variable, likely reflecting technology acceptance or readiness

(Davis, 1989). The model is statistically significant overall ($F(10, 413) = 164.77$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the predictors jointly explain a substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variable.

Here the R-squared value is seen as 79.96% by the adjusted R^2 at 78.92%. Due to this reason, a strong model fit and good predictive power are exposed. Looking at the academic branch, none of the categorical variables for multi-branches, such as commerce, engineering, law, MBA, etc., show statistically significant coefficients ($p > 0.05$), refer **Pic IV.** It indicates that branch/discipline does not highly influence the outcome when PU and PEU are accounted for. So, we can say that PU and PEU are more universal drivers of acceptance through different academic backgrounds.

Pic IV

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Adj SS	Adj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Regression	10	359.233	35.9233	164.77	0.000
PU	1	40.902	40.9025	187.61	0.000
PEU	1	40.668	40.6678	186.54	0.000
Branch	8	2.999	0.3749	1.72	0.092
Error	413	90.041	0.2180		
Lack-of-Fit	338	78.008	0.2308	1.44	0.029
Pure Error	75	12.033	0.1604		
Total	423	449.274			

Model Summary

S	R-sq	R-sq(adj)	R-sq(pred)
0.466923	79.96%	79.47%	78.92%

The inclusion of district quartiles.

The variance in the dependent variable is a strong fit, as pointed out by the regression model. It is clear from the data given ($R^2 = 79.68\%$, adjusted $R^2 = 79.44\%$ and predicted $R^2 = 79.13\%$. The included variables collectively have a substantial impact, as the overall regression is statistically significant ($F(5,418) = 327.84$, $p < 0.001$).

When we look at the district quartiles representing socio-geographic or economic classifications, it explains the only marginal significance overall ($p = 0.047$), **refer 'Pic V'**, pointing to a doubtful regional variation in readiness or acceptance.

Source	DF	Adj SS	Adj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Regression	5	357.986	71.5972	327.84	0.000
PU	1	44.143	44.1433	202.13	0.000
PEU	1	39.650	39.6504	181.56	0.000
District Quartiles	3	1.753	0.5842	2.68	0.047
Error	418	91.288	0.2184		
Lack-of-Fit	318	75.276	0.2367	1.48	0.011
Pure Error	100	16.012	0.1601		
Total	423	449.274			

Model Summary

S	R-sq	R-sq(adj)	R-sq(pred)
0.467324	79.68%	79.44%	79.13%

Pic V

Location Type:
It is not a significant predictor from the study, as the p-values for both "Municipality" and "Village categories are high (0.978 and 0.252, respectively). It indicates that the location does not have a significant impact on the outcome in this model.

Findings

1. The influence of PU and PEU is recognized in the research (Davis, 1989). The students who are digitally equipped are responsive in the reporting and protection of the children.
2. The need for digital literacy is found to be engaged in legal protection of cybercrimes and protection of the children.
3. Geographical location does not influence much on reporting; rather, it is the minimum professional knowledge which decides the reporting, as digital knowledge is very minimum for all professions.
4. The model from the multiple regression analysis is found to be predictive.

Recommendations

1. Promote Digital literacy programmes and integrate legal literacy and digital literacy programmes
2. Improve digital infrastructure in rural areas in order to overcome the socio-cultural and economic barriers in reporting
3. Simple digital platforms for legal engagement and make it user friendly for all and localized language support.
4. Promote the awareness of the POCSO Act and its protection
5. This study appeals for a holistic approach combining technology, education and community effort to protect children through digital literacy.

Conclusion.
This study reflects the technology acceptance or readiness; the multiple regression analysis demonstrates that factors can significantly predicts the variability of the dependent variable. Further, we can say that the model is wonderful with no issues of multicollinearity. The lack of fit test is significant, and it suggests room for improvement with potential additional predictors. Thus, despite a little error, the model fits well, and it offers strong predictive power, highlighting the central role of PU and PEU in technology adoption. Finally, female students in professions are more to be engaged with the legal mechanisms of child protection, creating collaborative platforms for these professionals to share best practices and challenges in child abuse cases and its protections in line the legal frameworks.

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