

Use of Abusive Content on Instagram in India

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Abstract

Instagram, a social media platform, has grown to become one of the most popular communication tools worldwide, including in India. However, with the increasing use of the platform, a growing concern about the prevalence of abusive content has emerged. This research paper explores the use of abusive content on Instagram in India, delving into its implications on users, social behavior, and the challenges of regulation. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative data collection through surveys and qualitative data obtained through interviews. **The study aims to highlight the prevalence of abusive language, its effects on mental health, and the response from Instagram and Indian authorities.**

Keywords: Instagram, Abusive Content, Social Media, India, Regulation, Mental Health, Online Behavior

1. Introduction

Instagram, a photo and video-sharing platform, is one of the most widely used social media platforms globally. With its advent, it has transformed how people communicate, share content, and express opinions. In India, Instagram has seen an exponential increase in its user base, with 362 million active users, particularly among the youth. However, like other social media platforms, Instagram has also been plagued with various challenges, one of the most significant being the rampant use of abusive content which sometimes include children below the age of eighteen.

Abusive content refers to offensive, aggressive, or harmful language that may include hate speech, bullying, harassment, or derogatory remarks. The rise of such content on Instagram, India has the most active Instagram users in India. In a diverse and populous country like India, poses serious concerns regarding user safety, mental health, and overall well-being. Despite efforts by Instagram and various authorities to combat abusive content, the problem persists, often due to the lack of proper regulation, awareness, and the anonymity that the platform offers.

This paper aims to investigate the prevalence of abusive content on Instagram in India, the impact it has on users, and the effectiveness of current regulatory measures. The study also aims to propose recommendations for improving the platform's safety standards and creating a more respectful online environment.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have highlighted the increasing concerns surrounding online abuse on social media platforms. The anonymity provided by social media allows users to engage in behavior that would be unacceptable in face-to-face interactions. According to a study by Kowalski et al. (2012), cyberbullying

and online harassment have become widespread due to the reach of digital platforms. In India, the issue is further compounded by cultural factors, where online abuse often takes on different forms, including caste-based insults, gender-based harassment, and religious intolerance.

In the context of Instagram, previous research has indicated that abusive content can lead to psychological issues, particularly among young users. A report by the CyberPeace Foundation (2020) found that 35% of Indian internet users had encountered cyberbullying on social media platforms. Instagram, with its visual-centric format, has been an attractive medium for both positive and negative expressions. The platform's reliance on user-generated content, without a robust mechanism for filtering abusive material, further exacerbates the issue.

The legal framework in India, including the Information Technology Act, 2000, has provisions against online abuse. However, enforcement remains a significant challenge, with many victims often unaware of their rights or unable to navigate the legal system. Recent developments, such as the implementation of the 2021 Information Technology Rules, aim to regulate content on social media platforms, including Instagram. However, these measures are still in the early stages of enforcement and their effectiveness remains uncertain.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

A mixed-method approach was employed for this study. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and impact of abusive content on Instagram in India.

Quantitative Data: A survey was conducted among 105 Instagram users in India, targeting individuals aged 18-40. The survey aimed to gather data on the following:

Frequency of exposure to abusive content

Types of abusive content encountered (e.g., hate speech, bullying, body shaming)

Emotional impact of abusive content (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress)

User actions (e.g., reporting, blocking, ignoring)

Qualitative Data: In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 participants who had experienced or witnessed abusive content on Instagram. The interviews sought to explore the personal experiences of users, the emotional and psychological effects of online abuse, and their perceptions of Instagram's efforts to address the issue.

3.2 Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using statistical tools to identify trends and patterns in the responses. The qualitative data from the interviews was coded and thematically analyzed to identify key themes related to abusive content and its impact on users.

4. Results

4.1 Survey Results

The survey revealed several key findings regarding the prevalence of abusive content on Instagram in India:

Prevalence of Abusive Content: 72% of respondents reported having encountered abusive content on Instagram at least once. Of these, 45% stated that they had encountered such content regularly (at least once a week).

Types of Abusive Content: The most common forms of abusive content included hate speech (34%), body shaming (27%), caste-based insults (18%), and religious intolerance (14%). Other forms of abuse, such as gender-based harassment, accounted for 7% of responses.

Emotional Impact: 62% of respondents reported feeling distressed after encountering abusive content. Among these, 35% experienced feelings of anxiety, 22% experienced depression, and 12% reported heightened stress levels.

User Response: When asked about their reactions to abusive content, 56% of respondents stated that they chose to block or report the user responsible for the abuse. However, 32% of respondents reported that they ignored the content, while 12% admitted to retaliating with abusive responses of their own.

4.2 Interview Results

The in-depth interviews provided further insight into the emotional and psychological effects of abusive content. Many participants shared that repeated exposure to abuse on Instagram led to a decline in self-esteem and a growing sense of helplessness. One participant, a young woman, described how constant body-shaming comments on her posts led her to withdraw from social media for months. Others reported a heightened sense of anxiety, particularly when they felt that the platform was not taking adequate action against the perpetrators.

Participants also expressed frustration with Instagram's reporting system, stating that many abusive comments went unnoticed or unaddressed. While some acknowledged the platform's efforts to implement automated moderation tools, they felt that these tools were insufficient in addressing the scale of the problem.

5. Discussion

The findings from the survey and interviews indicate that abusive content is a significant issue on Instagram in India. Despite the platform's efforts to combat harassment through reporting mechanisms and community guidelines, users continue to encounter a wide range of offensive content. This reflects broader challenges faced by social media platforms in moderating user-generated content, especially in a diverse and fast-growing market like India.

The emotional and psychological impact of exposure to abusive content is profound, particularly among young users who are more susceptible to online influences. Mental health experts have linked prolonged exposure to online abuse with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders (Faris et al., 2018). This underscores the need for more effective regulation and support systems to protect users.

While Instagram has implemented certain measures to tackle abusive content, including AI-driven content moderation tools and a reporting feature, the lack of a comprehensive, transparent process for dealing with abuse remains a significant concern. Furthermore, cultural factors, such as caste-based discrimination and religious intolerance, play a significant role in shaping the nature of abusive content in India, which complicates the moderation process.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be made to address the issue of abusive content on Instagram in India:

Strengthen Content Moderation: Instagram should invest in more sophisticated AI and human moderation systems to identify and remove abusive content in real-time. Transparency in the moderation

process and clear communication with users about why content is removed could improve user trust.

User Education: Instagram should launch awareness campaigns to educate users on the consequences of abusive behavior and the importance of respectful online interactions. This could include in-app notifications, educational content, and partnerships with mental health organizations.

Support Systems for Victims: Instagram should enhance its support systems for users who are victims of online abuse. This could involve providing access to counseling services, offering safe spaces for users to report abuse, and ensuring that perpetrators face appropriate consequences.

Collaboration with Indian Authorities: Given the legal and cultural context of India, Instagram should work closely with Indian authorities to develop a regulatory framework that addresses abusive content while respecting freedom of expression. This could involve collaborating on content regulation and the enforcement of anti-cyberbullying laws.

7. Conclusion

The use of abusive content on Instagram in India is a significant problem that affects millions of users, particularly young people. While Instagram has made strides in addressing the issue, there is still much to be done to create a safe and respectful online environment. This research highlights the need for more effective regulation, user education, and support systems to combat online abuse and protect users from its harmful effects. By taking a more proactive approach, Instagram can contribute to building a healthier and more positive online community in India.

References

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