

Like, Follow, and Share: A Gendered Perspective on the User Experience of Instagram

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Abstract

In the last decade, social media has made an explosive entry and has positioned itself as a requirement of daily life. It first marketed itself as a way to connect with new people and reconnect with those from the past. It enabled the creation of an individual space, where one could share content for a global audience. However, it quickly transformed according to emerging needs and became a platform for news, business, entertainment, etc. While much has been said about the power of the Internet, and how it can be a tool of empowerment and assertion for those who have been disenfranchised in the past, the biases that exist in reality, seep their way into social media as well. Social media has become a double-edged sword, where on the one hand, women, queer individuals, and members of Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities are able to organize themselves online and curate content that depicted the struggles they faced as well as challenge the status quo. On the other hand, these people are targeted in a similar manner that they are in real life. This paper will focus on Instagram and explore the gender bias that exists within this app. The analysis of gender bias will not only be based on the kind of discrimination that users experience through direct messages or comments, but also look at how the algorithms themselves are inherently discriminatory, such as privacy policies, censorship, advertising, and the influencer culture.

Keywords: gender, social media, digital divide, social media algorithm, Instagram, cybersexism, privacy, cyber-safety

In the last decade, social media has made an explosive entry and has positioned itself as a requirement of daily life. It has enabled the creation of an individual space, where one can share content for a global audience. However, it quickly transformed according to emerging needs and became a platform for news, business, entertainment, etc. Recently, it has been observed that social

media has become such a powerful tool, that it can even affect elections in countries, and ignite violence against others.

While there had been a few social media platforms before, the most decisive entry was made by Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg. As Facebook became a primary way for people to interact, post pictures, and share opinions, soon, other variations also emerged, for instance, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.

While many forms of social media are in use today around the world, the three major players are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This paper chooses to focus on Instagram, which is primarily an image- and video-based social media platform, and looks at the different components; and how they impact the users, especially women.

Instagram has had a steady growth in active users in recent years, with currently over a billion active accounts. It has boomed as a platform for “influencers”, who regularly post about their preferred subject and generate a large number of followers who are enthusiastic and engaged with what they post. Influencer advertising is a cost-effective way of marketing and is not as obvious as advertising through television or magazines. Instagram has also become a popular way for small businesses to sell their products and create communities with shared interests. It has been instrumental in generating awareness and spreading information across the world.

But there is a catch.

Before the advent of social media, mainstream media such as newspapers and television had always been dominated by upper-caste men, thus creating a gap, especially for marginalised sections. However, once social media started to gain traction, it was seen as a medium that could fill this gap and allow the creation of space for oppressed identities and communities. It is important to note that digital spaces are not free from violence. While it opens up avenues of freedom of expression, it also gives enough room for people to exhibit their hidden day-to-day biases and prejudices. The immediate reactions to public opinions are often expressed in the form of abuse (Munusamy 2018).

According to Datareportal.com (n.d.), 4.72 billion people in the world use social media today, which accounts for roughly 60 per cent of the world's population. Consequently, it becomes necessary to analyse the dynamics within these platforms and if people interact differently in the digital space.

Using the platform of Instagram, this paper tries to understand how users interact within this platform and what kind of an impact it has on them. The analysis is done through a gendered lens and focuses on how female users interact with Instagram and has been their experiences. This paper deals with various issues such as privacy and censorship, as well as the role of the market and advertising agencies and their relationship with Instagram.

One of the primary concerns in a digital space is how people present themselves. Social media has given the ability to the users to determine their identity and how they wish to be perceived by others. The type of profile that one creates is completely up to them - users have total freedom to create content according to what they want other people to think of them. Given that Instagram is a visual platform, the persona created is primarily through photos and videos. Aesthetics play a large role in Instagram and a lot of effort is put into trying to make a story or a post “aesthetically pleasing” so that it gains the maximum number of likes. There is a direct correlation between how aesthetic a profile is and how popular the account. Articles and how-to tips are in plenty, which give advice on how one can decide which aesthetic to use and how it can be achieved. Thus, there is pressure to “perform” in a certain way. However, the use of aesthetics is a double-edged sword.

A study by Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019) termed this as the “authenticity bind”. This bind refers to a problem commonly faced by female influencers, who are pressured to post in a certain manner but at the same time are criticised or slammed if their posts appear “too fake”. Or if not too fake, then too “real”. This dichotomy of fakeness/realness is based on what women are expected to post. In the same way that women are assigned specific roles and expected to behave according to a normative understanding of femininity, similar terms are dedicated in the offline world. Women are expected to post about fashion, makeup and skincare, family, relationships, etc. Their aesthetic is expected to be “feminine”. Deviance from this often results in trolling and bullying. Moreover, women are more likely to gain followers, recognition, and popularity if they stick to this ideal.

Hypersexualisation is also part of this package. Instagram is a very popular and powerful tool of self-representation, and for women, it traffics heavily in provocative and sexualised images. It has been observed that many women, especially celebrities, fetishise themselves, which also leads to more likes.

This influences and validates the decision for other women to do the same. While there is nothing wrong with women wanting to express their sexuality, it is often not expressed on their own terms. The authenticity bind can be applied here as well. In order to be accepted, the sexualisation of a woman has to be portrayed in such a way that it is not obvious and is “artful”. If it is considered “bold”, then women become the target of threats or unwanted advances. This online behaviour perpetuates a social ideology that sees women as sex symbols and commodifies them for the male consumer.

Additionally, this authenticity bind, as mentioned, is connected to the popularity of the account. This popularity then becomes a tool for marketing agencies and advertisers. Instagram has become a popular platform for the influencer culture, where public accounts post content to gain followers. Once there are a substantial number of people following the account, these influencers connect with various advertising agencies and market company products, from which they earn money. However, those who generate income as influencers have an added pressure to maintain normative femininity, as this is what brands prefer.

Companies that reach out to women are almost always fashion and beauty industries, while tech and sports companies reach out to men. Interestingly, money is spread unevenly. A survey was conducted with 1,600 influencers from more than 40 countries, which found that male influencers on Instagram earn more per post than women, at an average of \$1,411 compared with \$1,315 (Garlick 2020).

Thus, an entire industry that portrays women with traditional feminine roles and interests is created and markets the products accordingly. Women are more likely to receive targeted ads regarding fashion or beauty products. This is because social media only captures a small aspect of our lives

and data brokers frequently fail to accurately capture the rest. Therefore, the Internet selectors used to show ads reflect an incredibly small and massively biased view of our lives.

Furthermore, many ads are based on external lead lists, audience selection, and coarse demographic selectors. Women in STEM fields are far less likely to see many kinds of ads related to their careers, since such ads are often explicitly targeted only towards men. It is important to note that gender-specific advertising also disadvantages LGBTQIA+ community. Audience selectors and lead databases inadvertently built from homogenous sample groups mean minorities of all genders may be less likely to see such ads.

But the influencer is not the only problem. Even the audience that consumes this material is also negatively impacted. A heavily homogenised and biased ideal is created for women, forcing them to look and act a certain way. An example of this is the ideal body type. While television and advertisements already idolise individual bodies, social media increases the promotion of “thin and perfect” bodies. This negatively impacts the mental health of women, who then equate this perfection with beauty. It has also been observed that men too suffer from the negative consequences of body image issues that are created by the media. Films like *Rambo* and magazines like *Playgirl* propagate the “macho male” where men are portrayed as muscular and therefore desirable. Subsequently this has led to the formation of the “Adonis complex of attractiveness” where men have increased their efforts in wanting to build muscle and remain lean. The ideal male body has become more and more unattainable which has resulted in discrepancies between real and ideal, causing low self-esteem and depression amongst men (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia 2000). Maslow’s theory on the hierarchy of needs lists five needs that humans are motivated to fulfil: biological and physical needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and finally, self-actualisation needs (McLeod 2007). Self-actualisation is the desire for development and creativity within an individual. A user’s Instagram profile is how they have decided to present themselves to their followers. For many, this presentation is a tactic for gaining more followers, which leads to a sense of belonging and, ultimately, positive self-esteem (Minnihan 2018).

A lot of importance is placed on the number of followers and likes. In 2015, BuzzFeed posted an article about creating a proper Instagram post, for which a staff member asked their 16-year-old sister to explain the rules. The girl, Grace, points out several things such as timing, not posting too

much at the same time, and using hashtags ironically. Some of the things that stand out are: only posting selfies if they look good but posting them sparingly, and filtering photos on a different app since everyone is already familiar with the ones on Instagram. For followers, one should have more followers than the number of people one follows, so that one seems interesting. In the end, Grace adds, “Have fun and don't take it too seriously.” (Stryker 2015)

While the last piece of advice seems like everything is “breezy”, the particular and often - contradicting rules indicate that there is pressure in trying to maintain your image online. For women, this pressure manifests in several ways. For example, only taking a photo is not good enough. Whether it is a selfie or a moment with friends, it has to look “good”. From lighting to the background, everything needs to be perfect, yet it should not seem like you put in too much effort. Moreover, the outfits that you wear for your photos should not be repeated too often while posting. You always need to look put together, even if you are posting a picture of yourself at home. How many likes you get on a photo determines if it's good enough, and if the numbers are low, then many end up deleting the image. Often, the number of likes is connected with self-esteem and a sense of worth, which creates a social hierarchy - the more likes, the more popular you are, and, therefore, you are at the top of this hierarchy.

As the number of Instagram users increases, it is pertinent to also look at online safety and privacy concerns. Social media in general has often been considered as a medium for anyone to have a space to express themselves. Although online platforms do empower individuals by ensuring their freedom of speech and expression, it simultaneously endangers the fundamental right to privacy and human dignity, as it enables an enormous amount of liberty without putting in place essential safeguards to protect the users. As a consequence, online forums have become breeding grounds for unilateral organised crimes against anyone who advocates alternate ideologies and is different from the normative ideals of society. Furthermore, it has been seen that with right-wing leaders coming to power in several countries, there has been a sharp rise in intolerance towards social equality and diversity (Munusamy 2018). Those who criticise fundamentalism, oppose the government, break stereotypes, belong to marginalised backgrounds, and assert their rights, particularly women with opinions, are often targeted and branded as anti-nationals. This is because such people question traditional majoritarian norms (Munusamy 2018).

However, the target of this online violence is more often gendered than not. The gender gap in India is high and, coupled with the conservative cultural norms that dictate that women do not belong in the public sphere and should not have any social presence, online violence becomes another tool for men to suppress women.

According to the “State of Mobile Internet Connectivity, 2019” report released by the GSMA Intelligence (Bahia and Suardi 2019), only 30 per cent of Internet users are women. Therefore, even in digital spaces, men continue to dominate. Thus, if women post content that talks about equal rights, claiming self-respect, or even just having an opinion that is different from that of a man, they are targeted. Online violence can manifest in various ways, such as trolling, bullying, doxing, slut-shaming, distributing private images without consent, harassment with abusive comments, and even rape threats (Munusamy 2018).

The severity of online violence should not be underestimated as it can have a dangerous impact on a woman’s safety and security as it has the potential to be expressed in the form of physical violence also. Furthermore, this gendered experience can be further unpacked to reveal the casteist nature of online violence. In the same way that women’s empowerment is considered a threat for men, the empowerment of the Dalit community is also seen as a menace for upper-caste groups (Munusamy 2018). Hence, when women from privileged social locations are targeted, the abuse is sexual in nature. However, when women from minority backgrounds of caste, race, religion, sexuality, etc. are targeted, their abuse is often identity-based, with the aim to humiliate, defame, and delegitimize the existence of the individual. For example, when Dalit women are sexually abused, they are often told that they are “too ugly to rape” and that being labelled as a woman with “loose morals” is hereditary owing to their untouchable caste (Munusamy 2018).

Additionally, there have been growing concerns regarding privacy in an online world. With all of your information having the potential to become public, it becomes necessary to regulate how much we share and view this information. While there are some safeguards to provide users control over their privacy, the Internet remains mostly an unsafe place, especially for women. A report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that women were more likely to keep their profiles locked than men (Burnham 2012). This is because having a public audience may threaten their emotional and mental well-being (Sharma 2018). There have been many instances where

prominent female activists have become targets of bullying and gender-based harassment and have been forced to deactivate their accounts due to the disturbing and sexually abusive nature of cyber mob's threats. Furthermore, apart from abusive messages, women are also targeted in the form of illicit sexual surveillance, "creepshots", extortion, doxing, stalking, malicious impersonation, threats, and rape videos and photographs.

Moreover, for women who belong to marginalised communities and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the risk of cyber abuse increases. While Instagram policies try to regulate such instances, this becomes difficult as it becomes entangled with the debate of freedom of speech and expression. Some content moderation is related to legal obligations, as in child pornography, but a great deal more is a matter of cultural interpretation. Jan Moolman, who coordinates the Association of Progressive Communications' Women's Rights Division, states that "garden variety" violence against women—clearly human rights violations—frequently gets a lukewarm response until it becomes an issue of bad press. Unless an issue becomes highly publicised, abuse against women online seldom receives any proper attention (Chemaly and Buni 2015). This publicity is also often biased, and women from more privileged backgrounds have more agency to demand appropriate action than marginalised women.

Where privacy concerns threaten the safety of women online, censorship policies restrict the way women can express themselves in these spaces. Instagram's censorship policies have often come under fire, such as the much-publicised debate on #freethenipple, which argued that while men's nipple area is never censored, women's is. Even though women were consistently objectified and sexualised in other ways, a nipple was inappropriate while a man was not. Similarly, Rupri Kaur's photo, where she wears trousers stained with period blood, was removed, even though it did not go against community guidelines: she was fully clothed and wasn't attacking any group. This revealed how Instagram's algorithm is inherently biased, where menstruation was seen as inappropriate, yet countless pages where women, many of them who are underage, are objectified and not censored (Christie 2020).

Furthermore, in October 2020, Australian comedian Celeste Barber posted a parody image of herself where she was imitating a post from former Victoria's Secret model Candice Swanepoel clutching her bare breast and exposing the side. But while both photos revealed the exact same

parts of each body, Barber's post was removed, and Instagram notified that it "goes against our community guidelines on nudity or sexual activity" (Christie 2020).

Swanepoel's post, meanwhile, went unreported. In June 2020, plus-size model Nyomi Nicholas-Williams posted an artistic topless photo of herself, in which her breasts were covered by her arms. Instagram promptly removed it. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, a black woman's censoring did not go unnoticed. After the incident, Nicholas-Williams spoke up about how people of colour and fat people face discrimination that thin, white models are not subjected to (ibid.).

Therefore, there are three different issues at play: the censorship of black people and people of colour; the censorship of fat people and people in marginalised bodies; and the censorship of women and women's bodies. Yet all three bring us to the same conclusion: its time Instagram's algorithm makes room for everybody.

It is evident that Instagram is rife with biases and harmful notions of how women should be. Celebrating social media as an empowering tool is only presenting half of the picture, and unless we tackle the roots of oppression and gender bias, such forms of discrimination will find a space for themselves everywhere. Given that social media is here to stay, measures need to be taken to ensure the safety of the users. In this regard, it is essential to engage and discuss what it means to be an "Internet citizen" and the rights that one should have on the Internet. As an interactive space where new methods of communication have emerged, the Internet and digital spaces have become a relevant topic for the theory of democracy.

The Internet has been seen to have a positive potential for political culture. The new interactive possibilities for communication, deliberation, and participation are an asset to strengthen democratic processes. However, the Internet also has its own set of problems. Issues related to access and the extensive demands on users' media competence are a major concern. Additionally, the Internet is not self-actuating. Therefore, it cannot solve the problems of democracy on its own, but it can be used by societal actors to solve these problems. Hence, Internet technology must be actively internalised, socially and culturally, in order to develop its potential (Grunwald et al 2005).

In conclusion, seeing that digital spaces have been steadily growing and expanding, the spaces also need to be democratic and equal for everyone. Social media platforms need to be held accountable and their algorithms require scrutiny for biased censorship and privacy, as technology is not a neutral entity. Although Instagram has over a billion users, those who gain popularity come from a certain privileged and elite background more often than not. Marginalised voices seldom find space and recognition, and even if they do, they become targets for violence and abuse. Proper safeguards need to be put into place to ensure that the rights of the individuals are protected, and technology needs to be developed in such a way that it accounts for the representation of everyone.

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