XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDES AND REPRESENTATIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA

ACTITUDES Y REPRESENTACIONES XENOFÓBICAS EN LAS REDES SOCIALES DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 EN LA INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media activity was reported to have significantly increased during the pandemic period as most of the daily routines transformed into the digital space. This paper attempted to explore the politics of representation in digital space using Foucauldian theories of power and discipline. A qualitative exploration of the xenophobic attitudes and representation was conducted on 123 young adults to understand how health concerns associated with the pandemic influenced social representations and marginalization of certain social sections and how participants recognized and understood their contribution to this group polarization. Thematic analysis of participant opinions indicated a significant change in polarization and attitude towards out-groups following the pandemic outbreak. The existing hierarchical homogenization and polarization of the marginalized moderated by polarized political affinities were found to be translated into digital space intensifying xenophobic attitudes thereby contributing to the evolution of new digital cultures and hierarchies in digital literacy.

Keywords: Xenophobia. Covid-19 pandemic. Marginalization. Social media representation.

RESUMEN

Se informó que la actividad de las redes sociales aumentó significativamente durante el período de la pandemia, ya que la mayoría de las rutinas diarias se transformaron en el espacio digital. Este artículo intentó explorar las políticas de representación en el espacio digital utilizando las teorías foucaultianas del poder y la disciplina. Se realizó una exploración cualitativa de las actitudes y representaciones xenófobas en 123 adultos jóvenes para comprender cómo las preocupaciones de salud asociadas con la pandemia influyeron en las representaciones sociales y la marginación de ciertos sectores sociales y cómo los participantes reconocieron y entendieron su contribución a esta polarización grupal. El análisis temático de las opiniones de los participantes indicó un cambio significativo en la polarización y la actitud hacia los grupos externos después del brote pandémico. Se descubrió que la homogeneización jerárquica y la polarización existentes de los marginados, moderadas por afinidades políticas polarizadas, se traducían en el espacio digital intensificando las actitudes xenófobas, contribuyendo así a la evolución de nuevas culturas y jerarquías digitales en la alfabetización digital.

Palabras clave: Aprender. Reação. Gamificação. Acadêmicos.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media activity marked a 50 X surge during the pandemic with digital consumption making a jump of 87 percent with Facebook and YouTube accounting for the largest penetration in India often eased by the increased availability of affordable smartphones, cheaper mobile broadband (SHANTHI, 2020; KUMAR, 2020; KEELERY, 2021; SENGUPTA, 2021). This was further accentuated by the unforeseen travel restrictions and social distancing norms imposed at various stages of the pandemic (HAOKIP, 2020). As the majority of literate Indians swiftly relocated to digital spaces from the comfort of their homes, the social order of representation was evolving in digital space where the internet became the only means of maintaining connectivity in personal and professional realms contributing to economic conveniences. Those deprived of internet access due to social and economic reasons, therefore, were excluded from this continuity of work, and daily life activities were stalled creating a further economic crisis. This research aims to explore how these unexpected changes in lifestyle and communication affected the rapid relocation to the digital space and the way different social sections were represented in this newfound realm of reality.

The spread of the virus from Wuhan and speculations regarding the virus being a laboratory experiment, coupled with statements from political leaders and the conservative propaganda, significantly triggered xenophobia, Anti-Asian attitudes, and contempt on policy preferences among many Americans (RENY; BARETTO, 2020). Various cities in India also witnessed a similar spike in racial discrimination against people from the northeast region and accusations of them being associated with Covid-19 spread in the spring of 2020 (HAOKIP, 2020). The Indo-China border disputes in the Galwan valley and the subsequent ban of Chinese mobile applications in India also fuelled xenophobic reactions to the pandemic (ECONOMIC TIMES, 2020). The transformation to the digital space in itself was also not very egalitarian, and therefore the affordance of the digital media might not have benefited all communities in a similar manner. Instances of this disparity can be seen in Xie *et al.* 's (2020) study, where they explored the effects of this paradigmatic shift in the geriatric population. Humphry's study (2019) can be used to problematize this issue further, by looking into the disparity between the affordability of digital services and demands of a data-driven society, which as a consequence, might lead to misrepresentation of poorer sections of the society.

Digital spaces have become part and parcel of our lives with affordances of connectivity, spontaneity, and accessibility, facilitating a world of digitized identity and space. Forty percent of the world's population uses online social networking websites and spends an average of two hours per day, which breaks down

to half a million tweets every minute (BROWN, 2018). Curating a digital identity and constantly updating it to enhance digital performance has become a norm among youngsters (ROBINSON, 2018).

According to many scholars, unlike the traditional medium of communication and publication, digital space is relatively inclusive and accessible making knowledge creation and dissemination broader (WOODS, 2020); although the counter-argument on the digital divide is also prevalent (RAMSETTY; ADAMS, 2020). The Foucauldian concept of power as a strategic position, rather than a privilege, can be used to explore such contradictions in literature, the assumed role positions of vigilante and victim in digital space, and processes of power shifting under reversed circumstances (FOUCAULT, 1977). Concepts of surveillance and sousveillance, the act of being watched and monitored by the authority, and the counter-surveillance, where the public eye surveils the authority, also points to the strategic position one holds in digital space, the power held by the one who have access to surveillance data and hence the behavior of one being watched, contributing to our understanding of powered hierarchy in the digital space (MANN; NOLAN; WELLMAN, 2002).

In this study, we have attempted to explain how health-related concerns got translated to varied social representations and marginalization in digital space following the pandemic outbreak creating xenophobia and how people recognize and understand their contribution to the polarization of different social groups. The diversity, inclusivity and interdisciplinary of digital space is explored to unveil the hierarchies evolving as digital literacy increases in the population. On the verge of the new normal, post-pandemic, such knowledge may be contributory in analyzing and shaping the future digital media discourse.

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study attempted to delve into perspectives of digital representation in the context of pandemic in India. The technological advancements and affordance of digital media allowed many to compensate for the restrictions of corporeal space through increased usage of digital space. Although attempts have been made to analyses the predictive pattern of social media activity (KALAMPOKIS; TAMBOURIS; TARABANIS, 2013), there is a dearth in exploring the politics of representation of people from various walks of life in the digital world and how the same can modify the attitude and behavior in individuals' real-life interactions. The study attempted to explore the representation of different social sections in digital space following the pandemic outbreak. The outbreak of the pandemic and restrictive protocols was found to increase xenophobia against certain social groups (HAOKIP, 2020; RENY; BARETTO, 2020). In this study, we attempted to explore the representation of these xenophobic attitudes in social media

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platforms among an urban population and their contribution to the polarization of the groups. This contributes to our educational understanding of the evolution of digital societies and their interactivity in transforming the ubiquitous hierarchies in physical space to this new-found social space.

2 METHOD

2.1 QUALITATIVE APPROACH AND RESEARCH PARADIGM

This research attempted to explore the intricacies of representation of different sections of the society in digital space using Foucauldian theories of power and disciplining. The study followed a qualitative context-bound inductive approach (CRESWELL, 2003). The researchers assumed a social constructionist approach with a subjective and relativistic ontological assumption. The rhetoric is, therefore, personal and informal most of the time. The standards of reporting qualitative research (SRQR) were followed in reporting the findings (O'BRIEN *et al.*, 2014).

2.2 CONTEXT

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic globally created an unprecedented transformation of daily activities to the virtual space. As people embarked on the digital space for routines, work, education, etc., there has been a growing tendency for the expression of xenophobic attitudes online. The study explored the politics of representation of different social sections in digital space and how xenophobic attitudes were expressed in social media platforms.

2.3 SAMPLE STRATEGY

The participants were all young adults from India between the age range of 18 -32 since this population accounts for the maximum amount of digital activity (HUFFMAN, 2016). The participants were all residents of India and had at least one active social media account and access to the internet throughout the pandemic period. A convenient sampling method was used, and participants were approached through a snowballing technique. Out of the 792 people who viewed the survey, 382 initiated the survey and 129 people completed the open-ended questions of inquiry. Others completed the survey skipping few or all open-ended questions.

Individuals who contracted Covid-19, quarantined by the government or its agencies for health reasons, and those diagnosed with mental health conditions were excluded from the study.

2.4 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

A brief regarding the purpose of the study was circulated among different online chat groups using the snowball technique, and those who consented were provided with the online survey questionnaire link. The participant funneling process is detailed under the "sample strategy" sub-section above. The survey was conducted online using the encrypted QuestionPro platform. Participants were ensured about their rights to be a research participant, especially regarding confidentiality and their right to withdraw, through a detailed consent form available at the beginning of the survey. Their responses were recorded as text through the QuestionPro platform and were further analyzed for relevant themes.

2.5 ETHICAL ISSUES

Consent for participation was obtained from all the participants through a detailed online consent form, which contained brief information about the objectives of the study and possible implications. Those who consented to participate clicked on 'agree' and were directed to the form. The survey platform was chosen, keeping in mind the maintenance of privacy and necessary encryption of data. Participants had a "no response" option for every question. The personally identifiable data (mail address) collected was stored anonymously in a password-protected file and would be deleted one year after the publication of the results and consent form containing details of this data storage process. The research work received a clearance certificate from the institutional ethics review board.

2.6 SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey questionnaire was constructed by the researchers and uploaded to the Question Pro platform to collect data online. The first section included a briefing on the purpose of the study and a detailed consent form; with agree/disagree options for participants. Participants who consented could proceed further. The second section had questions on the demographic details of participants, which helped in participant screening based on inclusion-exclusion criteria. The last section contained five open-ended questions.

2.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Table 1 - Alignment of research objectives, focus themes and interview questions

| Research Objective	Theme Explored	Sample Question
Social media activity during the pandemic	Pandemic and social media activity	How has social media platforms impacted the experience of the pandemic?
Concept of fact-checking	Information overload and source verification	How do you gather your information online?
Concept of othering and conformity to the dominant perspective	Reactivity in social media	How do you react to information on social media?
Xenophobic attitude towards marginalized population	Attitude towards marginalized population	How are different social groups talked about on social media?

Source: Authors' own

2.8 DATA SYNTHESIS

The primary thematic analysis was performed manually by the first author and was further re-checked by the corresponding author for investigator triangulation. Cross-case comparisons of themes and sub-themes with randomly selected data were performed to ensure maximum engagement with the data.

3 SYNTHESIS AND INTERPRETATION

Imposition of the pandemic-related restrictions on movement combined with a fear of isolation lead to an all-time spike in digital activity (SCHUMACHER; KENT, 2020; CHANDRASHEKHAR, 2020). Digital spaces were cramped with local and global knowledge with posts on health, vaccination, the boredom of having nothing significant to do, and opinions on different issues related to the pandemic. The pandemic stress and subsequent influx of information and misinformation also facilitated an ideal information ecosystem for xenophobic attitudes (NAIDOO, 2020). 129 young adults from urban India reported their opinions on the politics of representation of different social sections in digital space. A thematic analysis of their responses led to the following structure as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Thematic structure of participant opinion
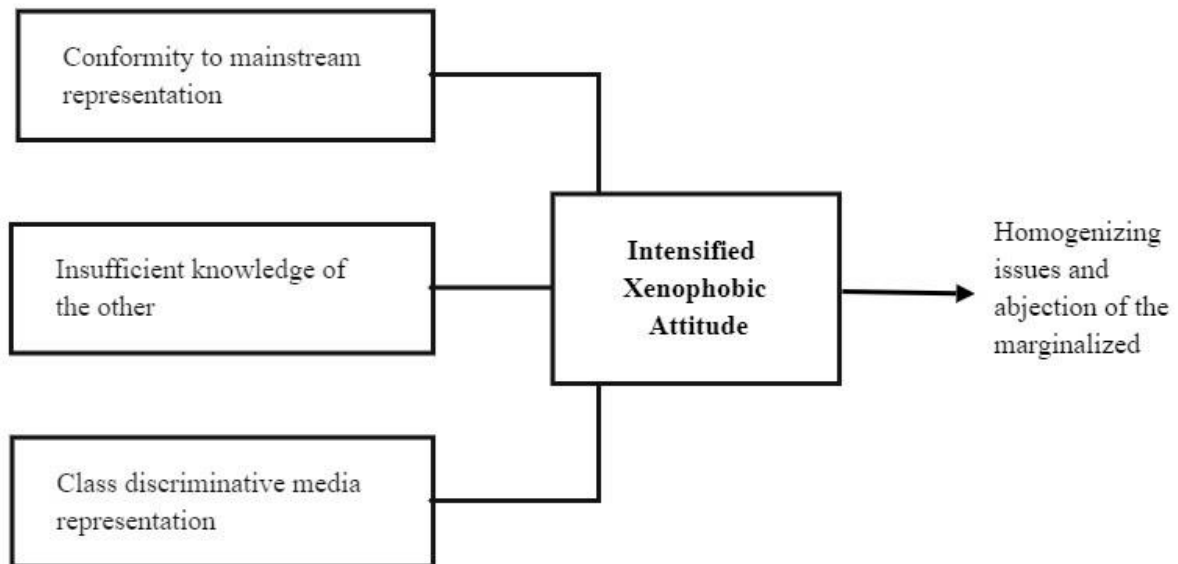
Source: Authors' own

The participant data suggested that xenophobic attitude in digital space is postulated to be intensified through three different channels. The nature of the participant to conform to the mainstream representation of certain social classes significantly contributed to their xenophobic attitude towards the other. This conformity to majoritarian stereotype against the targeted social group also limited contact made to people belonging to the other group, thereby increasing the lack of knowledge about the other. The representation of different social classes in media further accentuated these previously held beliefs and provided adequate confirmation to their biased notions about the other social group intensifying feelings of xenophobia. Each of the emerged sub themes are discussed in detail below.

3.1 INTENSIFIED XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDE

Digital space enables like-minded people to form ideological cliques. However, sometimes ideological positions contradict each other, and denouncing the 'other' becomes a common way to attain more popularity. This theme encapsulates the xenophobic attitudes of both participants themselves and how they viewed others around them.

3.1.1 Class discriminative media representation

Media is one of the most influential modes of shaping subjective and discriminative viewpoints. India as a country has always been divided based on caste and class. Media representation of different social sections is often influenced and controlled by the political powerhouses especially when media is funded by politically motivated organizations. For questions related to how different social groups are spoken about in social media, participants reported this tendency of the mainstream media to reinforce class-based stereotypes and lead to further polarization of the groups as seen in the opinion "there's always bias towards certain sections... they are unnecessarily targeted". The socio-political scenario in India, due to its innate nature of cultural multiplicity, had invariably been a perfect ground for discriminative skewed representation of classes, influenced and controlled by power. These representations become non-inclusive, creating or intensifying a xenophobic attitude towards certain classes of people. The analysis helped to explore how schema-consistent information about other classes has reinforced the existing prejudiced attitude towards individuals of other classes and caste.

Ironically, the narratives in digital space during pandemic were frequently the rhetoric of the privileged who have access to digital platforms, with a blaming spade on the underprivileged who lack access to the internet due to social or economic restraints (SHARMA, 2020). This convoluted representation of the privileged as victims was reiterated by participants when enquired about the impact of social media platforms in the context of the pandemic - "the upper-middle class and rich are seen as victims of the coronavirus pandemic whereas the poor who are struggling basic livelihood and sustenance are seen as the reason for community transmission" (participant opinion). Insight regarding the tendency to blame intolerance and violence on the nation's poor, as a mode of political marginalization and xenophobia (SICHONE, 2008) can be seen in the participant comments.

On one hand, these analyses enlighten us regarding the multiple layers of marginalization, which are added during the pandemic to the lives of the already marginalized, and how their abjection from digital discourse paved the way to that. Individuals, who are already suffering, now get misrepresented in majority discourse. Ironically, they do not have the authority or scope to represent themselves in those spaces. There is a horrific dissonance between pragmatic 'self' and represented 'self'; which, when encountered, may create a 'subjective horror' (JARDINE,1981). Such horrors may lead to the wish of washing oneself of 'unaccepted' aspects to fit into the existing majority discourse. The Foucauldian concept of power can be used to understand the power exerted here on those underrepresented by those who express their concerns. Although there is an attempt to represent the marginalized, it is often performed by the privileged creating a powered discourse.

Many primetime news debates are examples of such behaviors, where few individuals from these strata were given a podium to express. In response to how different groups are represented in social media, participants showed awareness of a skewed representation as in the excerpt- "the media has become self-serving at best and a propaganda piece at worst. so, the people who are poorly represented are those that the controlling entity chooses to target" (participant opinion). Many times it was apparent that their expressions were curated, and were careful of not disturbing the majority opinion. On the other hand, such insightful comments from participants also give the hope that there is an underlying awareness of the discriminative hierarchy. They are somewhat aware of the power-hierarchies that enable one class of people to play victim and blame another class without providing them a chance to defend. Some participants discussed manipulation and discrepancies in the numbers and statistical evidence reported in popular media, "The numbers are often false "(participant opinion), suggesting an awareness regarding constructed media representations.

3.1.2 Insufficient knowledge of the 'other'

The disparity between ideologies and behaviors of the majority necessitates scrutiny of plausible contexts. Xenophobic attitudes are maximized when there are strong demarcations between in-group and out-groups. The dearth of knowledge regarding the out-group and the stereotypical biases stemming from lack of interactions or media representations contribute to expanding the polarization between the groups. Digital space can often become a breeding ground for differential and inaccurate representation of certain social groups and these groups due to their existing social location lack access to this space which abhors them.

Participants in the study were observed to be well aware of their reach in digital space and in their online activity, the rhetoric is about the classes that they seem to lack knowledge of. The social location of the participants although allows them to comment about the outgroup, it does not necessarily give them knowledge about the experiences of those who they comment on. Analysis of participants' reactions made their surprise regarding the situations of marginalized classes very apparent. Scrutinizing the context and reason for such bewilderment indicates ignorance about the pragmatic scenario. Attesting to our above discussion, the discrepancy between ideological concepts and real encounters constructed the context for this scenario. Witnessing the actual sufferings of underprivileged people created dissonance with existing knowledge about them. Such dissonances led to perplexed reactions.

3.1.3 Conformity to mainstream representation

Reactance to issues of contempt, on one's own or sometimes unrelated 'others', is considered as an essential positive quality for communal harmony. However, excerpts from the data particularly in response to their reactivity towards the information gathered on social media, opinions like "too much information creating anxiety and irritate" (participant opinion), suggest that large amounts of information leads to strained mental health and often would be the reason for prejudicial or apathetic attitude towards those spoken about in the information.

Participants reported such tendencies, especially when the information is about individuals different from their own social location. Participants reported of "going numb" because of the information and therefore becoming apathetic and consequently approving the skewed representation through silence. They selectively focus on information, which matches their existing belief system, and thus the ontological purpose of the information is lost. This information is not enriching individuals' knowledge, instead of reinforcing their existing prejudice and apathy. The analysis also indicates the role of convenience in such scenarios. Questioning the authenticity of these representations of 'outgroups' may problematize their own behavioral representations. Showing apathy or being willfully ignorant might be a coping mechanism to deal with possible cognitive incongruence and dilemma. As a result of such withdrawing behavior of the majority of individuals, existing socio-political hierarchical representations of groups remain reinforced in digital space.

At the same time, there also exists an inclination to assume the responsibility of sharing any information they think is right. Qualitatively this theme was expressed by a 30 year old participant, when asked about their reactivity to information gathered online, "Now everybody has become a news reporter or journalist reading out and sharing whatever the forwards say". However, such opinions also subtly hint at the insight that every 'forwarded' news may not be true, as it has not been personally scrutinized. There is an underlying questioning regarding the authenticity of these assumed responsibilities and skepticism about the extent of the substantiality of shared information.

The theme of intensified xenophobic attitudes, therefore, indicates that personal biases and stereotypes, coupled with a need for power and representation of oneself and ideologies in the digital space, act as contributing elements to the process of 'otherness' (KUMAR, 2020). Extremist viewpoints on communal or regional terms are often derivatives of these personal biases and stereotypes, as explored through the analysis. Existing literature also suggests a significant increase in Xenophobic attitudes in digital space both in personal and public profiles following the pandemic across the globe (RENY; BARETTO, 2020).

3.2 HOMOGENIZING ISSUES AND ABJECTION OF THE MARGINALIZED

The analysis also explored a socio-political scenario, where multiplicity of experiences of underprivileged sections gets abjected in mainstream digital space; leading to a homogenized representation, a discourse where the 'other' is considered distinct from 'us' and is abhorred for their differences, but not given a space to explain themselves. The social location of these groups are understood from the lens of the privileged, hence their representation is fuelled from ethnocentric attitudes and personal biases of the privileged classes. The reinforced personal biases, intensified xenophobic attitude and the representation mediated by power conjointly contribute towards a creation of a homogenized 'other', identified by similar issues.

The process of 'othering' curated through the power dissemination and knowledge creation creates a discourse of the outgroup associated with a set of characteristics different from one's own group and this often leads to an outgroup homogeneity similarity bias where members are assumed to be more similar to one another. An example would be the issue related to the exodus of migrant laborers to villages which came up as a response to how different groups are represented in social media. They are "being blamed for trying to return home considering they have no work or money" (participant opinion). Participants when they engaged in conversations about this issue, seemed to be attempting to make meaning of the unique class experiences of laborers and their social locations. Concerning representation of groups in social media, some participants opine that the overload of information is associated with the disparity in representation and often financial resources fostered it. "There is an overload of information about every class of society but the topic of discussion with regards to every group is different. The rich are shown in a more sympathetic light and are lauded for their donations whereas the mistreatments of the poor are shown in crass language and some even blame the migrating poor" (participant opinion).

Kristeva's concept of abjection, although emphasizes on feminine abjection, can be adapted here to better understand how certain social classes are abjected from their own discourse (JARDINE, 1981). The multiplicity of issues faced by the members of these outgroups are therefore disintegrated and funneled into a homogenized version of issues. This hegemonic creation of the homogenized 'other', can also be related to the concept of Spivak's' 'otherness' (KUMAR, 2020) when allied with the systematic process of ignorance and ethno-cultural distance maintained from them (SICHONE, 2008). The members are hence not just removed from their discourse but also from their experiences. They are expected to work towards the homogenized issue identified through the lens of the privileged social classes, thus abjected from their realm of experiences. It is assumed that digital space enables the curation of the other, who is represented through the stereotypical notions that the privileged have about them leading

to a psychology of disparity enabled by the unjust distribution of resources among different social classes (KEEFER; GOODE; BERKEL, 2015).

The large amounts of data, limited scope of source verification and frustration from restrictions in physical space contributes to increased digital activity and reinforces personal biases. This subsequently leads to an increment in xenophobic attitude especially when the similar biases are reinforced in mainstream media representation. The dynamics of power and how it mediates one's access to creation and dissemination of information are also mediating factors in a homogenized representation of certain social classes. The tendency to blame intolerance and violence on the nation's poor, as a mode of political marginalization and xenophobia (SICHONE, 2008) is apprehended in the participant comments. These analyses enlighten us regarding the multiple layers of marginalization, which are added during the pandemic to the lives of already marginalized, and how their abjection from digital discourse paved the way to that.

4 CONCLUSION

The analysis indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic in India and the systemic transformation to digital space encouraged communal and regional xenophobia leading to misrepresentation of various social communities. Polarization of groups in digital spaces was enabled by the systematic inequalities existing in the cultural realm and political power play and often those despised in digital spaces often lacked accessibility to spaces that spoke about them. Further exploration of the experience of digital space from the context of classes subjected to misrepresentation would help us create a better understanding of our changing digital ecologies. and their social impact. Digital access is often shaped by the social location of individuals and therefore is related to one's social access. If the new normal in the post-pandemic future is digital, a more accessible and affordable digital space that allows more permeability to digital literacy to all social communities is necessary for a better digital society.

4.1 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study attempted to understand the representation of different social sections in digital space in the post-pandemic context. However, the sample size is confined to the urban population in India and may not be generalizable in other cultural contexts. Researchers practiced self-reflexivity to avoid biased interpretations but however, the opinions were collected online through QuestionPro platform and hence probing to the participant opinion was not within the possibility of this study.

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