The Influence of NSFW Subreddits on Exhibitionist Behavior: An In-Depth Analysis of Content, User Interactions, and Regulatory Frameworks

Sreeram K Y

Post Graduate student, Department of Forensic science, Garden City University, Bengaluru, India.
Email - sreeramky3502@gmail.com

Abstract: *The advent of social media has profoundly influenced the dynamics of online interaction and self-expression, with Reddit emerging as a prominent platform for diverse content sharing through its extensive array of subreddits. This research paper examines the potential role of Reddit's NSFW (Not Safe For Work) subreddits in fostering exhibitionist tendencies among users. By analyzing a sample of 150 NSFW subreddits, this study investigates the accessibility of these groups, the nature of the content posted, and the interactions within the comments sections. The findings indicate that the ease of access to explicit content, coupled with positive reinforcement from community interactions, may contribute to the development of exhibitionist behaviors. Furthermore, this paper discusses preventative measures in accordance with the IT Rules 2021, the Information Technology Act, Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, and Section 4 of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986. The research underscores the importance of stringent content moderation, enhanced age verification processes, and the promotion of ethical standards on digital platforms to mitigate the potential adverse effects of exposure to explicit content. By addressing these issues, this study aims to contribute to the creation of a safer and more responsible online environment.*

Key Words: *NSFW subreddits, Exhibitionism, Digital content regulation, Exhibitionist behavior, Content moderation*

1. INTRODUCTION: The social media landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation, fundamentally altering online interaction and self-expression. Among the prominent platforms, Reddit has carved a unique niche, facilitating the exchange of diverse content through its extensive network of subreddits dedicated to a vast array of interests. This research delves into the potential role that Reddit's Not Safe For Work (NSFW) subreddits play in fostering exhibitionist tendencies among its users. Exhibitionism, traditionally understood as a mental health condition characterized by the public exposure of one's genitals for sexual gratification (1, 2), has been primarily studied within a clinical context (3). However, the anonymity and ease of access inherent to online platforms like Reddit may create an environment conducive to exhibitionist behavior (4). This study examines a sample of 150 NSFW subreddits, analyzing their accessibility, the type of content posted, and the user interactions within comment sections.

Our study seeks to explore the potential link between the readily available explicit content on these subreddits and the reinforcement of exhibitionist behavior through positive social validation within online communities. Research suggests that exhibitionists seek gratification from exposure, and the online environment may provide a platform for fulfilling this desire through comments, upvotes, and other forms of online validation (5, 6). Studies by Park et al. (5) and Oswald et al. (6) highlight the connection between exhibitionism and engagement in social media use, with content production acting as a mediating factor. Furthermore, the potential for anonymity on platforms like Reddit might embolden individuals with exhibitionist tendencies who may not exhibit such behavior offline (4). Hayes and Dragiewicz (7) explore the phenomenon of unsolicited explicit images online, questioning the motivations behind such behavior.

However, the impact of online exhibitionism extends beyond the individual. Studies by Choi et al. (8) and Henry and Flynn (27) highlight the potential negative consequences for victims of online exhibitionism, including feelings of fear, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. This research also explores potential preventative measures aligned with relevant legal frameworks in India. These include the IT Rules 2021, the Information Technology Act, Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, and Section 4 of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986. These legal instruments provide a foundation for regulating online content and safeguarding vulnerable users. By advocating for stricter content moderation policies, enhanced age verification processes, and the promotion of ethical standards on digital platforms, this research aims to contribute to a safer and more responsible online environment. Stringent content moderation, as advocated by scholars like Calvert (9) and Wollert & Cramer (10), can help mitigate the potential negative effects of exposure to explicit content. Additionally, age verification processes can prevent minors from accessing harmful content (9, 10). This study also recognizes the importance of fostering responsible online behavior among users. Research by Mo and Leung (30) and Correa et al. (31) explores the interplay between personality and social media use, highlighting the potential for online platforms to influence users' behavior. By promoting ethical engagement on social media, we can contribute to a more positive online environment.

This research adds to the ongoing research regarding the psychological and behavioral impacts of social media use. Drawing upon existing research on exhibitionism, voyeurism, and online behavior (11-26, 28-29), this investigation sheds light on the potential interplay between social media platforms and the manifestation of exhibitionist tendencies. By examining the dynamics within NSFW subreddits, we can gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue and develop strategies for creating a safer online experience for all users.

2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH: The primary aim of this research is to investigate the potential correlation between the widespread availability of explicit content on Reddit's Not Safe For Work (NSFW) subreddits and the possible reinforcement of exhibitionist tendencies among its user base. The inherent anonymity and ease of access characteristic of online platforms like Reddit may create an environment that fosters exhibitionist behavior. This study seeks to explore the hypothesis that readily available explicit content within these subreddits could be linked to the potential reinforcement of exhibitionist tendencies through the mechanism of social validation received within online communities. By examining this potential association, the research endeavors to illuminate the intricate interplay between social media platforms and the manifestation of exhibitionist behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY: Prior to commencing the sample analysis for data extraction within the scope of this research, several pivotal factors were thoroughly considered. A comprehensive examination was conducted to understand user behavior within the Reddit ecosystem. This analysis encompassed a meticulous review of several key areas: the terms and conditions governing platform usage, the default settings associated with newly created user accounts (particularly their impact on discoverability and access to subreddits), and the various accessibility mechanisms employed by subreddits on the platform.

3.1 Recording the default settings of a Reddit user's profile: Initially, the documentation focused on the default settings of users' Reddit accounts, particularly emphasizing instances where the mobile number associated had no prior connection to a Telegram account. This documentation was essential due to its significant impact on accessibility and user engagement dynamics within subreddits on the Reddit platform.
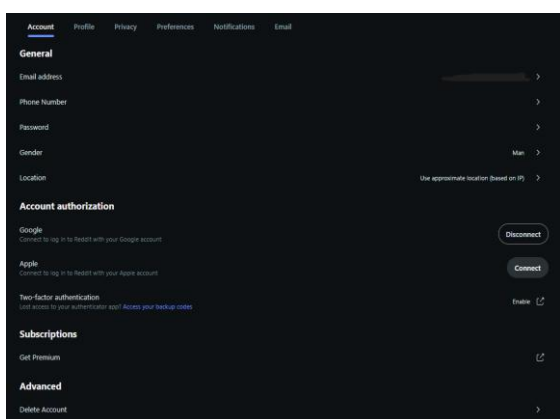

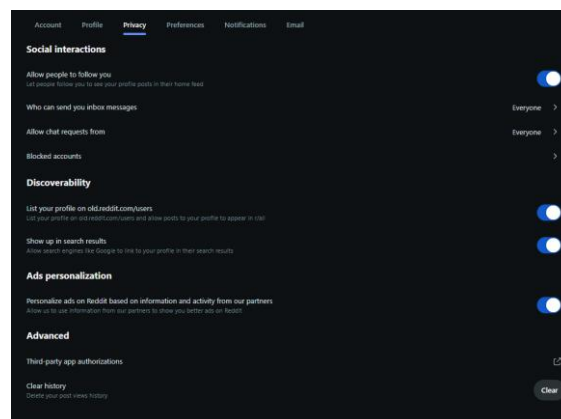Fig.1 shows the default account settings   Fig.2 shows the default privacy settings
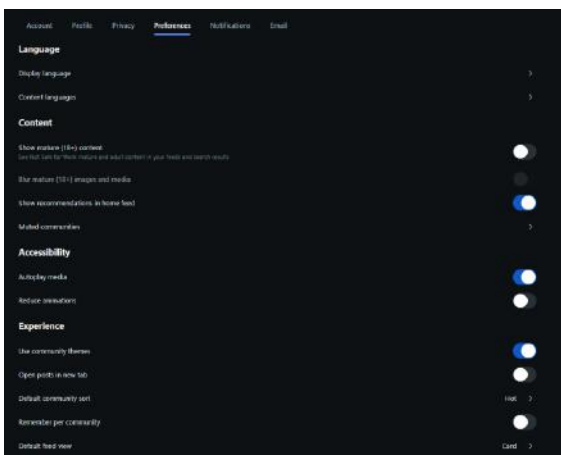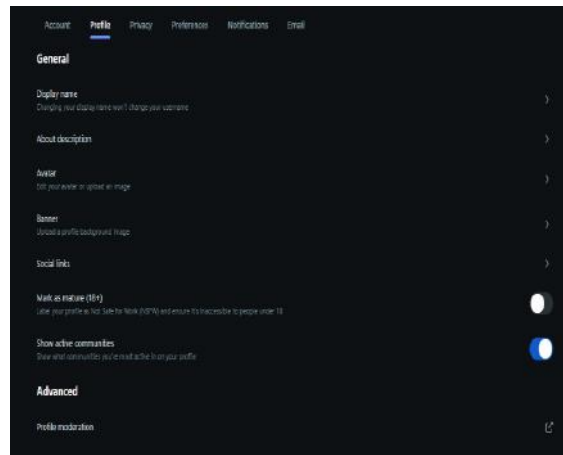
| Fig.3 shows the default preference settings | Fig.4 shows the default profile settings |

3.2 Assessing the Accessibility of Subreddits: To attain the desired number of samples (150 NSFW subreddits), this study required a methodological strategy addressing the accessibility of the respective subreddits. A multifaceted approach was employed, focusing on key factors such as third-party websites, promotions (sharing links) within the subreddits, and the Reddit search option. External websites, functioning as directories for subreddits, facilitated efficient discovery and sample diversification. Promotions (sharing links) within the subreddits, along with the Reddit search option designed to assist users in locating subreddits based on specific criteria, enabled targeted searches and ensured sample alignment with the research focus. This comprehensive approach to accessibility not only secured a representative sample but also contributed valuable insights for future research endeavors investigating user behavior within the Reddit ecosystem.
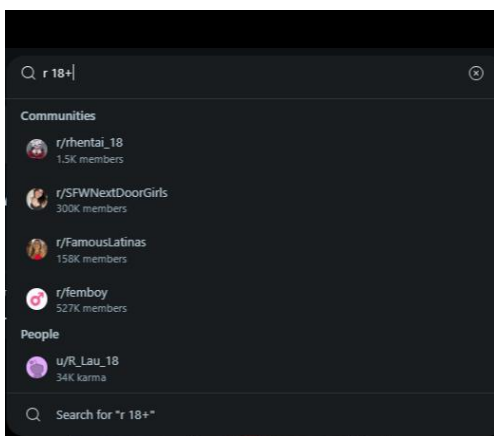

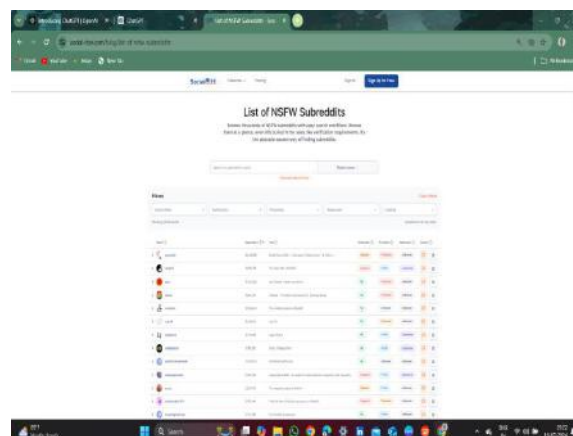| Fig.5 shows the search option in Reddit | Fig.6 shows the third party websites |

3.3 Examination of User Interactions within Subreddits: The examination concentrated on the interactions of users within subreddits, with a specific emphasis on analyzing the posts that users uploaded and the comment sections corresponding to these posts. The primary objective of this analysis was to comprehend how these interactions influence the behavior of exhibitionism among users. To achieve this, a meticulous approach was adopted. Each post's content and context were scrutinized to discern patterns and themes that might reveal underlying motivations for exhibitionism. This involved a detailed review of the language, tone, and subject matter of the posts, as well as the frequency and nature of posts made by individual users.

Furthermore, the comment sections associated with these posts were thoroughly examined. This aspect of the analysis focused on understanding how other users' responses and interactions might reinforce or discourage exhibitionistic behavior. The comments were analyzed for their content, tone, and engagement level, noting whether they provided positive reinforcement, critical feedback, or neutral responses. By combining these two layers of analysis—posts and comments—the study aimed to identify the dynamic interplay between user-generated content and community feedback

within subreddits. This comprehensive examination sought to verify the impact of these dynamics on user behavior, particularly in fostering or mitigating exhibitionistic tendencies.

The insights gained from this analysis were pivotal in uncovering the psychological and social mechanisms that drive exhibitionistic behavior among Reddit users. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing strategies to manage and moderate such behaviors within online communities, thereby contributing to a healthier and more balanced digital ecosystem.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

4.1 DSM-5 and Exhibitionism: According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), exhibitionistic disorder is characterized by intense sexual arousal from the exposure of one's genitals to an unsuspecting person. This arousal is manifested through fantasies, urges, or behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The findings from this study align with the criteria outlined in the DSM-5, as the behavior observed in NSFW subreddits reflects the exhibitionistic tendencies described in the manual. Users posting explicit content for sexual gratification and receiving validation from the community mirrors the exhibitionistic behaviors defined by the DSM-5.

4.2 Psychological and Social Mechanisms: The anonymity inherent to Reddit offers users a safe space to explore exhibitionistic behaviors without the fear of real-world repercussions. This anonymity lowers the barrier to entry for individuals who may be hesitant to engage in such behaviors publicly. The positive feedback loop created by community interactions—such as comments, upvotes, and awards—serves as a form of social validation. Social validation is a powerful psychological motivator, particularly for individuals seeking affirmation and recognition. The positive reinforcement received through community interactions likely enhances the gratification derived from exhibitionistic behaviors, thereby encouraging continued engagement. This aligns with existing research that suggests social media platforms can significantly influence user behavior through mechanisms of social validation and reinforcement (Park et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2019). The constant feedback and validation from the community can create a cycle where users are motivated to post more explicit content to receive further positive reinforcement.

The analysis of 150 NSFW subreddits yielded significant findings regarding their accessibility, the nature of content posted, and the interactions within the comment sections. These findings provide insights into how these elements potentially contribute to fostering exhibitionist tendencies among users.

4.3 Relevance of accessibility factors and joining behavior in subreddits:

The accessibility factors available for joining Telegram groups and channels emerged as a key determinant of user interaction patterns:

a) Third-party Websites: External websites that act as directories for subreddits were found to play a crucial role in facilitating the discovery of NSFW subreddits. These websites categorize and list subreddits, allowing users to efficiently locate specific types of explicit content. The ease of access provided by these directories simplifies the process for users seeking NSFW subreddits, thereby increasing the likelihood of engagement.
b) Promotions within Subreddits: A prevalent practice observed was the sharing of links to other NSFW subreddits within the posts and comment sections of existing subreddits. This internal promotion helps in building interconnected communities of NSFW content, enhancing visibility, and encouraging users to explore multiple subreddits. Such practices significantly contribute to the seamless navigation across NSFW content on the platform.
c) Reddit Search Option: The built-in search functionality of Reddit was found to be highly effective in locating NSFW subreddits. Users could easily find subreddits based on specific keywords and interests, which further streamlined the discovery process. This accessibility feature allows users to quickly find and join communities that align with their explicit content preferences.

4.4 Relevance of Content analyzed from subreddits:

a) **Nature of Content**: The content analysis of the sampled NSFW subreddits revealed a predominant focus on explicit and sexually explicit material. Users frequently posted personal photos and videos that exhibited sexual exhibitionism.

The content ranged from suggestive imagery to explicit sexual acts, showcasing a broad spectrum of exhibitionistic behavior.

b) **Frequency of Posts**: It was observed that certain users displayed a high frequency in posting explicit content. These users often uploaded multiple posts within a short time frame, indicating a potential pattern of exhibitionistic tendencies. The repeated engagement in self-exposure suggests a correlation between frequent posting and a desire for exhibitionistic gratification.

4.5 Relevance of User Interactions in subreddits:

a) **Comment Sections**: The comment sections of NSFW posts were found to be highly interactive. Users frequently provided feedback, praise, and validation through comments, upvotes, and awards. Positive reinforcement was a common theme, with many comments explicitly praising the content and encouraging further posting. This positive feedback loop likely serves as a significant motivator for users to continue engaging in exhibitionistic behavior.

b) **Community Engagement**: The level of engagement in comment sections varied, but popular posts typically received substantial interaction. These interactions included detailed comments, discussions, and expressions of admiration or desire, further reinforcing the behavior of the original posters. The communal validation and support provided by the subreddit members play a crucial role in sustaining and encouraging exhibitionistic tendencies.

The findings of this study underscore the potential role of Reddit's NSFW subreddits in fostering exhibitionist tendencies among users. The combination of easy access to explicit content, positive reinforcement from community interactions, and the anonymity provided by the platform appears to contribute to the development and reinforcement of exhibitionistic behaviors.

4.6 Case Study: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B) Action

In a significant move, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B) in India coordinated with various intermediaries to block 18 OTT platforms publishing obscene, vulgar, and, in some instances, pornographic content. This action included disabling 19 websites, 10 apps (7 on Google Play Store, 3 on Apple App Store), and 57 social media accounts associated with these platforms for public access in India. Union Minister for Information & Broadcasting, Shri Anurag Singh Thakur, emphasized the responsibility of platforms to not propagate obscenity, vulgarity, and abuse under the guise of 'creative expression'. On March 12, 2024, Shri Thakur announced the takedown of these 18 OTT platforms under the provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000, in consultation with other Ministries/Departments of the Government of India, and domain experts specializing in media and entertainment, women's rights, and child rights.

This case study exemplifies the proactive stance taken by the Indian government to regulate digital content and prevent the dissemination of harmful material. It highlights the importance of cross-departmental collaboration and the involvement of domain experts in crafting effective regulatory measures. The coordinated effort to block access to platforms propagating obscene content underscores the government's commitment to protecting societal values and safeguarding vulnerable populations from exposure to harmful content.

4.7 Suggestions in terms of formulating Preventative Measures:

To address the potential adverse effects of exposure to explicit content on Reddit, the following preventive measures are recommended:

a) **Stringent Content Moderation**:Implement advanced algorithms and human moderators to detect and remove explicit content that violates platform policies and legal standards. Regular audits and updates to moderation policies can enhance their effectiveness. Effective content moderation requires a combination of automated tools and human oversight to accurately identify and remove harmful content while minimizing false positives.

b) **Enhanced Age Verification**:Strengthen age verification processes to prevent minors from accessing NSFW subreddits. This can include requiring government-issued identification or other reliable verification methods to ensure compliance with age restrictions. Implementing robust age verification measures helps protect minors from exposure to explicit content and aligns with legal requirements for online safety.

c) Promotion of Ethical Standards: Encourage responsible online behavior by promoting ethical standards and digital literacy among users. Educational campaigns and community guidelines can help users understand the implications of their online actions and foster a more respectful online environment. Promoting ethical engagement involves educating users about the consequences of their behavior and encouraging positive interactions within the community.

d) Collaboration with Legal Authorities: Work closely with legal authorities to ensure compliance with relevant laws and regulations. Platforms should establish clear protocols for responding to legal requests and cooperate with law enforcement agencies in investigating and addressing illegal activities. Collaboration with legal authorities ensures that platforms are not only compliant with the law but also proactive in addressing potential issues.

e) Transition Period for Compliance: Given the technological complexities involved, social-media companies, telecom operators, and startups may require a transition period of 18-24 months to fully comply with the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. This period should be utilized to develop and implement the necessary technical and operational infrastructure. Allowing a transition period provides companies with the time needed to adapt to new regulations and implement effective compliance measures.

5. CONCLUSION: This research conducted on the impact of Reddit's NSFW subreddits reveals crucial insights into how digital platforms can foster exhibitionistic behaviors among users. The accessibility of explicit content, coupled with positive reinforcement from community interactions, creates an environment conducive to the development and perpetuation of exhibitionistic tendencies. This study highlights several key findings that have significant implications for understanding the psychological and social dynamics at play in online exhibitionism. First, the ease with which users can discover NSFW subreddits through third-party websites and internal subreddit promotions highlights the seamless nature of content accessibility on Reddit. This ease of discovery facilitates the engagement of users with exhibitionistic tendencies, allowing them to find and join communities that cater to their interests. Additionally, Reddit's effective search functionality further simplifies the process of finding explicit content, increasing the likelihood of engagement with exhibitionistic behaviors.

Second, the analysis of the content within NSFW subreddits revealed a predominant focus on explicit and sexually suggestive material. The frequent posting of personal explicit content by certain users suggests a pattern of behavior aligned with exhibitionistic tendencies, indicative of the gratification users derive from self-exposure and the validation received from the community. Third, the high level of interaction in the comment sections of NSFW posts demonstrates the significant role of social validation in reinforcing exhibitionistic behaviors. Positive feedback, in the form of comments, upvotes, and awards, creates a positive reinforcement loop that encourages users to continue engaging in exhibitionism. The communal validation provided by subreddit members plays a critical role in sustaining and encouraging exhibitionistic behaviors, as detailed and supportive comments serve as powerful motivators for users to continue posting explicit content.

The study's findings align with the criteria outlined in the DSM-5 for exhibitionistic disorder, which is characterized by intense sexual arousal from exposing one's genitals to an unsuspecting person. The behaviors observed in NSFW subreddits reflect these exhibitionistic tendencies, as users derive gratification from the exposure and validation provided by the community. The anonymity offered by Reddit lowers the barriers for individuals to engage in exhibitionistic behavior, while the positive feedback from the community reinforces this behavior, creating a cycle of continuous engagement. The case study involving the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B) in India illustrates the proactive steps taken by regulatory bodies to address the dissemination of obscene content. This action underscores the importance of regulatory measures in managing explicit content on digital platforms. To mitigate the potential negative impacts of exposure to explicit content, several preventive measures are recommended. Implementing advanced algorithms and human moderators to detect and remove explicit content that violates platform policies, and strengthening age verification processes to prevent minors from accessing NSFW subreddits are essential. Encouraging responsible online behavior through educational campaigns and community guidelines that promote ethical standards and digital literacy among users is also crucial. Establishing clear protocols for responding to legal requests and cooperating with law enforcement agencies to ensure compliance with relevant laws and regulations will enhance the efficacy of these measures. Allowing social media companies, telecom operators, and startups a transition period of 18-24 months to fully comply with the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, will enable them to develop and implement the necessary technical and operational infrastructure.

This study provides a foundation for further exploration into the psychological mechanisms behind exhibitionistic behavior in online settings. Future research should focus on investigating the long-term psychological impacts of engaging in exhibitionistic behaviors on digital platforms, evaluating the effectiveness of various preventive measures

in reducing the prevalence of exhibitionistic behaviors and protecting vulnerable populations, and conducting cross-platform analyses to compare exhibitionistic behaviors across different social media platforms to understand the unique dynamics of each platform.

In conclusion, balancing user privacy and freedom of expression with the need to regulate explicit content is essential for creating a digital ecosystem that is safe and supportive for all users. By addressing these complex issues through collaborative efforts between platforms, regulatory bodies, and users, we can work towards fostering a more ethical and responsible online community.

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