

Do Users in India, Kenya and Ghana React Differently to Problematic Content?

Introduction

Social media platforms have brought the world closer, and enabled users to express themselves freely, fearlessly, and safely across the globe. These platforms have also enabled users to access and consume diverse content, in a never seen before manner. While the popularity of social media platforms has the potential for turning them into a vehicle for inclusive, democratic, and free expression, their misuse may cause much harm to users (particularly new as well as to non-users), in the form of increasing polarisation, creating trust deficits, instigating negative reactions, promoting abusive behaviour, etc. Such misuse typically happens through the spread of allegedly incorrect, sensational, provocative, divisive, hateful, and misleading information (problematic content).

Problematique

It is plausible that various users differently perceive, engage, understand, internalise, and react to problematic content. The reactions may vary from sub-conscious, inadvertent, or wilful decision of not engaging with the content, to promoting and spreading it. These varied reactions may be on account of difference in users' ethnographic, cultural and political scenarios (India, Kenya, and Ghana), geographic location (urban, peri-urban and rural areas), demographic profile (age, gender, education), economic condition (income level) experience (number of years of internet usage), psychological and cognitive variables, extent and duration of exposure to the problematic content.

CUTS Study

Recognising the need to understand diverse perspectives of users to problematic content, to help them engage more critically or consciously to avoid problematic experiences; Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) intends to analyse and compare how platform users in India, Kenya, and Ghana engage with problematic content to better understand factors (as mentioned above) influencing such engagement, to devise targeted factor-specific intervention plan to help users avoid problematic experiences.

Objectives

The study envisages to meet the following objectives:

- Check if misuse of social media platforms (through problematic content – incorrect, sensational, provocative, divisive, hateful, and misleading information) may cause different levels and kinds of harm (in the form of increasing polarisation, creating trust deficits, instigating negative reactions, promoting abusive behaviour, etc.) to different users, particularly new as well as to non-users.
- Understand diverse perspectives of different users (difference in users' ethnographic, cultural and political scenarios, geographic location, demographic profile, economic condition experience, psychological and cognitive variables, extent and duration of exposure to the problematic content, etc.) towards problematic content.
- Devise targeted factor-specific intervention plan to help users engage more critically or consciously, to avoid problematic experiences arising due to exposure to problematic content.

Proposed Methodology

A broad outline of steps to implement the study has been set out below.

Secondary research and situation analysis: This will involve a review of relevant literature, reports, papers, and articles available in the public domain on problematic content on social media platforms, user behaviour and reaction thereof in the project countries.

Gap assessment and design of consumer interaction strategy: Based on secondary research, information gaps to be plugged based on interaction with users will be identified. Also, the information required to be verified from users will be noted. An operational strategy note would be prepared and fine-tuned based on the interaction with relevant subject experts and stakeholders in direct and focus group discussions. A Project Advisory Committee would also be constituted, comprising of such experts, which would guide the research team throughout the study.

Impersonal user perspective study: Appropriate data collection tools (structured and semi-structured questionnaires having multiple-choice and open-ended questions to obtain quantitative and qualitative responses) would be prepared, and administered to the appropriate number of users in the three countries. Offline/online modes will be utilised to reach out to users within available constraints.

In-person simulation exercises and laboratory study: Based on findings of impersonal user perspective study, tools for in-person simulation exercises and laboratory studies for deeper

interaction with different select user groups will be designed. This will aid in a better understanding of users' perception and reaction, as well as validating the findings from the impersonal user perspective study.

Analysis, documentation of findings: The findings of primary research will be tabulated and analysed to validate and build evidence beyond the secondary research.

Envisaged Outcome

The study will enable us to understand the rationale behind different kinds of users' inadvertent contribution (reposting, forwarding, believing, reacting) in the spread of problematic content, which will help in recommending practices for users on how to consciously avoid the spread of problematic content on social media platforms in India, Kenya and Ghana.

Proposed Outputes

The findings of the study will yield evidence-based research reports (report/paper/presentation, etc.) on the subject, for each of the three project countries. An appropriate number of op-eds, briefing/discussion papers, event reports, etc. may also be prepared. Also, perspectives of select users on problematic content will be captured on digital tools like audio and video to add a human touch to the initiative.

Envisaged Timeline

The study is expected to be completed within one year, i.e. during September 01, 2020, to August 31, 2021.

