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Digital Childhood: Representation of Marginalized Children in Indian Social Media Narratives

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- Page No. 1-13

Abstract: *In the epoch of digital media, the childhood phase is predominantly dictated and mirrored through online platforms. For marginalized children in India, social media as a medium represents a community of the same name is both a window to their visibility and a space of misrepresentation. Those children who are from Dalit, tribal, rural, or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, social media illustrates that it is a window to their visibility, and simultaneously a space that is filled with distortion of the image of such children and the issues they face. These representations have the potential to sway public opinion, policy-makers, and even the course of interventions for child rights. This paper dwells on the figures of marginalized children in Indian social media narratives, first and foremost, institutional posts (by NGOs, government bodies), then the user-generated content. It sets out to determine to what extent these representations are the ones that either enable children or perpetuate the stereotypes. A qualitative content analysis was embarked upon by purposive sampling of 50 Instagram and Twitter posts from verified NGO/government handles and 50 user-generated posts using hashtags like #ChildRights, #StreetChildren, and #SaveTheChild. Visual and textual elements were coded to ascertain the theme of dignity, victimization, resilience, and agency. The institutional posts predominantly show marginalized children as "objects of rescue" or "hopeful futures," while user-generated content vacillates between sympathy and sensationalism. The children's voices were scarce. The aspects of poverty and helplessness were overemphasized in a way that potentially could have led to a problem of one-dimensionality, thus, the characters of the children, their cultural identity, or the community resilience were even left out of the focus. Indian social media narratives concerning marginalized kids generally show them in a way that is off their realities, with their emotional appeal being given priority over the accurate representation. Participatory digital storytelling, which places children's voices and identities at the center, is needed. Ethical storytelling principles and digital literacy can aid in reconfiguring these empowerment-oriented narratives.*

Keywords: Digital Childhood, Marginalized Children, Social Media Narratives

I. Introduction

Digital technologies have radically changed how childhood is produced and mediated on international arenas. From Instagram posts to NGO-led campaigns, children's faces travel immeasurably across digital landscapes, often devoid of context but subject to a complex, conflicting symbolic weight. These transformations are especially visible in countries and regions marked by deep structural inequities, where children from marginalized communities—defined by factors such as caste, class, ethnicity, or regional disadvantage—are frequently framed through adult-centric narratives of suffering, vulnerability, or redemption (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Consequently, the digital portrait of childhood—particularly that of marginalized youth—is not actually created by these children at all, but through institutional logics and cultural assumptions that are built into larger media ecosystems. Social media



especially has been a key battleground for narrative warfare, humanitarian activism, and political mobilization. Though these platforms provide really impactful and powerful tools to raise awareness, there are some really big questions around ethics, agency, and representation. Organizations often forget that the subjects are kids! As a result, the intersection of activism, media, and digital technology has increased both the scale and the danger of misrepresentation that vulnerable populations face. As for the children, their incidental presence in these digital spaces is frequently without their knowledge, consent or ability to regulate. It certainly affects public opinion and eventually, policy. Additionally, as the production of content has migrated to social media platforms, new modes of digital content creation that prioritize visceral, emotionally striking, and easily digestible materials have exacerbated these critiques. This jarring dynamic produces a marketplace of ideas that favors affect over information, feeling over fact. When it comes to the lives of marginalized childhoods, this often results in stories of children being overdetermined by tropes of victimhood, innocence, or resilience and never with these complex, multidimensional narratives interwoven. Children are presented either as helpless recipients of aid or as heroic survivors of systemic adversity, with little acknowledgment of the socioeconomic structures that shape these lived realities (Orgad & Vella, 2012). These tropes flatten the complexities of children's experiences and can perilously hide the very systems—economic, cultural, political—that create their marginalization. Crucially, even when participatory digital storytelling tools are employed, children's voices are filtered through adult mediators, such as humanitarian aid workers, educators, or content creators, further embedded them into existing asymmetries of power (James, 2007). Technologies like smartphones and apps hold great promise to create the potential for participatory engagement. Their implementation is almost never neutral. What is curated, shared, and amplified online is largely in the hands of adults that possess greater digital literacy, social capital, and control over narrative framing. This is where the conversation turns to the ethics. These concerns around the ethics of digital representation of especially children have become a battleground of critical media scholarship. Third et al. (2017) further observe that even though digital platforms have the potential to democratize participation, they risk exacerbating exclusions in turn, particularly when considerations of informed consent, data privacy, and visual commodification are neglected. Indeed, images of children featured in fundraising or advocacy campaigns can evoke empathy and raise funds by focusing on the suffering rather than dignity. These images can then be shared without the child's or caregiver's consent, effectively turning children into aestheticized objects in new digital economies of visibility and emotion. One of the most immediate critiques for current representational practices is that they are often not child-focused. In this backlash, many scholars and practitioners are calling for more rights-based, inclusive approaches to storytelling. Storytelling that understands children not as passive subjects, but rather as rights-holders and potential narrators of their own stories. Uprichard (2008) calls for a paradigm shift in our understanding of childhood, away from the notion of a period of being human still in the process of becoming, to that of a childhood experience in its own right. The implication is that children must not only be talked about or depicted through the lenses created by adults, but rather they must be



involved as co-writers in the creation of stories surrounding their lives. Further, the politics of visibility in the digital age makes participation much more complicated. It's like I always say — visibility is not inherently empowering if you don't have agency and structural critique to back it up, and sometimes it can be exploitative. The perverse logic of digital platforms further incentivizes the production of media that provoke such radical emotions—shock, sadness, outrage—resulting in what Couldry and Hepp (2017) call the “datafication of human experience,” as lives are reduced to algorithmic metrics, engagement rates, and shareable infographics. For instance, in the representation of children in crisis—street children, those from conflict zones, or victims of trafficking—the visual takes over as a stand-in for veracity, even when without context. This research addresses these issues by critically examining representations of marginalized children in India, through a lens of power, privilege and difference, within digital stories. India provides a uniquely critical setting for such an exploration, owing to its size and heterogeneity, deep-based social stratification, and fast-paced digital development. As UNICEF and other child rights organizations across the globe will tell you, millions of Indian children still grow up in environments of dire poverty, exclusion, and systemic discrimination. Their narratives too often get penned by other people, mostly for purposes of advocacy or fundraising. Although mobile phones and digital platforms have created unprecedented opportunities to amplify diverse, participatory voices, the kids of these communities are still too often absent as storytellers of their own experiences. To further explore this representational gap, the study conducts a qualitative content analysis of 100 social media posts, 50 institutional posts from verified NGO or government handles operating in Canada and 50 user-generated posts using #childhood hashtags on Twitter. The posts were coded for four main themes-based literature and emergent coding—themes of victimization, dignity, resilience, and agency. These thematic categories provide insight not only into what is being represented, but how—what linguistic, visual, and symbolic tools are being employed to convey meaning. By looking at both institutional and user-generated content, this research is able to document the breadth of digital storytelling practices featured in this study from highly organized, agenda-driven campaigns to citizenry grassroots, visual expressions. It focuses especially on the frequency and framing of these four themes, posing critical questions about what is there, what is missing, and what these absences mean for social perception and child rights. Through our content analysis we examine how children's identities are formed at the crossroads of digital culture and social hierarchy, illustrating how digital storytelling can both perpetuate and oppose the ideologies to which it often submits. Ultimately, this study addresses a larger goal of decolonizing visual culture to better realize the ethical and political stakes in terms of representing children in digital realms. It advocates for inclusive, child-centered approaches that foreground children's voices, protect their dignity, and challenge the flattening effects of reductive digital narratives. As governments, NGOs, and content creators increasingly use social media to reach audiences and advocate for causes, the need to go beyond simply appealing to emotion and toward ethical storytelling is more important than ever. Meaningful representation. Representation is not just about becoming visible—it's about



power, who gets to speak on their behalf, and what kinds of childhoods come to be legible in the digital public sphere.

II. Rationale of Study

This digital turn has profoundly transformed the aesthetic, political, and cultural practice of narrative storytelling and humanitarian advocacy alike, alongside complex social representation, particularly so when it comes to the portrayals of childhood. Youth social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become powerful platforms where discussions of the realities of these marginalized children are created, spread, and shared. While these platforms do offer opportunities for greater inclusivity and participatory storytelling, they too can just as easily slip into the all-too-common trap of reproducing reductive, adult-centric representations steeped in themes of victimhood, pity and dependency. This is of critical importance in contexts like India, where overlaid structural inequalities—caste, class, gender, geography—not only deepen the marginalization of children, but paradoxically make them easier to identify and see within digital humanitarians' digital humanitarian campaigns. There was a huge gap of knowledge on how children—especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds—are depicted in India's social media environment. Yet a good deal of this digital content creation, both from institutional sources like NGOs and government agencies, local users, still really perpetuates these damaging visual tropes—children as victims, passive recipients of aid or future hopefuls. These representations are a violent erasure of children's agency, resilience and dignity, obliterating their lived experiences and realities, narratives and histories. This research was guided by the principle that representation is always a charged act. It's an ideological and cultural decision that shapes public perception, frames policy discourse and debate, and most importantly directly undermines the fundamental rights of children. Through a qualitative content analysis of 100 social media posts, 50 institutional and 50 user-generated, the study explores how four overarching themes—victimization, dignity, resilience, and agency—are represented and appropriated. Our hope, as with all of these posts, is to go beyond just understanding what's being visualized, how it's being visualized and to what goal. By attending to textuality and visibility, this project examines the symbolic processes through which childhoods are produced on the internet. Additionally, at a moment when access and participation in that burgeoning digital realm is increasingly unequal, and monopolized by logics of algorithmic engagement, we have to wonder, who gets to tell children's stories, and how are they permitted to circulate. These findings aim to contribute to ongoing academic and policy discussion on ethical digital storytelling, visual politics, and child rights by highlighting the representational gap and advocating for more inclusive, participatory, and rights-based narratives that acknowledge children's dignity and complexity. In so doing, this study seeks to disrupt exploitative tropes and advance a methodology for creating more ethical and transformative representations of marginalized children in digital spaces.

III. Literature Review

Critical engagement with the ways in which childhood is mediated by digital technologies has become a dynamic space for scholarship, creative expression, and activist work, particularly in contexts around the globe where marginalization is exacerbated by structural inequities. As



Hall (1997) explains, media not only mirrors the world, but creates it, thus influencing how society understands the social reality that is, particularly for marginalized social groups like children. Representations of any marginalized Indian child—all Dalit, tribal, rural, or economically deprived children—on digital platforms are almost never devoid of prejudices. Instead, they are all too often swayed by policymakers' priorities or gut feelings that do not begin to represent the real-world effects and circumstances of these children's lives. Banaji and Bhat (2020) further challenge South Asian media that digital platforms increasingly silence children's voices and centre adult interpretations and interventions. NGO-fueled social media rush campaigns are often based on sometimes misleading or even fake imagery that appeals to emotion or shock to provoke public outrage and empathy, generating support and funding. While these types of strategies may be interesting or even awareness-raising, they usually reduce children to passive recipients of adult benevolence that ultimately upholds the power hierarchies and fails to recognize the unique nature of each child or their cultural backgrounds. Digital media can both democratize participation while simultaneously deepening exclusion, cautioned Buckingham (2011), especially in terms of short-changing the young, where access and digital literacy are uneven. Livingstone & Third (2017) promote participatory digital practices that help children tell their stories, but warn against uncritical adoption of digital tools without engaging with broader ethical issues regarding consent, representation, and data protection. As Sen and Bhan (2019) recently show, hashtags like #SaveTheChild or #StreetChildren—even if meant positively—reproduce and further circulate hyper-sensationalized narratives that ignore and undermine the resilience of the vulnerable. Measuring digital poverty by UNICEF (2020) gives a broad global picture that children's online presence is still divided along class and caste lines, therefore influencing how disadvantaged children are represented or catered to. The colonial baggage that comes with any visual representation of Indian children in philanthropic appeals shows how these tropes have persisted into present-day digital storytelling. More than just ensuring we have consent; these methods enable us to foreground children as co-producers and active narrators of their own lived experiences. To our knowledge, the existing literature goes no further than calling for a transition from adult-centered, emotive, and sensationalistic storytelling toward more inclusive, participatory, and ethical storytelling. This initial research is advanced by this study, exploring the representation of marginalized children in Indian social media through the lens of dignity and agency, with particular focus on victimization and resilience in both formal and informal content.

IV. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative content analysis framework to construct an understanding of how underrepresented children are portrayed in Indian social media discourse. Qualitative content analysis is suitable for exploring the meanings embedded in text and visuals, especially in digital media contexts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012), and the research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm that emphasizes the subjective and socio-cultural meanings of representation (Creswell, 2013). With qualitative convenience sampling, we purposely oversampled a total of 100 posts with 50 institutional-acct posts from



NGOs, gov't agencies, and child rights bodies. 50 user-generated posts from TWT & IG, pulled from relevant hashtags (e.g #ChildRights #StreetChildren #SaveTheChild). These posts primarily seeded from Jan 2023 – Mar 2024 ranked mostly on engagement, reach, topical relevance, inclusion of marginalized childhoods (Silverman, 2016). Thematic content analysis was performed with NVivo 14 assistance, employing text and photo-based data coding. Visual elements such as expressions, settings and angles were analyzed through the visual semiotics (Rose, 2016), while captions and hashtags were scrutinized for thematic categories such as dignity, victimization, resilience and agency (Banaji & Bhat, 2020). Codes were inductively generated and peer-reviewed to ensure the inter-coder reliability (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to by anonymizing user identities, avoiding exploitative content, and referencing consent considerations for posts with children's images (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). UNICEF's (2020) digital storytelling framework and best practice recommendations were used. Triangulation occurred through comparative analysis of CMC institutional vs. user-generated content and validation of findings with literature published thus far on the subject. Among these are bias introduced by platform algorithms, the inability to control for private/non-public content and the cultural subjectivity introduced by the researchers' interpretation. Though these challenges made the methodology and analysis complex, exhaustive, and painstakingly caveated, this resulted in an ekphrastic analysis imbued with ethical consciousness, producing grave, powerful findings about how social media continues to insidiously create, curate, and pre-determine the digital identities of India's neo-liberal, post-colonial, vulnerable youth.

V. Findings

The results from the qualitative content analysis of 100 social media posts—50 institutional and 50 user-generated—show that Indian digital narratives about marginalized children are mostly bent toward passive as well as deficit-based portrayals. Institutional content from NGOs and government bodies generally presented children as beneficiaries of charity or as “hopeful futures,” reinforcing narratives of dependency and victimhood (Balagopalan, 2014; Twum-Danso Imoh & Ame, 2012). Posts frequently used sanitized or emotionally charged imagery—children in uniform receiving gifts or looking solemn—with text emphasizing rescue or transformation, but the children's voices, opinions, and agency were conspicuously absent (Montgomery, 2009; Banaji & Bhat, 2021). This mirrors prior critiques that institutions utilize “development porn” or “poverty porn” to elicit empathy and bypass structural issues. There was a huge range when it came to user-generated content. Posts shared using the hashtags such as #SaveTheChild and #StreetChildren frequently showed images of children sleeping on streets or begging, with a tone that ranged from pity to horror to moral outrage (Noble, 2018, Sen, 2019). While many such posts did amplify horrible suffering while escaping any sort of accountability, it raised the alarm sounded by Livingstone and Third (2017), calling attention to the ethical vacuum of public digital participation on topics involving children. The prevailing narratives in both categories were those of victimization and helplessness, with little to no inclusion of stories of resilience or agency present. Cultural identity, caste-specific marginalization and community support systems were barely represented, reducing children's



lived experiences to monolithic images of the poverty (Doron & Raja, 2015; Bourdillon et al., 2010). Intersectionality was sorely lacking, with posts rarely tackling how caste, gender, and region combine to filter childhood experiences in distinctly different ways (Crenshaw, 1991). This focus on shorthand, simplified visuals can skew public perceptions, further simplifying complicated socio-political topics into easily consumable yet misleading photo-ops (Chouliaraki, 2010, Orgad, 2015). Few posts offered reflections on systemic failings such as child labor, school dropouts, or discrimination. The orientation was towards individual suffering or individual rescue, thus re-stabilizing the binary of savior and saved. Through a visual analysis, we found a desktop aesthetic characterized by an over-reliance on black-and-white filters, emotionally manipulative close-ups and overtly commodifying text overlays like “Save Me,” that aestheticizes trauma and commodifies suffering. Especially when created in viral, snackable formats, such narratives risk reinforcing harmful, one-dimensional stereotypes and distorting public perceptions and thus public policy in reductive and damaging ways. The absence of participatory storytelling, where children speak for themselves or are shown as active participants, was striking (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011; UNICEF, 2018). These conclusions require an intentional reversal of the current practices that child representation on digital platforms, in favor of ethical, inclusive, rights-based communication that prioritizes dignity and diversity over pity and spectacle (Banaji, 2017). Qualitative content analysis was conducted using hybrid coding framework developed and applied with the assistance of NVivo software. This approach combined both deductive coding, informed by the pre-existing categories developed from literature namely: Victimization, Dignity, Resilience, and Agency, and inductive coding, allowing for what might be different and emerge through additional data. This was crucial in order to uncover both theoretically informed and context specific trends within social media portrayals. The complete data set included 100 total social media postings—50 institutional posts from verified NGO/government accounts and 50 user generated posts from accounts including hashtags such as #ChildRights, #StreetChildren. Each post was imported into the NVivo and coded systemically for the textual content (e.g., captions, hashtags) as well as visual elements (e.g., photos, filters, text overlays). These codes were then applied to the posts individually and in the clusters to determine overarching themes based on repeated language employed, affect, symbolic representation, framing strategies, etc. In order to enhance the inter-rater reliability of coding, two researchers independently coded a sample of 20 posts. Coding reliability was calculated, and differences were debated and settled by agreement. This iterative process was repeated multiple times until a finalized codebook was created and used consistently across the entire data set. NVivo’s query functions and matrix coding features were employed to identify code frequency, overlaps and variations in codes across institutional and user-generated posts. The qualitative content analysis showed a patterned and systematic use of narratives. Specifically, under the theme Victimization, one participant’s post stated: “He should not have to see a school. Save him before it’s too late. Tweet us using #StreetChildren #SaveTheChild”—an obvious, emotional manipulation via vulnerability. A more uncommon tweet that expressed the spirit of Dignity was: “These children from a tribal school painted their dreams today—#ArtForChange”, capturing

creativity and the sense of agency within a vibrant cultural context. These examples are indicative of the ways in which non-normative childhoods were largely represented through reductive, essentializing, oppositional binaries largely devoid of children's agency or structural critique. Overall, the utilization of NVivo aided in the process of establishing systematic coding, pattern recognition, and analytic transparency throughout the content analysis process, ultimately supporting the prioritization of dominant and underrepresented narratives across various categories of social media communication.

Thematic Coding of Social Media Posts

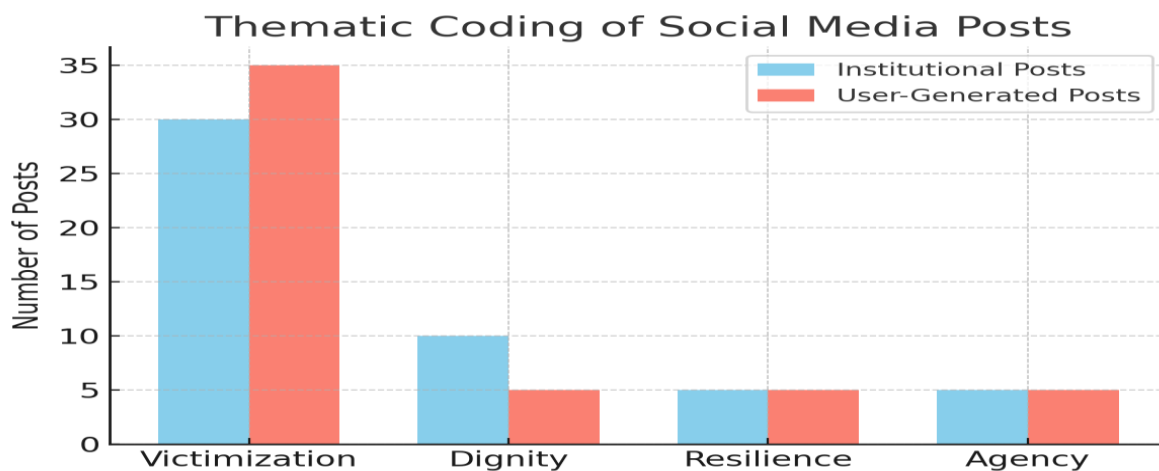


Figure 1: Thematic Distribution of Social Media Representations of Marginalized Children

The figure above shows the thematic coding results from the content analysis of 100 social media posts (50 institutional and 50 user-generated). All posts were coded under four overarching themes of Victimization, Dignity, Resilience, and Agency. Institutional posts mostly featured victimization, with dignity as a secondary theme. While these themes dominated the initial landscape of the crisis, they were not represented heavily on the social media. User-generated content instead accentuated victimization even more while predominantly excluding the messages around dignity, resilience or agency. The figure underscores the representational imbalance and the urgent need for more diverse, participatory portrayals of marginalized children in digital narratives. Technically, it signals a dangerous, single-narrative approach to victimization in user-generated content. IC3s with their systems, while costly, make visible the underrepresentation of these agency and resiliency signals, revealing the limitations of digital narratives silencing many of India's marginalized children today.

Theme 1. Victimization: Though occurring on different scales, the theme of victimization was consistently the most prevalent theme across both institutional and user-generated social media content. Marginalized children, especially Dalit, tribal, rural and economically disadvantaged children, were often painted as helpless victim in need of rescuing. Institutional pictures would usually feature children with forlorn faces, ragged garments, or being helped in schools or



refugee settlements. These posts may have had the goal of raising awareness or mobilizing support. They often only fueled a savior–victim binary by repeatedly showcasing suffering and lack. User-generated content magnified this narrative by way of emotionally charged imagery, think kids laid out on the street, weeping, or asking for money, paired with compelling captions like “save this soul” or “heartbreak.” This mode of representation threatened to condense nuanced lived experiences of childhood to truncated tales of woe, robbing the children of both their context and their complexity. Victimization took hold of the visual and textual narrative, rendering it as the primary perspective digital audiences construed marginalized childhoods through.

Theme 2. Dignity: Dignity, as a concept, came up repeatedly but tangentially. In institutional photo essays, glimpses of dignity appeared when children were depicted engaging with their education, or sharing a laugh or activity with classmates, though these scenes were typically presented under the umbrella of charity or children’s potential. What made me uncomfortable in my research, and still now, is that these posts mostly elaborated on the actions done to or for the children, not much on how or why the children existed as children. In fact, user-generated posts featured even less examples of dignified representation. Those posts that showed off the children’s creativity in more traditional attire or familial bonds were the rarity among the media streams and even they were the exceptions, not the rule. The outpouring lack of focus on dignity resulted in representations that boiled kids down to mere representations of poverty or injury instead of treating them like fully realized human beings with cultural wealth, uniqueness, or inherent worth. This thematic omission further highlights the shortcomings of social media discourses to portray youth of colour and poor communities as full-fledged actors, rather than image tokens of societal collapse.

Theme 3. Resilience: Resilience was actually the least represented theme across both institutional and user-generated posts. Just a few dozen posts depicted kids adjusting, managing, or flourishing in adversity. Several institutional posts showed schooling children moving forward and learning even with very few resources, but always presented as the exception to the rule – not the case. User-generated content was even less likely to show any resilience, instead doubling down on a focus on inaction or trauma. While the posts tended not to focus on the community, family, and cultural networks that allow children to move through adversity, As such, the portrayal of marginalized childhoods was flattened out, centered only on what they’re deprived of, as opposed to how they persist or resist. This thematic disregard furthers a tragic narrative of hopelessness, failing to recognize the agency and quotidian power most children wield in lived experiences.

Theme 4. Agency: Agency—children’s portrayal as active agents in their own lives—was the least frequent theme found. Wavelength artists were pointed in the direction of institutional posts that rarely included children’s voices, choices, or decision-making. The kids were largely depicted as hapless victims waiting to be rescued by the next aid worker or teacher. Posts that tried to illustrate children truly taking part—in guiding a group, in sharing a viewpoint, in joining a movement for social justice—were few and far between. User-generated posts provided little reprieve. Children largely served as visual subjects devoid of agency or context.



This thematic absence is all the more salient because it strips children of their status as rights-holders and furthers adult-centric narratives. If not grounded in agency, digital representations have the potential to obscure the voices of the people whose experiences they purport to showcase. This absence of participatory storytelling is a symptom of a greater problem in how we represent children — the inability to recognize that children must be viewed not only as objects of concern, but as participants who can shape their future agenda themselves.

VI. Discussion

These results from the qualitative content analysis reveal the ongoing perpetuation of deficit-oriented, depersonalized portrayals of marginalized children within Indian digital media narratives. These representations, overwhelmingly focused on the themes of victimization and helplessness, reflect past criticisms of child-centric communication strategies that focus more on emotional manipulation than on complex or uplifting depictions. The institutional posts especially mirror Montgomery's (2009) conception of a "benevolent authoritarianism," in which children are portrayed solely as objects of intervention, lacking voice or nuance. The aestheticization of the suffering that poverty porn and rescue narratives bring is one tactic that has been widely critiqued within institutional and user-generated spaces within media and development (Boltanski, 1999; Banaji, 2017). Yet while such content might succeed at achieving the fundraising aims of NGOs or the affective pleasures of online users, it fails to account for the rich and complex lived realities of the children and often causes harm by perpetuating certain dangerous stereotypes. This is in line with Chouliaraki's (2010) argument that the digital humanitarianism prioritizes emotional immediacy at the expense of structural critique, rendering complex global issues into easily digestible moral dramas. Tied for equally important is the lack of children's agency and cultural specificity in the majority of posts. The absence of any intersectional framing indicates that the social media depictions are yet to awaken to how these categories intersect to carve out children's realities (Crenshaw, 1991). Despite the participatory potential of digital media, very few posts featured child-led or rights-based storytelling, mirroring criticisms by Lundy and McEvoy (2011) on the translation of child rights frameworks into practice. Beyond the real-world, practical implications of these findings, their ethical implications cannot be understated. As Livingstone and Third (2017) caution, visibility in digital space must be accompanied by dignity, especially in the public forums where consent, misrepresentation, and audience intent are all murky at best. How children's trauma is being commodified through this hashtag event and photographic filter without appropriate context falls on the laps of civil society actors and digital platforms alike. Hence, this small study highlights the importance of developing more inclusive, participatory, and ethically grounded content creation that transcends victimhood and spectacle. Moving instead to see children as active social agents—not merely objects of intervention—can help subvert these narrow narratives and cultivate a more rights-affirming digital culture (UNICEF, 2018).

VII. Conclusion

This study thus aimed to study the representation of marginalized children in Indian social media narratives through a qualitative content analysis of 100 posts. These findings shed light



on how the typical institutional and user-created content does overwhelmingly depict children through the lenses of victimhood, dependency and suffering. It almost scandalously underrepresents dignity, resilience and agency. These patterns only serve to entrench reductive stereotypes, even as they gloss over the structural and intersectional realities of childhood in milieu of poverty, caste and regional disparity. Even with the participatory possibilities these digital platforms provided, children's voices were still very much missing, and children's realities were articulated through adult lenses instead of through their own lived experiences. These findings echo larger anxieties echoed in the media and child rights literature regarding the ethical and political implications of "poverty porn," visual commodification and non-consensual storytelling. As we look ahead, it is critical that digital actors—from NGOs to government agencies to content creators to the public—take a rights-based, inclusive approach to content production. These representations must be informed by ethical practices that honor children's agency, identity, and human dignity rather than commodifying them into spectacles of pity. A healthier, more inclusive digital discourse is imperative to help catalyse the kind of informed public engagement and in turn, the policy interventions that will best protect and promote child welfare in our rapidly evolving digital age.

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