

Research Paper

## Social media websites and circulation of explicit contents- with special reference to Kerala, India

P. Vishnuprasad<sup>1</sup>, Madona Mathew<sup>2\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 lockdown, a drastic increase in number of people viewing child pornography in Kerala was noticed. Recent reports state high rate of pornography consumption across the country, and increasing demand for child pornography. When compared to other states, Kerala is the largest producer of porn videos in India as per previous reports of Times of India in 2012. Trivandrum, Kochi stands out in the list of highest porn viewership in Kerala. Alcohol addiction, lack of sex education and a conservative society are considered as factors contributing to this scenario. We apparently came to know about the existence of such social media groups that circulate these contents. 100 local males of age group between 15-30 were taken as samples and the survey was completed with the circulation of google form. The social networking sites we focused were Instagram, WhatsApp and Telegram. As per the results, the highest sample response was for telegram on circulation of explicit content. This research deals with the study of circulation of explicit content across social media- telegram in particular, the anonymity of the senders and recipients, security of the platform, the laws and theories behind it. Other aspects include psychological dependency of viewers, child pornography, incest contents, child abuse along with the government initiatives for the control of the same. As per the findings, telegram holds several group circulating these contents and are easily available and accessible to anybody.

**Keywords:** Child Pornography, Kerala, Telegram, Explicit content, Incest, COVID-19

The Kerala state police observed the year 2019 as the 'Year of Cyber Security' to enforce zero tolerance towards child pornography and crime against children. Sexual themes have become common in the media and other mediums. People are more likely to come across sexually explicit material online intentionally or unintentionally. Explicit sexual material, particularly **pornography**, impacts young people's well-being, sexual practices, attitudes and social relationships. The exposure to explicit sexual content has been linked with addiction, poor self-esteem and engagement in unprotected sex<sup>[1]</sup>. The use of pornography is done for discovering one's own sexuality, reducing repressions about sex and sexuality and being more open-minded to diverse forms of sex. Speaking about

<sup>1</sup>School of Criminology and Crime Science, Raksha Shakthi University, Gujarat, India

<sup>2</sup>School of Forensic Science and Risk Management, Raksha Shakthi University, Gujarat, India

\*Responding Author

Received: August 07, 2020; Revision Received: September 21, 2020; Accepted: September 25, 2020

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Kerala in specific, a one-day raid caught almost 45+ people who were playing behind the curtains of these trusted social media applications. As per the recent records, Kerala is one of the main states where the demand for child pornography content is at its peak. As per previous studies 90% of the people accessing it are identified to be as males and 1% are females, whereas the rest is unidentified. The demand for children in pornography had also increased, especially amid the pandemic. The Kerala police records states that the demand for child pornography had increased in this time, obviously the abuse against children has also increased <sup>[2]</sup>. The main content people try to get accessed using these sites are Unnatural/ Abusive visuals that may include brutal torture or even rapes. Since ages, people got into dark web and all, but the basic requirement of it included high technical knowledge, but these platforms like social media applications don't require such effective technical knowledge. So, the access plays a major role too. Cyberdome noticed many groups were using the highly-secure Telegram messaging app for sharing videos of child pornography as it has strong encryption. Besides Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp were also used to circulate their material <sup>[3,4]</sup>.

The main aims of the study were to arrive at a conclusion about the viewership and circulation of explicit porn content, (mostly of children) that has drastically increased during this pandemic, to discuss about the massive exchange and dealing of explicit porn content across social media- especially Telegram, to discuss the demand for pornography content mainly child pornography, to discuss about the psychological dependency of the people getting access to these contents more often before and during pandemic lockdown, the privacy that Telegram offers so as to keep the anonymity of the people sharing the content and to analyze the accessibility of these contents to the society.

### **METHODOLOGY**

100 males of age group between 15-30 were taken as samples. The Indian state of focus for this study was Kerala.

#### ***Primary data***

A questionnaire form with a necessary set of questions regarding the topic was circulated among the sample and data was collected.

*The questionnaire included questions related to:*

1. Age group of the sample
2. Do you watch porn?
3. Has your habit of watching porn increased amid lockdown?
4. Social media platform with more groups circulating explicit contents
5. Circulation of porn contents in telegram groups
6. Number of groups you noticed that circulates porn contents in telegram
7. Kind of porn circulated in telegram
8. Circulation of child porn or incest porn materials in telegram groups?
9. Circulation of such contents during lockdown period
10. Circulation of pictures/ videos of girls without their consent on telegram
11. Security policies of telegram
12. Psychological dependency towards porn
13. Unnatural sexual contents and telegram

**Secondary data**

The secondary data was collected from printed media as well as digital media.

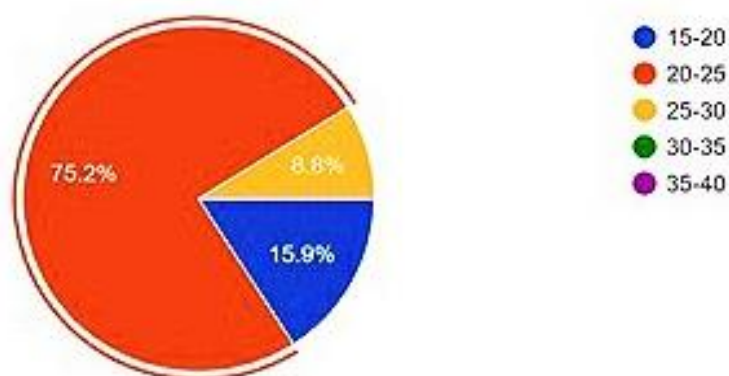
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

***From Porn sites to Social Media – Platform Transfer***

Earlier, people could easily get access to porn sites, so the float of explicit content on the social media was not seen quite often. The ban of several sites, led to the flooding of such content to social media platforms. Porn sites had several guidelines with proof reading regarding the content and usually extreme abusive contents are not allowed. But, on the other hand, social media doesn't hold any such guidelines and any content can be circulated easily<sup>[17]</sup>.

***Age Group***

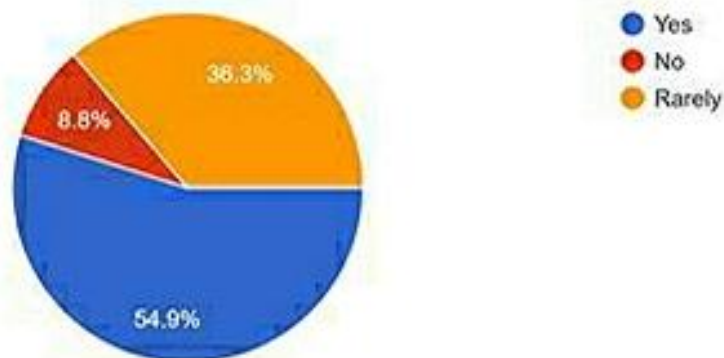
Unsurprisingly, the 20-25 age group views more than the other five age groups at just over 75.2%.



***Figure 1: Pie Chart showing the Age Group of samples***

***Youth and Pornography viewership***

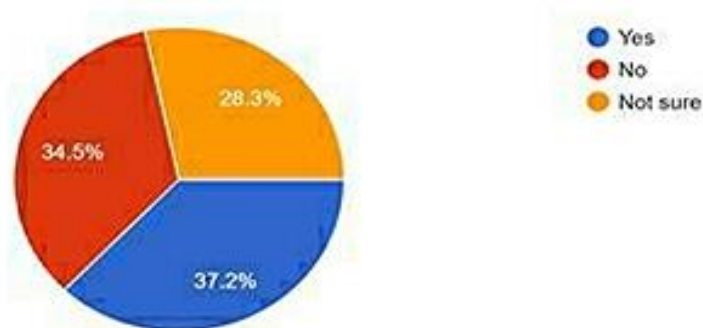
Despite many of our popular beliefs, the internet is not a safe place for our children to be roaming around. Pornography predators just look for children so that they can go on with their schemes. It is becoming increasingly important for parents to know the facts about their teenager's time spent online, as well as how to approach this topic with them. As per our results, 54.9% youth do watch porn and 36.3% rarely watch porn.



***Figure 2: Pie Chart showing the data of people watching porn***

**Watching porn & Pandemic lockdown**

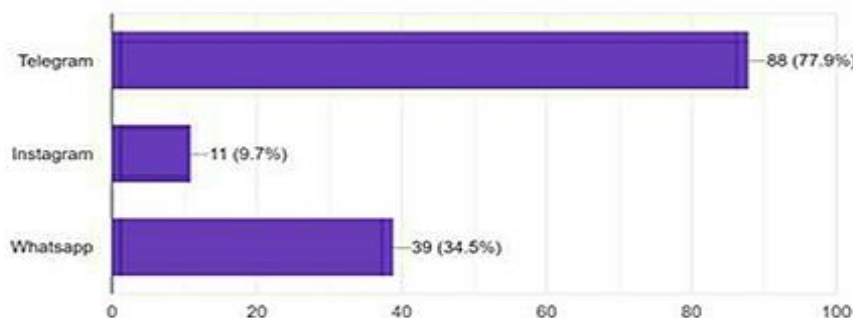
The social distancing measures due to the corona virus pandemic led to increase in social isolation, loneliness, and stress. Porn consumption rates are up in general this time. Porn hub recently reported the increasing traffic in the site amid this lockdown. In fact, on March 17 alone traffic to the site was up 11.6 percent. As per our results, 37.2% males confirmed that, their habit of watching porn has gone up during this lockdown.



**Figure 3: Pie Chart showing the increased viewership of porn amid lockdown**

**Porn & Social media**

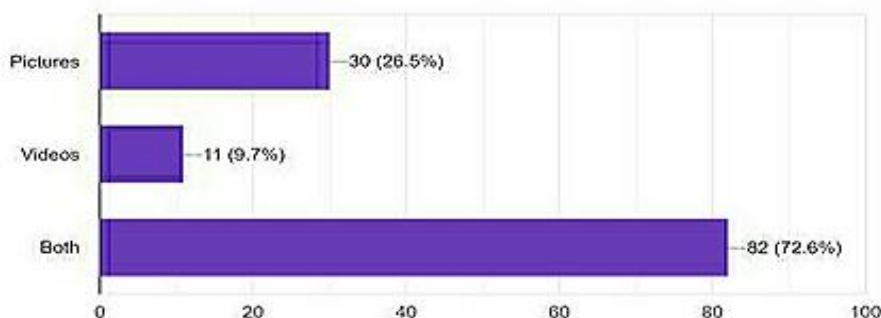
Pornography has gone social. Sexually-oriented content is now common in social medias and they are streamed as casual as any other content. As per our results, the highest circulation of porn content has been noticed in the social media called Telegram.



**Figure 4: Pie Chart showing social media site with highest explicit content circulation**

**Explicit content type in social media**

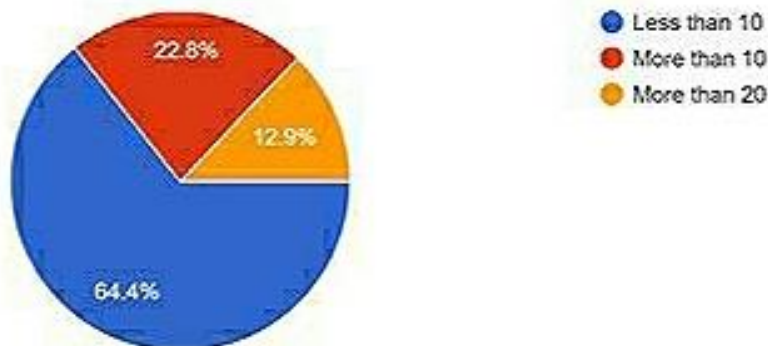
Usually, explicit content circulates through these social networking sites in the form of images and videos usually. 72.6% samples confirmed that both pictures and videos are circulated as explicit content.



**Figure 5: Pie Chart showing the type of explicit content circulated Telegram groups & Explicit content**

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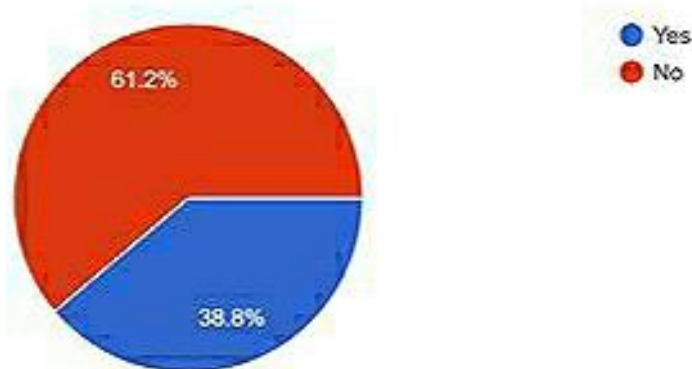
The secure platform which telegram provides, acts a curtain for all these illegal activities. As said earlier, apart from all these growth of the cyber security across the country and with all these innovations, the number of people arrested till date for the explicit content circulation in Kerala haven't touched hundreds in number yet. While, the subscribers of each group, numbers in thousands. The groups secure their identity, by demanding active participation of every group member in the discussions going on, or else, inactive members are usually removed immediately.



*Figure 6: Pie Chart showing number of groups circulating explicit content across telegram*

### *Increasing circulation of explicit content amid lockdown*

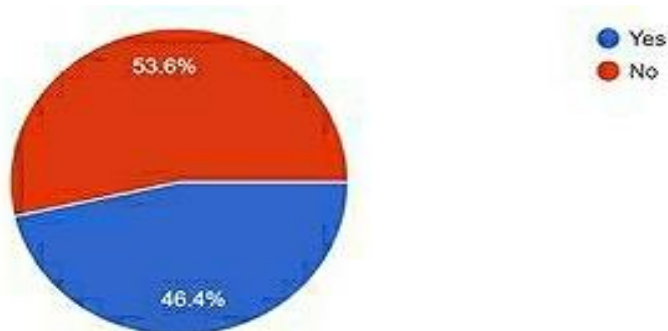
As lockdown and isolation has forced people to stay online a lot more than they usually did. Many people now remain in their virtual space mostly. As the viewing of explicit content had gone up amid the lockdown, apparently, the circulation has also increased. 38.8% of the samples have agreed to the point that circulation of these contents has increased amid lockdown as compared to the time before the pandemic.



*Figure 7: Pie Chart showing the increased circulation of explicit content amid lockdown*

### *Telegram acting as a secure platform for explicit content circulation*

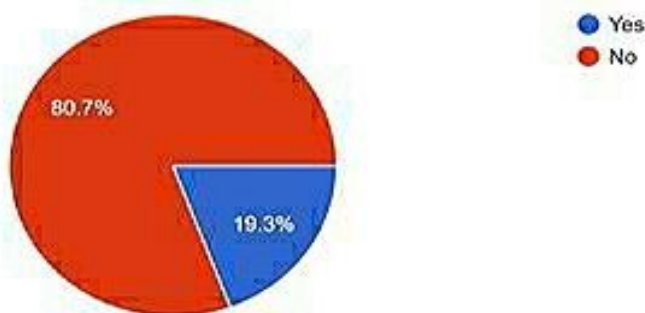
As telegram offers end-to-end encryption, anonymity, logging into the application with the use of mobile numbers is only required at time of signing in and later on one can access any group without revealing their identity, free access, secret chat and a lot more facilities that telegram provides, has made it a secure platform for the circulation of the contents and discussions about the same. 46.4% of the sample, agreed telegram to be a secure platform.



**Figure 8: Pie Chart showing security provided by telegram for sharing child porn contents**

***Circulation of picture/ videos of girls in Telegram groups***

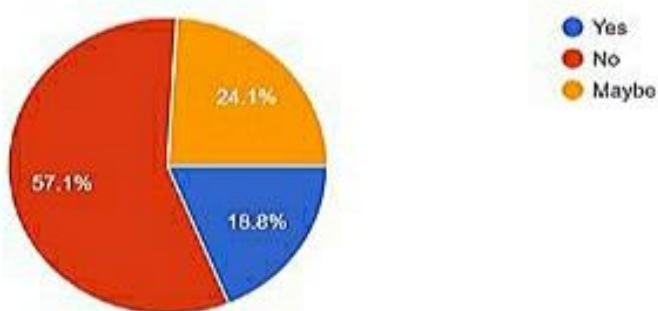
Usually the pictures, videos of female film stars, famous faces and even other girls are taken from their social media accounts and circulated in these groups. Further vulgar discussions on the content shared takes place.



**Figure 9: Pie Chart showing the circulation of images/ videos of girls without their consent on telegram**

***Psychological dependency towards watching porn***

People going through depression or loneliness often report greater desire to seek out pornography; to cope up with their feelings of stress, anxiety, or negative emotions. Pornography (and masturbation) likely offer a temporary relief from bad feelings. Along with this, one who has no idea about this accidentally enters the group, is also easily brainwashed by other people and later on he completely indulges into the same.



**Figure 10: Pie Chart showing the psychological dependency towards watching porn Demand for unnatural sex content- Rape, Torture, Incest**

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Sexual abuse is abusive sexual behavior by one person upon another often done using force. Usually, a lot of unnatural sexual contents which includes rape, torture, incest etc. are being circulated and a quite few people find that attractive too. Unnatural sexual contents have come a long way across attracting people and thus increasing the demand too. The sexual activities between the family members, which is quite unnatural to happen, for example, sexual activity between a mom and her son, father and his daughter etc is now the main point of attraction virtually<sup>[5]</sup>.

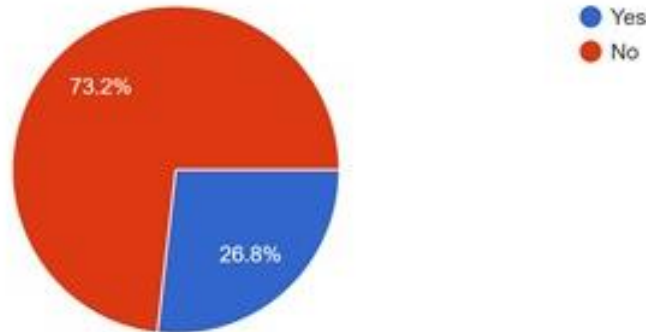


Figure 11: Pie Chart showing the circulation of unnatural sexual content across telegram

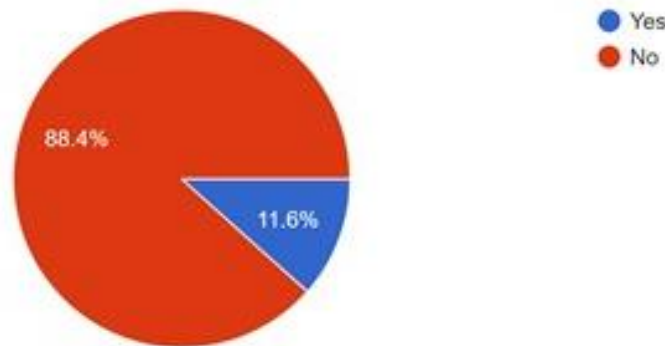
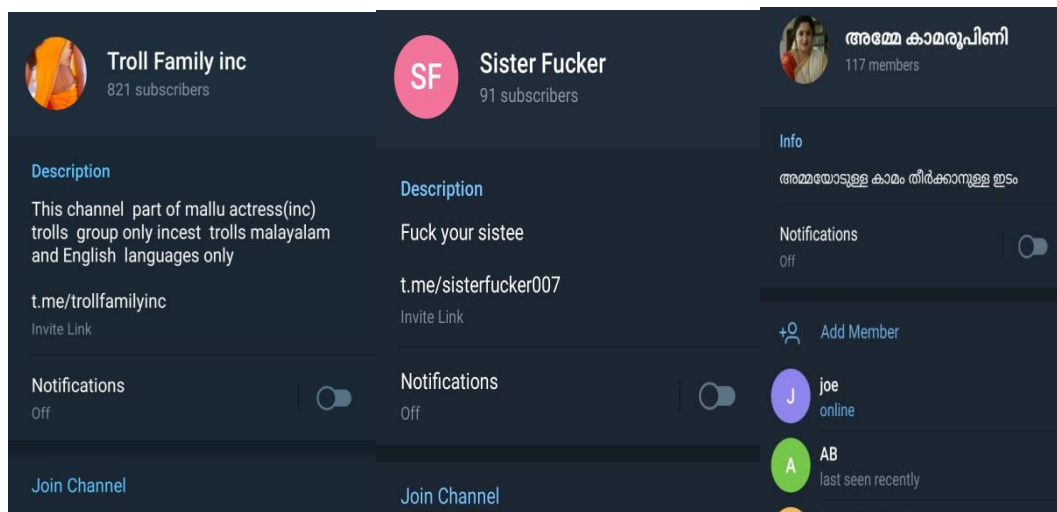


Figure 12: Pie Chart showing samples' attraction towards unnatural sex contents



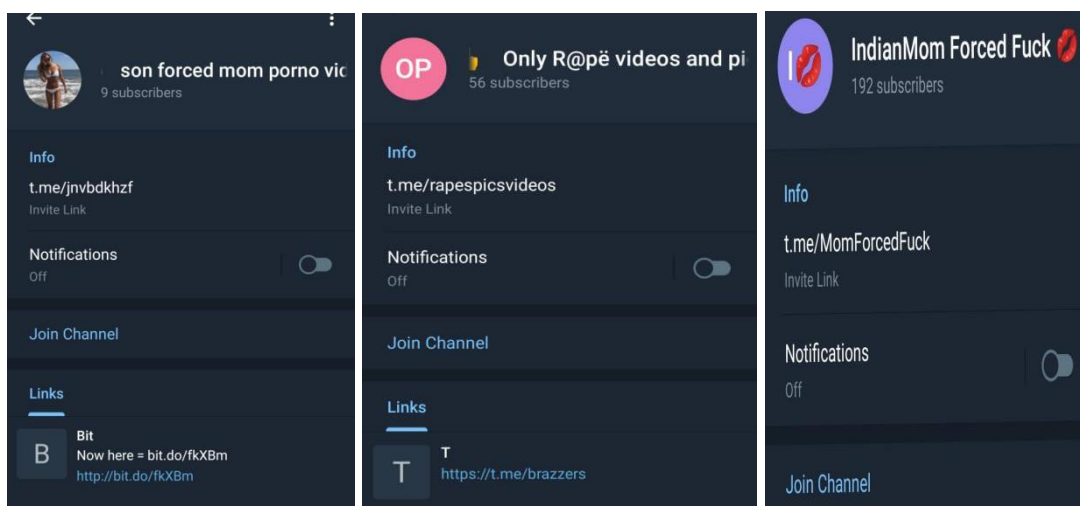


Figure 13: Screen-shots of few telegram groups circulating incest porn contents

### Child pornography

As per our results, the majority i.e. 96.3% males are against Child Pornography, and the rest is not. From which we can slightly conclude that, in one way or the other, the abusive explicit contents affects the psychological mind of a person.

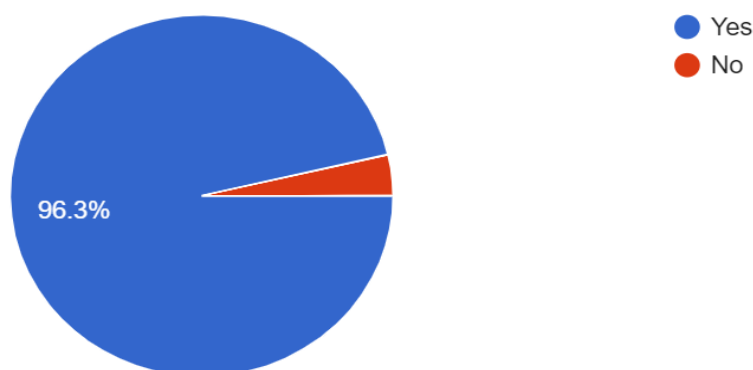


Figure 14: Pie Chart showing the samples against child pornography

### Telegram- A safe platform for the circulation of explicit content

- A) **End-to-End Encryption:** The end-to-end encryption facility of telegram works so well that, as per reports, even terrorists' activities are planned in this social media. Everything communicated in the group, remains in the group and is available to the users only <sup>[16]</sup>.
- B) **Secret Chat:** Unlike other social media platforms, telegram offers an option so convincing to the users. The secret chat option is the highest witness for such explicit contents. As everything shared on the chat remains for a very little time only and later on it gets deleted automatically, leaving no clues or evidence behind. And usually tracking back to the initial stage is quite impossible <sup>[14]</sup>.
- C) **Not a single click away:** Usually when one searches on telegram for something, it is not just a single click away. A link leads to a group, then another link in the group leads to yet another new group and this chain goes on. People keep travelling from one group to the other in search of content <sup>[5]</sup>. And anybody in the group can easily share links of other active groups.

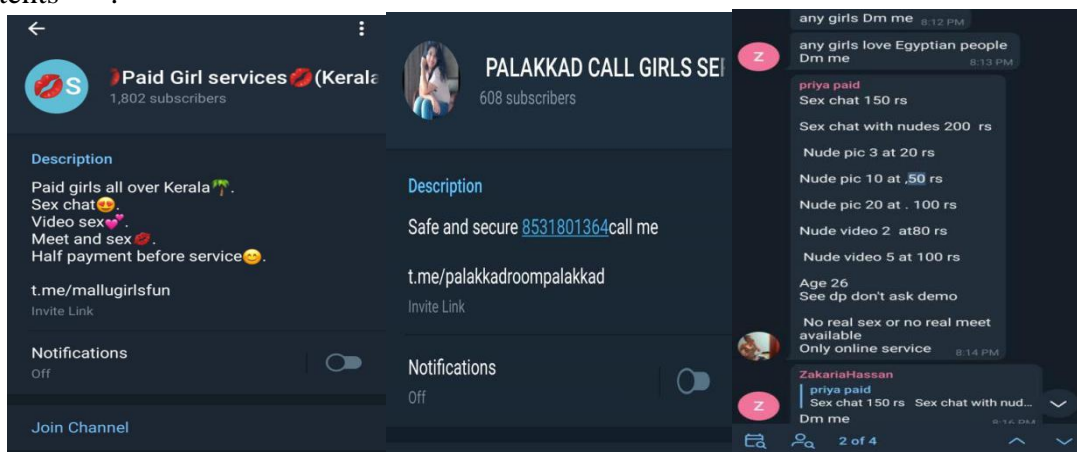


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**D) Anonymity:** Telegram groups can be easily accessed even if you don't wish to share your mobile number. Other social media applications usually share the identity of the person, but telegram doesn't. So, the anonymity helps the circulators, to go further without much fear [15].

### *Exchange of money*

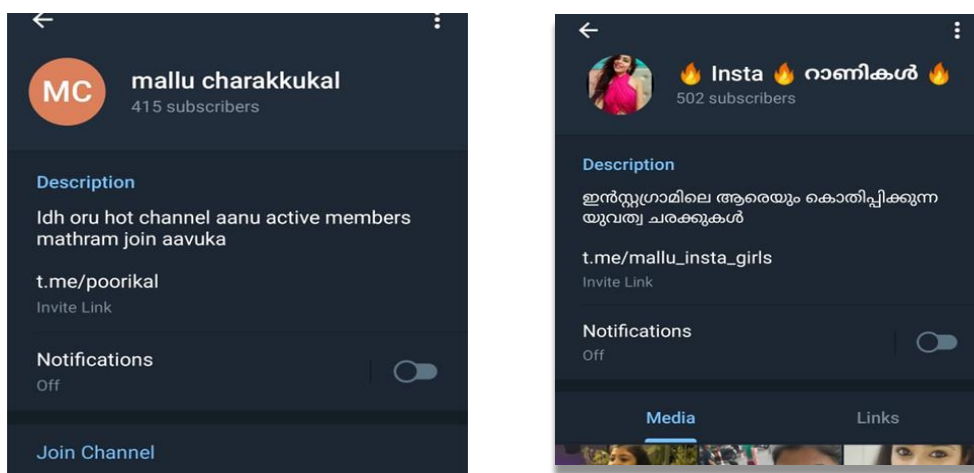
Many contents are circulated with fixed amounts. Even online prostitution or say, the cyber prostitution had begun. Everything and anything is likely to be shared on the media with the exchange of money. Apart from the contents shared, several groups even charge for the discussions on the contents. A lot of people, unfortunately have take the process of earning money in such a way very seriously. Great amounts of money is transferred daily for such contents [7, 5].



**Figure 15:** Few groups in telegram with a large number of active subscribers

### *Collection, Re-posting & Circulation- Revenge Porn & Porn Memes*

Revenge porn is the distribution of sexually explicit content individuals without their consent. These materials may be used by the perpetrators to blackmail the subjects. Collecting images/ videos of girls from their social media accounts, reposting them on telegram and discussing about the same had been trending since a while. The images they repost followed with the discussions are all paid. A circle of money making too takes place. This content is usually being shared on the groups without the consent of the girls. A primary form of communication is the internet meme. Social media groups, have now started the circulation of adult meme materials too. Porn memes, include pictures as well as dirty comments. Usually morphed pictures are used for the meme creations [13].



**Figure 16:** Screen-shots of few groups circulating images of girls without consent

### ***Space Transition Theory***

The space transition theory deals with nature of the behaviour of the persons who bring out their conforming and non-conforming behaviour in the physical space and cyber space<sup>[11]</sup>. When individuals are at a physical space (place) they might be concerned about their behavior. But, once these individuals move to cyber space, they are least concerned about their status because there is no to stigmatize them. This theory explains the change that takes place in an individual, when the physical space where he belongs to change. The motives of the individuals which cannot express in the physical space due to their status and position in the society would seem to be more convincing to perform in virtual space. So, the urge of individuals to fulfil their sexual needs with virtual content could be linked to the theory as the regulations of their physical space disallow them to do so.

In the recent raid by the Kerala police where 47 people were arrested for circulation of explicit content across social media. It included people from various professions and it was quite clear that, people used the cyber space as a curtain to fulfil their needs which couldn't be completed in the practical space.

### ***Pre & Post Lockdown- Arrest Scenario***

About 136 cases of explicit transmission were reported under the IT Act by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in 2011. Kochi was identified as the one of the main hubs of cybercrime, followed by Calicut and Trivandrum. Before this pandemic lockdown, in 2019, only around 35 people in total were arrested regarding this issue. But, a total of 47 people, including youngsters were arrested in a single day raid across Kerala for allegedly seeking child abuse material on the darknet during the Covid-19 lockdown. Over 140 electronic devices were seized from the arrested and sexual abuse of children locked up in their homes were evident<sup>[6]</sup>. After noticing a sudden increasing spike in virtual activity from state seeking child abuse material particularly, the CCSE (Countering Child Sexual Exploitation) team bursted into action. 47 people included a minor and a doctor. They were arrested for allegedly sharing child pornography on the darknet, during India's COVID-19 lockdown. The vast variation between the scenario of the pre and post lockdown clearly defines and points out towards the increasing abuse against children regardless of their age for sexual activities. And the groups circulating the content and the people demanding for such usually come across the contents of the children residing in the state itself<sup>[1, 2]</sup>.

### ***Government Initiatives***

- A) POCSO Act:** The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act) 2012 was established to protect the children against offences like sexual abuse, sexual harassment and pornography<sup>[8]</sup>.
- B) Operation P-Hunt:** Operation 'P Hunt' is an initiative launched by the Kerala Police to arrest people involved in sharing and posting child pornography. Operation 'P Hunt' was conducted by Cyberdome<sup>[9]</sup>.
- C) Kerala Police Cyberdome:** Cyberdome is a technological research and development centre of the Kerala Police. The initiative was launched to track people involved in sharing and posting content related to the sexual assault of children. Cyberdome is an initiative of Kerala Police to strengthen the cyber security of Kerala as well as to curtail the notoriously widespread cyber mess.<sup>[10]</sup>
- D) Cyber Cell:** The cyber cell of the state has been working constantly on the security of the virtual space and for controlling the circulation of such materials.

### **Law- Section 67 of the IT Act 2000**

Under the Indian law, watching pornography is not illegal to a great extent, still limitations and excel. However, sharing or disseminating it is — with a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years for publishing and transmitting "obscene" content under section 67 of the IT Act. There are stricter rules against child pornography. As per the current law, viewing, distributing or storing of any child pornographic content is a criminal offence and can result in upto five years imprisonment and a fine up to Rs 10 lakh <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **CONCLUSION**

As per our conclusions, the habit of people watching porn has increased to a greater level amid the pandemic lockdown. Thus, leading to the increase in the explicit content shared online. The tight security that telegram offers leads to a great difficulty as the law enforcement officers cannot crack or hack into the application. Telegram has been found as the main platform for the circulation of these kind of contents due to its tight security policies. Although strict rules and regulations exist to control this, law enforcement should strengthen up to get this act in control. Child welfare associations would help in preventing the sexual abuses and even violence against children. A psychological dependency has also started getting into people about the viewership of explicit content.

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### ***Acknowledgments***

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** P. Vishnuprasad & Mathew M. (2020). Social media websites and circulation of explicit contents- with special reference to Kerala, India. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(3), 1591-1602. DIP:18.01.161/20200803, DOI:10.25215/0803.161