

Challenges to Online Disability Rights Advocacy in India

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ABSTRACT

People with disabilities experience high levels of social discrimination worldwide. But, these harms are more pronounced in the Global South due to the intense stigma around disability and its intersections with structural embeddings of patriarchy. The massive growth of social media in the Global South provides people with disabilities a unique opportunity to advocate for disability rights and challenge regressive ableist norms. Yet, little is known about the challenges they face in doing their advocacy work on social media. Through interviews with 20 disability advocates in India with diverse gender identities and abilities, we found that disability advocates routinely face ableist hate and harassment, patronizing and invalidating comments, and lack of visibility and support, which forces them to self-censor as a form of self-protection, leading to low advocacy outcomes. We draw on these findings to illuminate the role of social media in the invisibilization of people with disabilities in the online sphere.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in accessibility**.

KEYWORDS

HCI, social media, disability, online advocacy, online ableism

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Content Warning: This paper contains graphic examples of explicit and ableist language used towards disability rights advocates in India.

*This work was done when the author worked at Microsoft Research India.

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1 INTRODUCTION

An estimated 1.3 billion people experience significant disability worldwide, of which about 80% live in low-income settings in developing regions. India is home to more than 60 million people with disabilities [76], most of whom live on the margins of society, battling low literacy [2], economic security [14], and social and physical mobility [2]. People with disabilities in India are historically marginalized and routinely experience disproportionately high levels of social discrimination [40, 46, 49] and sexual violence [1] due to the intense stigma surrounding disability and its intersections with structural embeddings of patriarchy. Their oppression has long been exacerbated via the stigmatization of disability within the traditional media [54]. In these ableist environments, social media has provided participatory and virtually accessible spaces to enable them to advocate for disability rights and challenge regressive ableist norms.

The use of social media by people with disabilities has received considerable attention from HCI scholars who have shed light on several aspects of their social media experience, including the online labor of content creators with disabilities [8], platform accessibility [37, 73], and online safety [15]. A growing body of work, largely in the West, examines the ways in which social media platforms lend themselves to mass mobilization for historically sidelined causes of disability rights activism [4, 47, 48, 62]. However, despite the steady incorporation of online experiences of people with disabilities in India where disability remains severely tabooed due to long-held stigmas perpetuated by religion, faith, and ignorant policies, little is known about the challenges that members of this historically subjugated population face in advocating for disability right online and how their subjugation translates into the online sphere. To address this critical gap, we ask two research questions:

RQ1: What are the challenges faced by disability rights advocates in India on social media?

RQ2: What approaches do they use to cope with and mitigate these challenges?

To answer our research questions, we conducted interviews with 20 online disability rights advocates across a spectrum of disabilities in India. We found that disability rights advocates face enormous challenges in response to the advocacy work they do online. Instead of receiving engagement and support from abled followers on posts and narratives that challenge ableist structures, our participants received patronizing and infantilizing comments and tropes of inspirational porn under an intense ableist gaze. Abled followers often responded to advocacy with questions that invalidated and minimized participants' lived experiences of disability. While some

followers engaged in desexualization of the disabled body in response to advocacy related posts containing photos of people with disabilities, others fetishized it and imposed sexual fantasies on the participants. When participants questioned these ableist behaviors, they received abuses, hate speech, and harassment from ableist followers. The participants who identified as a woman or LGBTQ+ member received more ableist and harassing behaviors than those who identified as men, suggesting that disability advocates with multiple marginalized identities faced severe repercussions and intense ableist and sexist scrutiny as an outcome of their advocacy.

In response to these challenges, disability advocates heavily censored their online activities and expressions, engaged in self-tone policing to avoid alienating abled allies and fellow advocates, and created multiple profiles dedicated to separate personal and professional endeavors to avoid ableist gaze. Their advocacy work saw resistance not only from abled followers online, but also from their families, which in some cases did not approve online advocacy to divert attention from their disabled identities. Drawing on our findings, we discuss how social media platforms invisibilize advocacy efforts of Indian social media users with disabilities and outline design recommendations and concrete takeaways for HCI researchers and practitioners who intend to create social media platforms that prioritize users with disabilities within their foundational blueprints, rather than as design afterthoughts. This paper makes three key contributions to the HCI scholarship on advocacy and disability.

- (1) We present findings from the first in-depth qualitative study on online disability rights advocacy in India, providing descriptive and contextual examples of the challenges faced by the disability rights advocates and their consequent self-censorship, and
- (2) We discuss the technoableism embedded into the infrastructure and policies of mainstream social media platforms and outline recommendations to amplify the voices of disability advocates on social media.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Online Disability Rights Advocacy

In the last decade, Disability Studies scholars have called for more in-depth research into the role of new and alternative media in shaping disability rights advocacy. Emergent scholarship from the West has outlined the rising role of social media platforms in enabling new methods, cultures, and socio-politics of such advocacy. A major thematic focus of the studies has been on campaign strategies to increase the reach and impact of online advocacy. The use of hashtags to draw attention to disability rights narratives has gained popularity through campaigns such as *#CriptheVote*, to engage voters and politicians in a productive discussion about disability issues in the United States [47], and *#SaytheWord*, initiated to destigmatize the use of the word 'disability' [4]. Mann [48] categorized online participation by disabled protesters in the 2017 Women's March as a form of *'cyberprotest'* that served to advocate for inclusive social justice protests. Disability advocates with first-hand experiences of disability often use online platforms to self-represent the complexity of everyday disabled experiences. Virtual ethnographic studies by Richter and Egner [59] on *queer-crip* and *neuroqueer* blogging

[30], for example, shed light on the intersectionality of queerness and disability. Online platforms further facilitate the creation of public and private online disability communities across and within specific disability groups, enabling the creation of cross-border social networks centering community support, social inclusion, and friendship [68].

These studies point to (1) how organizational strategies underlying online disability rights advocacy are fundamentally shaped by platform affordances such as hashtagging and resharing, and (2) how social media plays a vital role in enabling virtual access to advocacy movements, allowing users with disabilities to bypass the physical limitations posed by protest movements. This scholarship further sheds light on the aspirational motives of online disability rights advocacy. Social media platforms allow the articulation of disabled needs in response to a historical dismissal of voices of people with disabilities, wherein the participatory nature of social media acts as a conduit for the collective creation of counternarratives to challenge abled perceptions of disability [69]. These include the reclamation of disabled identity and agency, such as that championed by the *#ActuallyAutistic* campaign which seeks to shift the focus of representation away from caregivers and towards individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder [29]. Work of Pearson and Trevisan [56] on the media surrounding the UK Paralympics shows that such campaigning can also lead to favorable mainstream media coverage and allow users with disabilities to challenge existing structural issues of discrimination ranging from negative stereotypes to government policies. In this study, we found that the strategies and aspirations of Indian online disability rights advocates, including hashtag activism, online campaigning, and personal blogging, largely reflect those found in prior work, such as by Sannon et al. [62]. Our work expands this scholarship by focusing on the challenges encountered by disability rights advocates in India in the process of engaging with disability advocacy in an ableist and patriarchal society.

2.2 Challenges in Online Disability Advocacy

A growing body of HCI scholarship has examined the challenges that people with disabilities face online, in response to their advocacy work. One such challenge is initial access to the online sphere. Limited access to devices connected to the Internet and inaccessible user interfaces pose a major challenge to equal participation for people with disabilities on social media [45, 71]. For people with disabilities who experience literacy and infrastructural barriers in accessing social media, researchers and disability advocacy organizations in the Global South have created voice-based virtual spaces that enable people with disabilities with basic mobile phones to build solidarity and share resources [26, 71].

In addition to facing accessibility challenges online, people with disabilities also encounter ableism, which frequently arises as a response to their advocacy efforts. Campbell [13] defines ableism as a set of practices and beliefs that assign inferior value to people who have developmental, emotional, physical or psychiatric disabilities. Dunn [28] notes that ableism may emerge from 'outsider privilege', in which abled individuals may act "in ways that often unknowingly promote their social and psychological interests over people with disabilities." Heung et al. [39] sheds light on a variety of

ableist microaggressions that people with disabilities face on social media, including infantilization and patronization, denial of disability, and invasions of privacy, leading to long-term detrimental impacts on their mental health and self-confidence. Nario-Redmond et al. [53] categorizes various forms of online ableism as benevolent, hostile, or ambivalent, showing that some forms of ableism were more prevalent among individuals with visible disabilities. Along the same lines, through interviews with 20 content creators with disabilities in the United States, Sannon et al. [62] show that the quest for online visibility—which is necessary for online advocacy—poses various challenges surrounding social stigma, algorithmic suppression, accessibility issues, and online harassment. These challenges force content creators to forego visibility to prevent online harassment and ableism [62]. Ableism, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality [18], highlights the interconnected nature of discrimination, emphasizing how people with disabilities may face unique challenges compounded by factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. For example, Southern and Harmer [66] shows that women, especially those who are highly visible online, are disproportionately targeted by online ableism.

In addition to encountering ableism, online advocacy efforts of people with disabilities are influenced by interlocking issues of representation and trolling. Anderson [3] showcases rifts in online discourse between individuals with disabilities, who are wary of misrepresentation, and academic researchers and advocates working on disability rights advocacy. Bitman [7] expands on how activists with disabilities face several difficulties in conforming to able-bodied notions of activism, and in turn creating counter-narratives to challenge mainstream notions of disability in the online sphere. Even when not directed at people with disabilities, online trolling can often take on ableist connotations, construing disability as undesirable [32, 55]. Furthermore, research shows that while people with disabilities must perform an additional burden of disclosure in online spaces [57], it can lead to an exacerbation of online trolling [6].

Advocacy on social media also results in inequitable representation online. By examining the use of social media by disability advocacy organizations in Sweden, Gelfgren et al. [36] emphasize that disability advocacy is shaped by those who have the resources to participate in such communication and can often lead to a digital divide, leading to challenges in equitably addressing the needs and interests of various target groups, such as individuals with various disabilities of varying age groups and economic statuses. While advocating for disability rights is a crucial step toward the inclusion of people with disabilities, the pace of this process is gradual. Dube [25] shows that disability rights advocacy has led to positive advocacy outcomes in some cases, but its effectiveness still lacks substantial legal and political change.

Broadly, the literature on the challenges faced by people with disabilities, in the process of using virtual platforms for advocacy, suggests that they must constantly contend with ableism on structural, societal, and individual levels. However, much of the work discussed so far has focused on disability rights advocacy in the West even though every four out of five disabled people live in non-Western regions. Our study makes important contributions to this line of work by capturing the challenges disability rights advocates in India face online and discussing how sociocultural norms

shape their advocacy work within a highly ableist and patriarchal society. In doing so, we shed light on the technoableism [64] of participatory social media platforms. We showcase some ways in which social media fails to democratize narrative-building for, or uplift, people with disabilities and demonstrate the integration of ableism into the technological imagination that produces social media platforms.

2.3 Constructions of Disability in India

The constructions of disability in India are largely driven by three factors that have long contributed to large-scale constructions of minority communities: religious texts, the portrayals in the mainstream media, and the languages and constructions of government policies.

First, Buckingham [12] notes that intellectual and textual traditions shape the historical understanding of disability in India, and these differ from those rooted largely in Judeo-Christian constructions prevalent in Western nations. Religious texts may perpetuate the belief that disability is a form of *karmic* justice or divine retribution, a construct that faults people with disabilities for their conditions, having brought them upon themselves due to their own sins in their past lives [12, 74]. The Manusmriti, an ancient text, notes that ‘disabled persons are despised by the virtuous’. Another Hinduism text *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* denies people with disabilities inheritance due to an inability to carry out religious rites, in contrast to the construction of disability as a punishment for sin as noted in Christian religious texts. In Islam, disability may be viewed as a natural spiritually redeeming challenge that may be addressed through spiritual cures. The fact that these constructions are present in religious texts gives them authority and credibility, leading to their infiltration into society. In general, diverse and intersecting identities of caste, class, religion, and gender play a significant role in perceptions of disability.

Next, the mainstream media often has stigmatizing portrayals of disability. Pal [54] categorizes historical portrayals in Indian cinema as forms of punishment, dependence, disequilibrium, or social maladjustment, a trend that is only beginning to witness minor disruptions in recent years. Friedner [33] argues that the mainstream media acts as a tool to apoliticize disability and invisibilize rights-based discourse, affording it metaphorical meaning that overshadows embodied experiences of disability. He writes, “...*Indian context representations of disabled people do what they are supposed to do: they function as non-threatening diverse Indians who make others feel good about their country.*” Friedner further highlights that structural failings on the policy level in India have led to the rise of neoliberalist forms of disability inclusion, focusing on individualism and entrepreneurial merit. In an India where the media has played a vital role in shaping social understanding, constant portrayals of disability as undesirable have led to an overwhelmingly negative outlook towards people with disabilities [20].

Government policies further promote non-affirmative language for people with disabilities. In 2016, India’s Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment announced a change of official nomenclature from ‘*viklang*’ or deficient body, to ‘*divyang*’ or divine body to refer to people with disabilities. Disability organizations have criticized

both terms for their damaging portrayals of people with disabilities. The 'inspiration porn' narrative centering the 'extraordinary abilities' of people with disabilities celebrates the abled gaze.

Lastly, despite advances in medicine and the general understanding of medical misinformation, "babas" and homegrown medicine have gained widespread acceptance alongside a populist right-wing call to reject Western thought in favor of nationalist sentiments in India [44]. While a focus on the mystical in the realm of healing has long existed in the country, popularity has soared in recent times [38]. This, as we will note further in this work, has some implications on how disability is perceived and approached on Indian social media.

3 METHODS

We now describe participant recruitment, interview procedure, participant demographics, and data collection and analysis processes adopted for this IRB-approved study.

Participant Recruitment. To identify disability advocates online, we used a multi-pronged approach which included looking at accounts followed by social media profiles of established disability advocacy organizations in India, using hashtags, such as #DisabilityTwitter, #DisabilityInclusion and #ActuallyAutistic in India, and using publicly available datasets containing social media profiles of disability advocates in India [52]. We used Direct Messages to recruit participants who: (1) had disclosed their disability on Twitter and/or Instagram (via bios, pictures, or published content), and (2) actively participated in online disability advocacy on their public social media profiles. We intentionally adopted a broad definition of 'advocacy', keeping in mind that varying levels of comfort with online disclosure of disability identity can lead to engagement with methods that involve significant disclosure (e.g., creating awareness campaigns, sharing lived experiences) and those that involve lower levels of disclosure (e.g., retweeting disability rights activists, sharing selfies). This approach allowed the definition of disability advocacy in the context of Indian social media to emerge organically throughout the duration of the study, in contrast to restricting our investigation with the use of a presumptive definition. Similarly, when recruiting participants, we evaluated their active participation in disability advocacy online by looking at their posts rather than the number of people who followed them. We also received referrals from interview participants and used snowball sampling [22], which has been known to aid research on the experiences of inaccessible marginalized populations, particularly in feminist contexts [75]. We also used stratified sampling [60] to ensure a varied representation of genders to capture experiences of disability and its intersection with gender.

Semi-structured Interviews. All interviews were conducted remotely through an online video conferencing platform. To ensure sensitivity while engaging with participants, we offered to communicate in their preferred language (English, Hindi, or Indian Sign Language). Further, we followed communication guidelines outlined in the National Disability Institute's Disability Sensitivity Guide [5] including people-first language, affirming language, and the "ask first" approach towards offering assistance with tasks such as filling out online consent forms. We first conducted a brief

pre-interview asking participants to sign a consent form explaining data collection processes, participant rights, and the purpose of the study. The participants were then asked to complete a 5-minute survey that captured demographic details. Following this, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which focused on motivations and methods of online disability advocacy, challenges experienced during and after the process of advocacy, online ableism as a result of or obstacle to advocacy, and negotiations with online visibility. The interviews lasted about 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. We encouraged participants to share specific details about online experiences relating to the aforementioned themes and concluded the interviews by asking about relevant experiences of online disability advocacy that we may have failed to capture. The participants received an online gift card as an honorarium for their contribution.

We took a number of steps to ensure that our research is conducted in an ethical and responsible manner. To ensure participant safety, we told participants during the consent process that they can end the interview at any time and skip any question they may not feel comfortable answering. During the interview, when participants discussed sensitive topics and felt overwhelmed, following the recommendations from Draucker et al. [24], we asked them if they felt okay and encouraged them to take breaks or discontinue the interview. Following best practices from Chen et al. [16], we focused on rapport building during the warm-up and debrief period, engaged in active listening and empathy to establish a welcoming environment, and mirrored the participant's language to avoid potentially detrimental labeling. At the end of the interview, we provided access to mental health resources to help participants process any emotional distress. We also used several data protection measures to ensure participants safety and privacy, including double checking what data can be used for the analysis and using culturally appropriate pseudonyms to protect their privacy when discussing our findings.

Data Analysis. We prepared 20 separate raw data files, translating and transcribing them into English. We then conducted thematic analysis [10] and performed open-coding on the data to identify dominant themes. We took multiple passes on the transcribed data, avoided using any pre-supposed codes and instead let the codes emerge freely from the data. During the analysis, the authors met regularly to discuss emerging codes, develop a preliminary codebook, review and update codes, and resolve disagreements through peer debriefing [19]. The categories and themes were iteratively developed after a process of merging and discarding overlapping and duplicate codes. Prolonged engagement with the data helped us establish credibility.

Participant Demographics. Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants. We recruited 20 participants with a spectrum of disabilities, including visual impairments, motor disabilities, and chronic illnesses. Of the 20 participants, four were gender non-conforming (GNC), ten were female, and six were male. Half of our participants were in the age range of 18–24, eight were in the age range of 25–34 and the remaining two were in the age range of 35–44. Most of our participants (65%) had completed graduate-level education and had master's degrees. The remaining six had either

Table 1: Demographics of disability advocates in our sample.

P#	Gender	Disability	Age	Education	Employment
P1	GNC	ADHD, Autism, PTSD, seizures	25-34	Undergraduate	Content creation
P2	F	Cone Dystrophy (Central vision loss)	18-24	12th	Human resources, student
P3	F	Thalassemia	18-24	Masters	Research, advocacy
P4	M	Duchenne’s Muscular Dystrophy	18-24	12th	Student
P5	M	Vision impairment (moderate)	18-24	Undergraduate	Research, advocacy
P6	F	Vision impairment (moderate)	25-34	Masters	Research, advocacy
P7	GNC	Arthritis, Diabetes, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	25-34	Masters	Law, non-profit
P8	F	Spina Bifida	35-44	Masters	Comedy, advocacy
P9	F	Rheumatic Heart Disease, Chronic Pain Syndrome	18-24	Undergraduate	Law
P10	F	Locomotive disability (profound)	18-24	Masters	Student
P11	M	Vision impairment (profound)	25-34	Masters	Law, non-profit
P12	M	Locomotive disability (profound)	35-44	Masters	Paralympian
P13	F	Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita	18-24	Masters	Content creation
P14	GNC	Chronic pain, multiple chronic illnesses	25-34	Undergraduate	Illustrator
P15	F	Vision impairment (profound)	25-34	Masters	Non-profit
P16	F	Spinal cord injury	25-34	Masters	Human resources
P17	GNC	Cerebral Palsy, Autism	18-24	Masters	Research, advocacy
P18	F	Scoliosis (profound locomotive)	18-24	12th	Student
P19	M	Spinal Muscular Atrophy	18-24	Masters	Canine Behaviourist
P20	M	Cerebral Palsy	25-34	Masters	Writer

undergraduate degrees or had completed high school. The participants were employed in a variety of domains, such as research and advocacy, online content creation, comedy, sports, and law.

Positionality. In our attempt to fairly represent the challenges of online disability advocacy in a way that captures the complexities of ableism and how it manifests itself on social media in India, all authors must reflect on our social contexts. The mixed-gender team of scholars and technologists behind this work includes authors with extensive experience working with people with disabilities, as well as researchers of social media and gender. We adopted a feminist and queer disability studies perspective [34, 50] which recognizes patriarchal and ableist structural embeddings while resisting essentialism. This informed our understanding that participants have varying experiences at differing intersections of marginalization and that these must be captured in our research. Through the study process and further in the writing of this paper, we aimed to center the voices of participants with disabilities, reflect on our own ableist biases, and offer perspectives on disability affirmative platform design to center the needs of our study participants.

4 FINDINGS

Our participants actively engaged in disability rights advocacy on social media for many compelling reasons. Social media enabled participants to amplify their voices and engage with the general public on an unprecedented scale to raise awareness about the challenges experienced by people with disabilities. In addition to increased reach, participants also used social media to document the discriminatory behaviors they experienced offline, holding the authorities accountable and providing evidence to support their

advocacy efforts. In addition to connecting advocates to abled followers in different geographic locations, social media platforms also provided them with opportunities to engage with policy makers and actively shape the discourse on disability rights. The participants also appreciated the pivotal role social media played in making them aware of the advocacy efforts of other prominent individuals and disability-focused organizations and helping them build solidarity and a sense of community. In these virtual spaces, disability rights advocates voiced their frustrations with advocacy work and shared resources to enhance the effectiveness and reach of disability rights campaigns in India. As expected, the aspirations of our participants and the strategies they use, including hashtag activism, online campaigning, and personal blogging, largely reflect those found in prior work focusing on disability advocacy in other regions [62]. We now describe the findings central to our research questions on examining the challenges that disability rights advocates in India face in doing their advocacy work online and the strategies they employ to navigate and alleviate these challenges.

The thematic analysis found that our participants faced several distinct challenges in the process of engaging in online advocacy. These included patronization and contending with a culture of inspiration porn (Section 4.1), invalidation and minimization of disabilities (Section 4.2), desexualization and sexual fetishization (Section 4.3), online trolling and harassment (Section 4.4), and a failure to seek platform visibility (Section 4.5). We discuss the self-censorship in which participants engaged (Section 4.6) and the fragmented identities they created online (Section 4.7) to escape a constant onslaught of ableism online.

4.1 Patronizing Comments and Inspiration Porn

All participants were frustrated that their posts on disability advocacy often received patronizing remarks from abled followers. These remarks were often presented as compliments. Priya, a writer, authored an article describing their queer relationship for an Instagram page about disability-activism. The post received condescending comments like, *“It’s great that you have found someone like her. She must be so kind.”* Similarly, when Natasha posted selfies of herself in a wheelchair to bring attention to the needs of wheelchair users, she received compliments such as, *“such a sweetheart you are”* and *“you are so hardworking.”* Participants were annoyed that abled followers often posted comments indicating their “approval” instead of reflecting on ableist structures and behaviors to which they wanted to draw their attention. Pushpa, a non-binary participant who blogs about disabled life on Twitter, received the following response to one blog: *“you are doing great and we are really proud of you.”* During their interview, Pushpa reflected on wanting engagement instead of approval: *“I don’t do all that to make you proud of me. That’s for myself and my community.”*

Participants often received unsolicited advice on their disabilities and ableist questions based on ‘deviant’ aspects of their online profiles, such as their appearance. The former manifested itself as encouragement. Veena, who lives with chronic illnesses, recalled: *“People are really uncomfortable when you share things related to disability. They don’t know how to react to it. They say things like ‘get better soon’, and I’m like, there is no get better soon.”* One form of unsolicited advice was medical, often shared by abled users who did not work in the medical field or with people with disabilities. For example, Priya used to post about her chronic illness to *“feel seen”* and create a space for herself and others like her online. However, she often received unsolicited comments, like *“do yoga”*, and recommendations:

“I get lot of suggestions of treatment. You should visit this doctor. You should see that doctor. You should go to that baba [spiritual gurus or experts in alternative medicine].”

Patronizing comments were characterized by their intrusive nature, in which abled curiosity tended to take precedence. These comments were heavily gendered, in that they were targeted much more at women and non-men with disabilities. Participants who identified as women or gender non-confirming were faced with a double whammy of both ableist and gender norms surrounding how they should present their ‘deviant’ bodies for abled consumption. In turn, this lack of representation made it difficult for other disabled users to post pictures of themselves and their lived experiences. A constant inflow of compliments and approval made it difficult for participants to authoritatively demand accountability towards the cause of disability rights. Priya wished to post pictures of herself experiencing the ‘trivial’ or ‘fun’ aspects of daily life, such as going out and singing, to break stereotypes associated with wheelchair users. However, she often refrained from doing so:

“Because every time I put a photo of myself on a wheelchair they are like, ‘What happened to you?, Who really pushes your wheelchair when you go out?, and Why are you always sitting in a chair?’”

Although patronizing comments often infantilized participants, they were constructed at the same time, often to their dismay, as ‘inspirational’. Participants felt that the dominant online content surrounding disability, published by allies and nonprofits, often encompassed performative, feel-good portrayals of disabled individuals ‘conquering’ disability, achieving extraordinary tasks, receiving awards, and showcasing varying forms of everyday bravery. Likely as a result of the domination of such narratives, participants routinely received tropes of inspiration porn by abled followers on posts on disability rights and advocacy. Pushpa noted that abled followers would leave confusing comments on their Instagram page: *“Every day [...] I get a lot of DMs, ‘You are so brave,’ No, I’m not brave. I am just living my life.”*

Given high user engagement in posts that contain inspiration-porn narratives, some participants felt compelled to focus on publishing such posts on their own social media profiles. Alisha, for example, occasionally used inspirational narratives in her own posts in the hopes that more traction would lead to higher engagement on advocacy content too:

“When I say, ‘I was like this, and then I did that’, there’s a lot of engagement... we need to keep that engagement. Sometimes, even if we don’t want it, we post such stuff.”

Although some participants, like Alisha, were okay occasionally putting out such content, others felt more strongly against inspirational porn. Raheel shared, *“Disabled stories are coming out, but some of it is very, very artificial. If I see a story of a disabled person just overcoming it [the challenges], I don’t know what struggles they might go through in their daily lives.”* The normalization of inspiration porn on Indian social media hence not only disincentivizes disabled users from publishing posts providing realistic portrayals of their own authentic experiences with disability, it also cuts off participants from consuming such content.

4.2 Invalidation and Minimization of Disability Experiences

When participants posted about their lived experiences with disability to challenge regressive ableist norms, abled users often responded with comments invalidating their disability experiences or minimizing their suffering. For example, when Pushpa articulated the struggles of living with cerebral palsy and autism on their Twitter profile as a form of advocacy, users commented that they [Pushpa] could still, at least, walk and speak for themselves. Kehkasha refrained from posting about seemingly trivial, everyday experiences of disability which discomfited her, such as *“bodily pain and being unable to sleep at night.”* Such experiences, according to Kehkasha, were *“not considered experiences disabled enough [by abled users], but equally impact the disabled lives.”* Pushpa and Kehkasha’s experiences indicate that people with disabilities, and particularly invisible disabilities, are not perceived as ‘disabled enough’ to justify anger or seemingly accusatory behavior towards individuals and structures that uphold an ableist status quo.

Another form of invalidation was the minimization of accomplishments. When Rohit received a “blue check” on Instagram, verifying his contribution to Paralympic sports, he received comments such as, *“What have you done to be verified with so few followers?”* Similarly, when he posted about winning a medal during a national

championship, his abled followers quipped, *“No one competes in their category. [Paralympians] go ahead and win nonsense medals.”*

Conflict surrounding the validity of disability experiences also emerged within the community. With minimal space afforded to disabled voices online, some advocates pushed for only the “most marginalized” to be centered in discourse. As a result, those with relative social privilege felt excluded from the conversation about disability rights in India. For example, Priya, who has a motor disability, received her education from a leading institute in India. When she attempted to create content about disability, she felt surveilled by fellow disabled voices that seemed to say:

“We have it a lot worse than you. You have got everything. You’ve got good education, a good job, you’ve studied from good colleges. You have a certain amount of privilege.”

The followers of disability advocates tended to box them into their disabled identities. Jaspreet often felt pressured by followers to center her disability in posts on her Instagram profile. When she did not do so, her followers would bring up her disability in the comments sections. This made it difficult for her to retain aspects of her identity that she felt existed outside of and despite her disability. For example, she sometimes wished to create fashion and beauty content, which posed a challenge: *“They can’t see beyond my disability. People always say something in the context of my disability, even when reaching out to me for my beauty, for my thoughts. Yes, I am the girl on the wheelchair. But I am [Jaspreet]. I have a personality too.”* Similarly, Anne’s Instagram profile showcased her in a variety of outfits and hairstyles. She described the need to post content unrelated to advocacy: *“If I only post about the advocacy, I just become ‘the person with the disability’. I don’t want that. There’s so many layers to me as a person.”* These experiences show that the construction of disability as more ‘important’ or ‘interesting’ than other aspects of identity may often be enforced upon, rather than adopted by, online disability rights advocates.

Another form of minimization was the reduction of the complexity of the disability experience. Sheetal, who posted about living with multiple disabilities in a fat body, shared, *“People get really uncomfortable when you don’t want to fit into an agenda for them. It kind of becomes like, oh my god, why do you have to be so complex?”* Her association with multiple socially marginalized identities made it difficult for people to ‘slot’ her on the basis of her utility to various causes and organizations. With audience reception varying, disabled advocates contended with a reductive approach online, finding it difficult to portray ‘less’ interesting, unique, inspirational, or evocative aspects of authentic selves.

4.3 Desexualization and Sexual Fetishization

Some participants experienced desexualization primarily as a stripping of their ability to be construed as desirable. Tripti appeared in a video by a disability rights organization on masturbation in an attempt to destigmatize disabled sexuality in India. Despite the taboo nature of the topic, she did not experience harassment or trolling in response to the video, which she found surprising given the trolling abled women have encountered when posting such content. Tripti noted that her online audience’s lack of willingness

to ‘punish’ her in the same way they do abled women was entirely due to her visible disability. She shared:

“I haven’t been called a slut... people are just not willing to look at [me] from a sexual lens [...] people are just more respectful as a result of their own sympathy.”

Desexualization sometimes took on the form of abled moral policing. Priya enjoyed using Instagram to share pictures of her daily life. If any visible element in her pictures hinted at her sexuality, the abled followers were quick to point it out as unacceptable. For example, when Priya shared a picture in a “low neck dress”, she recalled that *“there was so much hate. Unwarranted DM’s in comments, like, ‘My God, how can she? She is in a wheelchair.’”* Jaspreet noted that even when her pictures were not sexual in nature, the messages she received included comments, such as, *“[disabled people] should not wear this kind of short clothes. We are not interested in knowing your sexual life. Your panties are showing. The legs are showing.”*

While some followers engaged in desexualization of the disabled body, others fetishized it and imposed sexual fantasies on participants. Unlike desexualizing comments, fetishizing messages were primarily relayed in the privacy of Direct Messages. Most of the fetishization was directed at non-men and participants with visible physical disabilities. Priya received responses, such as, *“I’ve written stories and had fantasies about you.”* Ria noted that in more than one instance when they posted pictures of themselves, they received unsolicited nude pictures from abled male followers. In one instance, they received the message: *“I would love to date a disabled person. I would love to fuck a disabled person.”* Veena reflected on the fetishizing messages she received:

“When you’re being vulnerable online, that is seen as lowered self-esteem. That part of your identity either gets fetishized, in the sense of ‘I can easily control them’, or ‘Why would they not go out with me?’ or ‘What is even a better option for them?’ Even sexual violence should be something I should be grateful for. It is a favor to me. My entire identity becomes a fetish because people are not able to reconcile their idea of being able to desire something that is not socially acceptable.”

Such messages relied on the presumption that disabled people were unable to find sexual partners and thus must be grateful for sexual attention. Another participant reflected on why fellow disabled advocates receive fetishizing messages online: *“Because you’re disabled, you don’t have a choice. So whatever you get, you should take it.”* These presumptions implied a dangerous assumption of consent. Ali, a male participant who uses a wheelchair and also experienced online sexual harassment, recounted a message he received on Instagram which read: *“Because you are physically disabled and you look good, I would like to fuck you. I would like to try out my fantasy, because you can probably not run anywhere.”*

When participants refused to entertain such requests, whether by ignoring them or responding negatively to them, the same users who approached them with sexual propositions often became aggressive. Alisha, who received messages, like *“Marry me. I am a doctor. Please talk to me. We are kind to you”,* noted: *“every now and then I get such DMs. If I don’t respond, I get harassed and bashed.”*

4.4 Trolling, Harassment, and Abuse

Participants had to endure name-calling, trolling, harassment, and denigration in response to their advocacy work. These behaviors occurred more frequently when advocacy work received unusually high engagement online. For example, Raheel authored an article on masturbation in an attempt to normalize disabled sexuality which was published on the social media pages of a popular nonprofit with over 30,000 followers. In response to its publication, he was targeted via an Instagram Direct Message group consisting of what he described as non-resident Indian men: *“I got added to a random group of people I didn’t know. These people started doxxing me. They started tagging me, saying, ‘next time I see a person masturbating, I will just assume he is disabled’. Things like that, very nasty things.”* Sakshi published a Twitter thread outlining an instance of ableist discrimination she faced at a popular establishment that turned her away because she was in a wheelchair. When this thread went viral, Sakshi was subjected to intense and prolonged trolling:

“There was this one post on a right-wing page talking about this incident. There were 200+ comments just trying to humiliate me. It was really bad for my mental health. [...] It made me question if I actually was making a big deal out of it or if I was really exaggerating.”

In another case, trolling occurred in response to an online campaign that gained traction during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Akriti, who has thalassemia, conducted a blood donation campaign on Instagram because many members of her community require frequent blood transfusions. She was brutally trolled by abled followers who believed her to be malicious: *“Someone said that you are selling this blood. That you are doing this business to sympathize on your disability, and then make a business out of it.”*

We encountered more experiences of trolling and harassing behaviors when participants had a relatively higher number of followers compared to others in the sample. For example, Sheetal, who has a verified account and more than 10,000 followers on Instagram, added identity markers such as *‘disabled’* in her Instagram bio as a form of claiming space online, finding fellow community members, and normalizing her lived experiences. She recounted the risks associated with such disclosure: *“Adding identity markers to the bio immediately invites a certain kind of trolling crowd that comes to you and says terrible things.”*

When photos of participants went viral, they often encountered body shaming and abuse centered on the physical attributes of their disability. For example, Alisha, a blind participant, received the comment, *“you have very weird eyes”* on her advocacy page. The notion of *‘weird’*, here, problematizes disabled bodies’ deviance from the abled body not just in isolation, but in a social media culture that encourages and rewards physical desirability. Sheetal, who has an invisible disability, described that trolling often focused on her physical appearance: *“Majority of the trolling comes for the fatness. For taking up space and posting photos and being comfortable in my fat body.”* Ali, who uses a wheelchair, recalled that he was called *“langda”* (derogatory slur, *‘one-legged’*) on his Instagram profile. In one instance, he received a question in the form of a Direct Message, *“Tera khada hota hai kya [can you get an erection]?”* This

comment, in conflating the notion of physical ability with sexual ability, brings into question the masculinity of the participant.

In cases of virality and high follower counts, ableist trolling occurred as a result of heightened online visibility. If participants wished to avoid trolling, the only viable option for them was to reduce the visibility of their online profiles, which would also lead to decreased visibility of their online advocacy. These select instances show that the trolling experienced by our sample of disability rights advocates was frequent and severe. It hindered the process of advocacy by affecting participants’ mental health, making their accounts functionally unusable, or causing them to temporarily or permanently withdraw from the public sphere of visibility.

4.5 Lack of Visibility, Support, and Accountability

Participants noted dissatisfaction with having fewer followers than their abled counterparts, and noted that positive engagement in their posts on advocacy was usually a result of interactions from fellow disabled users rather than from abled followers. Our participants perceived this as problematic since much of the content published by them was designed to educate abled users and challenge the ableist norms. In instances when participants’ posts were able to exit the silo of the online disability community, advocacy outcomes remained inadequate. Sakshi published a viral Twitter thread demanding accountability from an establishment that turned her away because she was in a wheelchair. Although the tweet was seen by more than a quarter million people, the restaurant did not respond and the authorities took no action. Another participant shared a similar experience: *“[One post] did get a lot of traction and there were people who resonated and shared that they had similar experiences. Then it went into the media [...] It created some traction, but not from the concerned authorities. It was not powerful enough for people to do something about it.”* Participants noted that while virality is an effective tool to gain initial public awareness, without structural and institutional support, it fails to lead to tangible positive outcomes.

The experience of posting about systemic oppression and not receiving an appropriate response to such posts, also had adverse mental health consequences for participants. A participant shared: *“Online, it’s just a different kind of discrimination, being ignored. We do not talk about that much, but it’s... your life will be ignored. Your experiences are invalidated.”* The conflation of online engagement with emotions of care and concern meant that when the former was not present, the participants assumed that the latter was not important enough to be taken into account by the general public. Illustrating this impact, Jaspreet shared an incident in which the driver of a popular ride sharing service compared her to an animal and refused to let her board the vehicle, when he found out that she was in a wheelchair. She posted about this incident on her social media profile and demanded accountability from the corporation involved. However, her post did not receive any traction. Not only did this allow the corporation to evade accountability, Jaspreet felt invisible and doubted if the incident was significant enough to gain public attention. She noted how this made her *“feel invisible.”* This example illuminates how failure to seek visibility is not attributed in isolation to platforms or people, but to the unfortunate meeting

of abled users who ignore disabled narratives, and platforms that perpetuate this ignorance in a system where initial traction (or the lack of it) can determine the long-term visibility of published posts.

Participants also faced unique struggles in their attempt to ‘play the visibility game’, i.e., contend with paternalistic platforms that dictate how creators should behave online through a series of incentives and punishments [17]. A near-gamification of online visibility meant that participants relied heavily on algorithmic folklore [78] to decide when and how to post online. One of such lore that gained popularity at the time of this study was the disproportionate visibilization of Instagram users who published Reels. Because of this, participants felt the need to create widely shareable Reels to visibilize their advocacy. A participant described:

“It’s very confusing to understand the Instagram algorithm even if you are following trends. I have seen many suggestions that you should make reels on this music and that stuff. Even if we are doing that, we are not getting the views we require or should get.”

Another lore was the need for users to post frequently and consistently in order to grow their visibility. This pressure from the platform to produce more content led participants to agonize about the lack of level playing field, since it was not always possible for them to publish rapidly due to the physical limitations posed by their disabilities, the additional time spent tending to medical needs in contrast to abled users, or the time spent strategizing the tonality or content of posts within largely abled online environments. As a result, participants had to engage in additional labor to pursue disability advocacy online. In some cases, they had to strategize alternative methods of seeking visibility. For example, Anne, who is blind, reshared content from her advocacy-related Instagram profile to her private Instagram profile as well as her professional LinkedIn profile. Since on Instagram, the frequency of initial traction on a post—determined in part by the number of followers—can determine its short-term and long-term visibility within and beyond a network of followers, Sahil made Twitter his primary platform for advocacy. In this way, his tweets could achieve virality despite the number of users who followed the publishing account. Some advocates felt forced to into trending dances and challenges on social media to visibilize their advocacy efforts. Priya, who has motor difficulties due to Cerebral Palsy, described her frustrations:

“There’s so much talent involved. There’s so much time involved. And to get that skill of editing and to know what’s trendy, what’s not, what music is picking today, you know, even when you want to say a simple thing, it’s very difficult to keep up with the pace.”

Lastly, the challenges in meeting the demands of the platform along with the poor mental health resulting from negative interactions online led many participants to suspend their advocacy efforts. Priya described her inability to keep up with the demands of Instagram’s platform algorithms in the following manner:

“I just feel like some boyfriend, chasing and chasing and chasing. Now I am like, fuck it. My followers’ interactions have dipped, the number of followers has also dipped. I can’t keep up – I mean, it is not even just Reels. Something else will keep coming up. I don’t know how content creators do it.”

4.6 Coping through Self Censorship

Participants adopted several approaches to cope with the challenges they faced as a result of their online advocacy efforts. One of the key approaches they used was to heavily self-censor their online activities out of the fear of: (1) alienating abled allies, and (2) alienating fellow members of the small Indian disability rights advocacy community active online.

4.6.1 Alienating Allies. Even though participants experienced constant ableism from their abled audiences, they felt that they could not afford to alienate abled followers and saw it essential to recruit more allies to the cause of disability rights in India. Almost all participants were acutely aware of their tonality, and shared some way in which they ‘checked’ it to make it more “neutral”, “strategic”, “mindful”, and “generic.” For example, Maya noted that she often wished to address online harassment targeted at her, but that she modified her tone to make her response palatable to abled audiences: “When I post [a response], I think about it a lot before I post, and try to make it as uncontroversial as possible.” When asked about the themes of writing published on social media by Pushpa in order to raise awareness about disability, she shared that she attempted to create: “...something that makes sense to the widest possible user base. I don’t want to write something that makes sense to the community, but outside of the community, it sounds offensive.” Geeta noted a similar reason for her own self-censorship: “I have to be very strategic in my messaging. I need to have the right balance of light-hearted humor and intense messaging.” Since members of the community already contend with low online visibility, the prospect of losing followers and in turn potential supporters for their cause was worrying enough to trigger self-censorship.

This self-censorship, which involves the use of tone-policing in one’s own language, differed across genders. Non-male participants cited consciously working to be perceived as “polite” and “uncontroversial”, and often curtailed their real emotions. Priya, for example, described being exposed to a “barrage of comments and creeps” online, but did not feel like she could address the situation adequately:

“Sometimes I want to be angry. All these things, even when I tried to bring them out, have been in a very subtle, toned down tone. Not as angry as I would like to be. I think as a woman, I am not allowed to be angry. It’s so... It’s a different ball game altogether.”

Male participants also self-toned policed; however, both their reasons and methods differed. For example, Sahil, whose tone-policing was rooted in the potential discomfort of being challenged in his claims about ableism by abled Twitter users, chose to rely on published information rather than his own experiences while creating Twitter threads on disability rights. He made “a conscious attempt to always have very strong data or theoretical backup.” Arjun noted that his self-tone policing revolved largely around maintaining a sense of professionalism on his social media profiles. When an individual in his extended professional circle posted something detrimental to the disability community, he did not publicly demand accountability. Rather, he made a thread alluding to the issue at hand and spoke in generic terms.

4.6.2 Alienating Community Members. Given the close-knit nature of the online disability advocacy community, most participants knew each other personally and saw each other as an active or potential collaborator. Several participants expressed fear of alienating fellow members, which led them to avoid any potential conflict. This was in part due to difficulties in offline socialization because of which participants perceived online friendships as a vital form of socialization. In line with the findings of prior scholarly work [71], our participants noted the important role social media played in enabling participants to find others with disabilities and build a sense of community, which many said they lacked before gaining online visibility. Although this sentiment was expressed by the majority of the participants in the interviews, most still felt isolated in their experiences.

Some participants recognized that disability existed on a wide spectrum. They feared becoming a 'voice' for and misrepresenting the experiences of those with disabilities different from their own, or those with the same disability but at differing levels of severity. This led them to avoid posting about disability rights related issues that they did not have the lived experience to speak authoritatively about. This meant that the issues of severely underrepresented groups remained unheard. An equally important reason for self-censorship in these contexts was a fear of being 'called out' or 'canceled'. Sahil, who has moderate blindness, described why he curtailed his expression on Twitter:

"You have a visual impairment, but a person who is blind might have a totally different experience and he might not agree with you. There is a fear of that. There is uncertainty of what people want. It might not land as you intend, and then it might do more damage."

Some participants feared that they may be seen as unfairly dominating the online conversation on disability, and in turn causing the erasure of those with more profound or recognized disabilities. One participant with an 'invisible' disability described her apprehensions as a form of "impostor syndrome", sharing: "People sometimes just assume that you're not disabled because you don't look disabled. You're not disabled enough, so you don't deserve to claim space." Another participant expanded on why she refrained from labeling her conditions as disabilities, despite them impacting her life significantly: "I don't know how these people view the term disability. I don't know if they would be inclusive of a person like me. There's no piece of paper that I have that says I'm disabled."

Self-censorship was a means to not only protect themselves, but also their initiatives, from disrepute within the community. Therefore, they often navigated the online disability community with a fear of alienation, the ramifications of which would adversely affect their own advocacy, and in turn, online disability advocacy in India at large. Hunar, the co-founder of a popular initiative among online disabled users, described why she felt a need to self-censor content on her personal profile:

"I'm scared of creating [...] conflict with other disabled folks. [...], of people getting canceled. If someone does not like what I say, personally, I don't feel that impacted. But [organization] has come to mean a lot to a lot of people, so I worry, what if we make something and it's

not in line with what people have come to expect from us?"

Some participants also engaged in tone-policing and self-censorship "to avoid hyperaccountability." Veena, the founder of an advocacy organization, said that the more she posted about disability politics on her personal profile, the more her followers expected her and her organization to live up to its standards perfectly, which were difficult to reach while contending with a lack of resources. For example, if she posted about "fair pay to all" on her personal profile but could only offer a limited salary to the interns and employees of her organization due to the limitations of nonprofit funding, she would be questioned aggressively by her followers. She noted: *I've noticed a certain parasocial tendency of people. My personal musings become a reflection of [organization]... I hesitate to share my honest thoughts because I feel like I will become the one responsible for meeting those expectations.*

4.7 Coping through Fragmenting Identity, Accounts, and Gaze

Several participants created multiple social media profiles dedicated to separate personal and professional endeavors, as well as curating different identities on different platforms. They hoped that this would help them maintain visibility for advocacy efforts while at the same time retain a sense of privacy to protect themselves against ableism and harassment. For example, Alisha initially advocated for disability rights on her only Instagram profile. After receiving ableist comments, she felt the need to create two Instagram profiles: one public account dedicated to advocacy and one private account dedicated to more personal posts for a smaller number of followers. By doing this, she was able to stop strangers interested in her advocacy from accessing her personal posts and avoid personal association with a more activism-oriented public persona.

Another reason for creating profiles on different platforms was the desire to engage in online disability rights advocacy away from the gaze of one's immediate social circles. While there were exceptions, the majority of women and non-gender-conforming participants in our sample were dissuaded from online advocacy from family members who wished to hide their disabilities or minimize the severity in the public eye. These participants carried the burden of not wanting to embarrass their family members in an Indian society marked with deep-rooted ableism and patriarchy. For example, Geeta created a private social media account where she directed her family to follow her. She maintained a public account for disability rights advocacy, outside the knowledge of her parents, which had many more followers. She described: *"The private account, it is just for photo updates. There are a lot of family following me over there, who I know will have a problem with my views and opinions and the way I am. My opinions are strictly reserved for my public account."* Tehseen, who runs a popular Indian online disability advocacy organization, experienced a similar dilemma. She chose to make her Instagram profile private, completely anonymized her Twitter profile, and engaged in advocacy largely on the organization's social media pages. These findings reflect the societal burden on women and gender non-confirming people with disabilities in India to meet familial expectations, remain docile and subservient, and represent the 'honor' of their respective families.

When participants did not diversify their profiles, they still engaged in diversification within the same profile. For example, when Sheetal encountered harassment and microaggressions when posting about her chronic illness online, she decided to distribute such content via Instagram stories for two reasons. First, the shorter longevity of the stories meant that there was a shorter time span within which followers could respond to her with ableist comments. Second, responses to posts are usually in public comment sections, whereas responses to stories tend to be directed to the user's inbox. While this approach allowed Sheetal to avoid unsolicited medical advice in the public domain where her followers are witness to it, it forced her to invisibilize her own disabled experiences, affording her less time, space, and public engagement.

Almost all participants preferred to organize advocacy efforts privately, away from the gaze of abled users. Their platform of choice was WhatsApp, which offers the ability to create closed, invite-only groups. WhatsApp groups we came across included both homogeneous disability groups for participants with rare conditions and heterogeneous disability groups focused on advocacy and awareness. Some groups included disabled and abled allies who worked together for the purpose of activism and advocacy, whereas most included ground rules that allowed participation only from those who had a disability.

On WhatsApp, participants could shed their tonal filters and move the conversation on disability politics beyond rudimentary definitions aimed at individuals largely ignorant about their ability privileges. They could also speak about their own lived experiences – in an act often referred to as '*ranting*' – with a subdued fear of ableist reactions. These groups also allowed disability advocates to show solidarity and receive support, which led to positive outcomes, including feelings of "*courage and camaraderie*", reduced feelings of isolation, the ability to share jokes about one's conditions that may seem offensive to abled onlookers.

Participants derived several benefits from such groups. Medical and accessibility benefits included assistance and support in seeking diagnoses, and sharing information on drug trials, medicine, and accessibility devices. Advocacy-related benefits were several and included remaining updated with advocacy work across the community, helping each other gain traction on advocacy-related social media posts, discussing disability-related policies, connecting disabled individuals to jobs, and even convening to initiate legal interventions. Personal benefits included being able to form and become comfortable in one's own disabled identity in a safe space, and learn more about disability politics as well as the unique experiences of people with different disabilities. However, the online disability community's reliance on WhatsApp also reveals a problem: the domination of the abled gaze in the online sphere is so severe that constantly contending with the challenges of online disability rights advocacy is simply not a viable option for disability rights advocates. Therefore, they are forced to silo themselves into alternative spaces like WhatsApp, which aid in the important task of bringing the disabled community together, but widen the gap between advocates and one of the key targets of their work: abled social media users in India.

5 DISCUSSION

Our findings show that social media offer disability rights advocates an important opportunity to challenge regressive ableist norms, but myriad challenges impede their advocacy efforts and outcomes. While the motivations and aspirations of our participants bear close resemblance to those articulated in related prior work such as by Sannon et al. [62], our work extends the current scholarship on disability advocacy in three meaningful ways by capturing the challenges experienced by disability rights advocates in India. First, our work describes in detail the critical role intersectionality plays in gendered visibility online and the desexualization, fetishisation, and ableism that advocates with multiple marginalized identities experience for whom structural embeddings of ableism and patriarchy intersect to produce oppressive conditions. Second, we show that the self-expression and portrayal of disability by advocates are heavily influenced not just by abled followers, as reported in prior work, but also by their family members and allies in the disability community. Third, our work highlights how various sociotechnical architectures of social media platforms shape the engagement of disability advocates, illustrating, for instance, the use of Instagram for performative displays of disabled lives and WhatsApp for more private expressions and community building beyond the intense scrutiny of the abled gaze.

Shew [64] uses the term *technoableism* to describe "*a rhetoric of disability that at once talks about empowering disabled people through technologies while at the same time reinforcing ableist tropes about what body minds are good to have and who counts as worthy.*" Our findings show that there are three distinct planes on which ableism and technoableism emerge in context of disability rights advocacy online (1) interpersonal interactions between members of an ableist Indian society and disability rights advocates with disability, (2) cultures of competition, normativity, parasociality, and appeal produced by the platforms which host these interpersonal interactions, and (3) the medium, i.e. the platforms, which engage users through an unacknowledged, yet pervasive set of algorithmic folklore. Based on our findings, we describe three arguments that center social media platforms' inability to adequately uplift disabled Indian voices within a technoableist society, and in turn, to promote positive advocacy outcomes. These arguments place significant accountability on platforms, rather than abled and ableist users in isolation, for the challenges faced by online Indian disability rights advocates. While social phenomena such as ableism are carried online by users, they evolve – sometimes, to be uniquely disempowering – within and as a result of the sociotechnical architectures of mainstream social media platforms. While the primary goal of this qualitative work is to draw attention to the systemic and structural challenges that disability rights advocates experience in the process of their advocacy work [23], we also discuss design recommendations, when applicable, that emerged from our conversations with participants to create an enabling environment for their advocacy work.

Engagement-oriented architectures of social media platforms promote the invisibilization of disabled voices. Disabled voices are present and vocal on social media, but are invisibilized due to the dominance of abled narratives in India, and platform architecture that promotes dominant narratives over disabled self-expression.

Our findings show that disability rights advocates contend for visibility online that determines the percolation, impact, and perceived value of online advocacy. Traction and visibilization on social media platforms, such as Instagram and X, depends on the frequency of engagement in the form of likes, reactions, shares, and comments. This 'engagement-fosters-engagement' architecture, as noted by [11], exists to serve profit motives by allowing for constant, large-scale data production and collection, a process that perpetuates a threat of invisibility. Given the limited positive engagement from abled users as well as self-censorship by disability advocates in order to prevent themselves from ableist experiences, they struggle to achieve the level of visibility online that they require, and want, for effective advocacy. In existing alongside, and often in response to, the necessary practice of visibility-seeking which precedes effective advocacy and awareness building, ableism poses an impossible conundrum for disabled users: to command either attention and positive advocacy outcomes, or dignity and safety. As social media stands right now, the two cannot co-exist. These findings resemble the conundrum presented in the work of Duffy and Hund [27] on gendered visibility on Instagram which reports the challenges that women Instagram users experience in projecting themselves as authentic. Similar to our participants, not only women Instagram users felt compelled to self-express online, due to the algorithmic demands of the online platforms, they had to constantly deflect accusations of being too real, and, alternatively, as being not real enough. Furthermore, the increased visibility resulted in wider policing and harassment of women and other marginalized communities.

Our findings also demonstrate that the engagement-oriented architectures of social media platforms unfairly apply normative standards of appeal to disabled users causing further marginalization of disabled voices. Disability is fundamentally characterized by a deviance from the normative in many spheres, including the physical body, level of ability to engage in everyday activities, and physical and socio-emotional support needs. In stark contrast, the online cultures cultivated by social media platforms uphold a strict standard of normative appeal, competition, and desirability. Within this culture, all users regardless of their social locations—from lifestyle and beauty influencers, to political actors, to disability rights advocates—are scrutinized on the same metrics of content quality within a fast-paced attention economy, with the consumption and production of advocacy conflated with that of entertainment. Our findings show that this environment forces disability rights advocates to contend with these all-encompassing standards, which include the ability to quickly and constantly churn out content, create content that follows set standards of engagement appeal, or to practice a non-offensive identity politics. Since all forms of content are forced to compete, this culture compelled our participants to increase the entertainment value of their own work, thereby severely limiting the ways disability advocacy was performed and practiced online, and obscuring both the message and tone of their self-expression. Prior work also shows that the social media ecosystem provides conditions for disability advocacy content to be invisibilized and suppressed, as evidenced by shadowbanning of disabled creators on Instagram and TikTok [9, 63], purportedly done to prevent the bullying that disabled creators experienced in response to their self-expression and advocacy work. Such algorithmic oppression leads

to a fragmented and partial view of disability, illuminating only those aspects of disabled life that *do not* defy abled narratives and cause discomfort to abled users. Ultimately, by holding disproportionate power to determine advocacy processes and outcomes for disabled users, through ranking algorithms and the prioritization of abled user experiences and discourses, social media platforms can often disempower rather than empower online disability rights advocates.

To uplift the voices of disability advocates, these architectures, and by extension the corporate interests that are often at odds with the subversive demands of disabled communities, must be radically reimagined for inclusivity. One approach could be divesting power on social media, which refers to the intentional process of redistributing or relinquishing control and influence within digital spaces. It involves shifting power dynamics to create more equitable and inclusive online environments by promoting user autonomy, reducing the influence of centralized authorities, fostering diverse voices, and ensuring that decision-making processes are participatory rather than centralized. In order to divest power from platforms and place it in the hands of disability advocates, the platforms can, theoretically, offer an opt-out of surveillance by the ranking algorithms altogether. Alternately, platforms may be urged to rethink and modify existing algorithmic cultures to decrease competition for activists and marginalized communities, ensuring that their content is properly assessed based on its merits rather than engagement metrics.

Ableist retaliation towards advocacy determines online narratives of disability. Since abled users resist disabled narratives that challenge perceptions of their own ability privilege, the strength of numbers allows abled narratives that promote new and harmful constructions of disability to dominate the online sphere. For example, our findings show that patronizing compliments undermine the voices of female disability rights advocates under the garb of virtuous well-wishing, while inspiration porn legitimizes the exploitation of the disabled body for feel-good online entertainment. Aabled users at once desexualize disabled bodies as sexless, and fetishize them in private spheres such as Direct Messages. A hyperfocus on disability as the only valid or interesting aspect of one's identity coexists with the invalidation of disability altogether. These conundrums undermine the voices of people with disabilities. For the public endorsement of any cause, audiences must accept rights advocates as well-informed and trustworthy authorities of the causes they champion. However, our findings show that ableist comments, microaggressions, and trolling, and the resulting self-censorship of people with disabilities, further marginalized disability rights advocates instead of recognizing them as true authorities on their lives and communities. In an online sphere marked by self-performance, this strips people with disabilities of the agency required for self-representation, and in turn, self-advocacy.

Our findings also show that abled users minimize the suffering of disability advocates to protect themselves from the cognitive discomfort of confronting their own ability privilege and frequently invalidate disabled existence in accordance with normative standards set by an ableist society. Examples from our findings include constructing participants as 'hardworking' by virtue of simply existing, or suggesting that women with disabilities aspire towards

normative standards of female beauty. Through the assumptions that people with disabilities require reassurance, concern, and compliments via public comments, abled users propagate the idea that disability is a burden or punishment. Through inspiration porn, abled users propagate the long-standing falsehood that disability should be overcome rather than accommodated for. Similarly, our findings show that impositions of docility on non-men with disabilities allow for the perpetuation of a culture of overlooking disabled consent in spheres of intimacy and the achievements of people with disabilities were seen as ‘handouts’, such as in the case of Rohit’s paralympic medal. These findings parallels the work of Moloney and Love [51] on online misogyny, in which they describe how male users perform violence and invalidation against women in online spaces in response to the use of social media for female subversion of the gender status quo.

To combat such harmful constructions of disability, the platforms need to use reformative and educative approaches. A critical first step in this direction is to establish community guidelines that educate social media users about ableism and its manifestations online. Not only would these guidelines contribute to raising awareness about the various forms of ableism, they would also motivate and force platforms to address harmful stereotypes, harassing, and discriminatory behavior against people with disabilities.

Little redressal for gendered ableism on Indian social media. In her seminal work, Crenshaw [18] introduced the concept of intersectionality, emphasizing that various social categories, such as race, gender, and class, are not separate, but intersect and mutually shape everyday experiences of people. She highlighted the limitations of understanding oppression solely through single-axis frameworks and argued for a more nuanced approach that considers the overlapping and interlocking aspects of identity. In line with Crenshaw’s work, our findings show that advocates with intersectional identities of gender and disability experience high levels of sexual fetishization and harassment. Fahs and McClelland [31] in their work in the field of critical sexual studies emphasize that sex and power have a close relationship, in that sex is often enacted as an imposition of power between dominant and marginalized groups. In a deeply patriarchal Indian society where much of sexual violence itself is rooted in sexual entitlement [58], the narratives of our participants demonstrate abled entitlement towards marginalized disabled bodies which were seen by abled users as incapable of being desired, and hence incapable of causing harm. The victimization of non-men with disabilities by disability fetishists too is concerning as Jeffreys [41] notes, “*the fetishising of disability comes from the way in which, under male dominance, male sexuality is constructed to eroticise hierarchy and to objectify.*” This is in line with findings from prior work that shows how social media platforms create a sense of pressure to perform appropriate femininity, sexiness, and desirability [67, 70]. Men with disabilities have historically faced derogations relating to masculinity, in part due to the dilemma of coexistence: disability, which constructs the individual as ‘dependent and helpless’, threatens mainstream and often patriarchal conventions of masculinity as ‘powerful and autonomous’ [65]. Our findings demonstrate how social media platforms provide a space for the tangible manifestation of such problematic

constructs, and lack of technological or platform policy interventions, given their limited understanding of how ableism manifests online [39], allow these harms to perpetuate. The inability of social media platforms to tackle sexual violence in the Global South is well documented [43, 61, 72, 77], and our findings suggest that this is an urgent problem for disability advocates with multiply marginalized identities.

Work of De Choudhury et al. [21] show that cultural and gender norms significantly shape disability disclosures online and pathways to seeking care and social support. To enable disability advocates to engage in advocacy effectively, the platforms need to develop moderation tools that can identify online ableist behaviors, which are not only contextually diverse but also vary significantly across cultures [63]. On platforms such as Instagram, which now offer AI-driven detection of hate speech, it is critical to expand the corpus of identifiable hateful speech to include ableist phrases, not just in English, but also in non-Western languages that are “left behind” in the NLP advancement [42]. This is particularly critical since current NLP technologies are severely limited in identifying ableist behaviors online. The problem is compounded in non-Western contexts where these tools lack a cultural understanding of disability and its intersection with gender. For example, REALTOXICITYPROMPTS—a publicly available dataset to measure toxicity online [35]—has just over 130 occurrences of the word disability in a set containing 100,000 sentences, limiting its utility in identifying ableist hate even for users with disabilities in the West. Finally, with platforms, such as X and Instagram, moving to actively provide nudges that aim to correct political and medical misinformation, it is important that disability-related misinformation and ableism, particularly those surrounding harmful stereotypes, is countered similarly.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper examines the challenges disability advocates face in advocating for disability rights on social media and the ways they cope with these challenges. Through interviews with 20 disability rights advocates representing a diversity of abilities and gender identities, this research reveals a complex set of challenges, including patronizing comments, invalidation of lived experiences, desexualization and fetishization, and outright harassment. Moreover, advocates with multiple marginalized identities, such as women or LGBTQ+ individuals, face intensified scrutiny in ableist environments with structural embeddings of patriarchy. In response to these challenges, disability advocates employ various coping strategies, including heavy self-censorship, self-tone policing, and the creation of separate profiles for personal and professional activities to evade ableist scrutiny from not only online followers but also their own families. Based on these findings, we discuss the technoableist infrastructure and policies of social media platforms that fail to safeguard disability advocates and provide them a safe platform to advocate for disability rights and challenge regressive ableist norms. Our conversations with participants with disabilities remind us that there remains much to be addressed in future work, including the development of tools and strategies to counter online ableism (particularly in regional languages), explorations of structures and relationships within offline and online Indian disability

advocacy groups, and further in-depth investigations of the online experiences of Indian users with disabilities and rights advocates across intersections of caste, sexuality, and gender.

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