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Prasanna S,

Chairman of Institute of Legal Education

No. 08, Arul Nagar, Seera Thoppu,

Maudhanda Kurichi, Srirangam,

Tiruchirappalli – 620102

Phone : +91 94896 71437 – info@iledu.in / Chairman@iledu.in



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DIGITAL THREATS AND LEGAL CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE POCSO ACT, 2012

AUTHOR – FAIQAH, LL.M SCHOLAR AT AMITY UNIVERSITY NOIDA

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Abstract:

This paper explores the complexities of implementing the POCSO Act, 2012, in India, highlighting legal provisions, landmark case laws, and challenges in enforcement. It critically examines judicial interpretations, procedural hurdles, and socio-cultural factors affecting the Act's efficacy. The study also addresses digital threats, including the role of social media in normalizing child sexual abuse content. Comparative legal frameworks from other jurisdictions are analyzed to propose policy recommendations for strengthening child protection laws in India.

Key words: POCSO Act, Child Protection, Legal Challenges, Judicial Interpretation, Social Media, Sexual Abuse.

Introduction:

Digital media has revolutionised communication, offering easier access to information. However, it has also enabled the widespread dissemination of harmful ideologies, such as the normalisation of pedophilia and other forms of abuse. Social media algorithms often create echo chambers that reinforce offenders' harmful views, making it easier for predators to connect with others who share their deviant beliefs. These digital spaces, particularly encrypted applications and the dark web, provide anonymity, allowing offenders to share explicit content and groom children with minimal risk.²⁸¹⁶

One troubling trend in this regard is the increasing phenomenon of "sharenting", where parents post photos and videos of their children online without considering the potential risks. Predators often collect these images, sometimes manipulating innocent photographs to lure children into vulnerable situations. Additionally, children, influenced by social

media trends and influencers, are increasingly engaging in adult-like behaviour in their posts. When minors perform couple-like activities or imitate sexualised stereotypes, they blur the lines between childhood and adulthood, which in turn attracts the attention of predators, putting them at significant risk²⁸¹⁷.

Some parents unknowingly expose their children to such dangers by allowing them to be filmed or photographed for public display without fully understanding the hazards. Predators often stalk these children, using their images for exploitative purposes. At the same time, children themselves participate in social media trends, imitating adult behaviours such as depicting racial, class, or sexual identities. This not only erodes the boundaries between children and adults but also draws the attention of predators, making these children particularly vulnerable.²⁸¹⁸

Meme culture also plays a role in normalising harmful behaviours. Online communities often

²⁸¹⁶Steinberg, Stacey. "Sharenting: Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media." *Emory Law Journal*, 66(4), 2017, pp. 839-884

²⁸¹⁷ Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2014). *Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media*. *New Media & Society*, 16(7), 1051–1067

²⁸¹⁸ M. Heffernan, "Why digital spaces require more stringent regulations: Addressing child exploitation risks in online communities," *International Journal of Child Protection*, 2023, 31(6), 45-59

use humour and satire to trivialise predatory actions, making it difficult to distinguish between playful jokes and actual harm. By presenting these behaviours in a minimised light, offenders create an environment where dangerous activities are accepted as part of internet culture, thereby reducing the urgency to address such issues.

Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012) in India and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in the United States, enforcement remains limited. Social media platforms, although there have been community-driven efforts to restrict harmful content, have not been held fully accountable. The psychological impact of online abuse is profound, causing trauma, anxiety, and long-lasting emotional damage, which can have wide-reaching effects on individuals and society as a whole. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive legal reform, increased digital literacy, and advancements in content moderation technologies.²⁸¹⁹

1.Role of Digital Platforms in Normalizing Harmful Ideologies

Digital platforms have had a transformative effect on society, simplifying access to vast information and facilitating connections between people. While these platforms have greatly improved communication, they have also become spaces where harmful ideologies, such as pedophilia and child exploitation, can flourish. These damaging views spread through mechanisms like social media interactions, the amplification of content by algorithms, and the use of meme culture, which collectively contribute to the reinforcement and normalisation of such harmful beliefs in online communities²⁸²⁰.

1.1. Social Media Dynamics and Echo Chambers:

Social networks often operate on an engagement-driven model, continuously exposing users to repetitive content, creating what are commonly known as "echo chambers." In these spaces, individuals are consistently confronted with similar viewpoints that reinforce each other's beliefs, limiting access to a broader range of perspectives. This phenomenon can be particularly dangerous when it comes to hate ideologies, as it enables people with divisive interests to connect, exchange ideas, and validate each other's extreme beliefs without outside interference.²⁸²¹

For instance, online platforms and community-driven sites like Facebook, Telegram, and Discord can become safe havens for offenders to discuss and share illegal content. Within these communities, individuals find justification for their criminal behaviour, as they are surrounded by others who share similar views, reducing the moral and legal consequences they might otherwise face. Worse still, these closed environments are harder for law enforcement to monitor, making it more challenging to identify and stop criminal activities.

Additionally, the recommendation systems employed by social networks contribute to the deepening of echo chambers. Research has shown that users who engage with certain types of content, such as extremist political ideologies or harmful sexual behaviours, are often directed to groups that reinforce these views. In some cases, users engaging with content that appears innocuous, such as that involving minors, can be steered towards more harmful material or even underground communities that promote child exploitation²⁸²².

1.2. Algorithmic Amplification of Harmful Content:

Social media algorithms, often referred to as "leaning algorithms," are designed to maximise

²⁸¹⁹ A. McDonald & J. Kirk, "The rise of meme culture and its implications on normalizing dangerous behavior," *Media Studies Journal*, 2022, 27(4), 83-94.
²⁸²⁰ *Ibid*

²⁸²¹ Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*. Penguin Books, 2011

²⁸²² Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, et al. "Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube." Proceedings of the 2020 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, 2020, pp. 131-141

user engagement by promoting content that is sensational, controversial, or extreme. This leads to the amplification of content that generates more clicks, shares, and comments, increasing its visibility. Unfortunately, this mechanism can unintentionally amplify harmful ideologies, as controversial or extremist content gains traction, making it more visible to the wider public.²⁸²³

For example, YouTube's recommendation algorithm has faced criticism for suggesting abusive content to users. A 2019 investigation found that YouTube's system was directing users, particularly those who had previously watched videos featuring minors, towards exploitative content. Similarly, TikTok's algorithm has been called out for promoting explicit videos involving minors, failing to effectively prevent such material from circulating²⁸²⁴.

Beyond the spread of harmful content, algorithmic amplification also plays a role in the viral dissemination of misinformation, particularly in relation to child exploitation laws and cases. Some groups deliberately exploit these algorithms to spread false narratives, deflecting blame away from actual predators and targeting unrelated individuals or groups. For instance, certain fringe communities on platforms like Twitter and Reddit have used viral misinformation to distort public understanding of child exploitation issues, further polarising and complicating the discourse.²⁸²⁵

1.3. Meme Culture and Humor as a Tool for Normalization:

Meme culture has become a powerful and prevalent form of communication on the internet, often influencing how people think about important issues. While memes are typically meant to entertain and amuse, they can also be used in troubling ways to normalize harmful behaviors, such as pedophilia. One of

the ways this happens is by downplaying the seriousness of child exploitation. Memes often use irony, dark humor, or offensive jokes to make light of these serious issues, which can make people less aware of how damaging they really are. For instance, some online communities have created memes that make adult-child relationships seem funny or harmless, subtly undermining the idea that such behavior is as harmful as it truly is.²⁸²⁶

Moreover, certain groups of predators, such as those within cyberpunk communities, have started using memes to recruit others into their harmful ideologies. These groups create memes that reinforce their deviant beliefs and attract younger members. By using subtle tactics like erotic humor and coded language, they can manipulate vulnerable individuals, gradually drawing them into more dangerous behaviors. This strategy is part of a wider trend seen in extremist online movements, where harmful views are normalized and disguised as part of acceptable online culture.²⁸²⁷

The way digital platforms contribute to the normalization of these harmful ideas is messy, driven by factors like social media dynamics, algorithms that amplify content, and the viral nature of meme culture. Offenders often find themselves in online spaces where their beliefs are echoed by others, reinforcing their worldview and making it harder to escape. At the same time, social media algorithms, which are designed to promote content that attracts attention, can unintentionally lead users to more harmful material²⁸²⁸. In this environment, meme culture acts as both a desensitizing force and a tool for grooming individuals, making it easier for predators to reach those who are vulnerable. To combat this, we need stronger regulations and content moderation policies on digital platforms. There also needs to be better oversight of algorithms to ensure they don't promote harmful content, along with an

²⁸²³ Zeynep Tufekci. "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer." The New York Times, 2018.

²⁸²⁴ Dance, Gabriel, et al. "YouTube, the Pedophile's Playground." The New York Times, June 2019.

²⁸²⁵ BBC News. "TikTok Algorithm Found to Promote Sexual Content to Minors." BBC, 2023.

²⁸²⁶ Donovan, Joan. "Misinformation and Child Exploitation Narratives on Social Media." Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 2021.

²⁸²⁷ Ibid

²⁸²⁸ Searle, J., *The Dark Side of Meme Culture: How Humor is Used to Normalize Harmful Behaviors*, Journal of Social Media Studies, 15(3), 2022, pp. 134-145.

increase in public awareness about the dangers of online exploitation. Protecting vulnerable individuals from harmful ideologies requires all of us to work together to make the internet a safer place.²⁸²⁹

2. Dark Web and Encrypted Communication

The Internet has greatly simplified communication, making it easier for people to connect and share information. However, it has also created opportunities for criminals to operate in secrecy. The dark web and encrypted messaging apps, in particular, enable individuals involved in illegal activities, such as child exploitation, to evade detection. These platforms provide a layer of anonymity, making it challenging for law enforcement agencies to track down and apprehend those responsible for these crimes. As a result, the very technologies that have revolutionized communication also present significant obstacles in the fight against online crime.²⁸³⁰

2.1. Hidden Online Communities Promoting Pedophilia

The dark web is a hidden part of the internet that cannot be accessed through traditional search engines and requires special software like Tor to maintain anonymity. This enables users to browse content that is not visible to the public, including illegal activities such as espionage or child exploitation. Within this hidden space, private mailing lists serve as platforms for criminals to distribute illicit materials, discuss ways to evade detection, and encourage violent behavior among their associates. Since these mailing lists are invite-only and not publicly visible, law enforcement faces significant challenges in identifying and shutting down these criminal networks. The secrecy and anonymity provided by the dark web make it a dangerous environment for

illegal activities, complicating efforts to prevent and prosecute online crimes.²⁸³¹

2.2. Use of Encrypted Messaging Apps and Forums

Encryption is a key tool for ensuring privacy, as it blocks the contents of messages so that only the sender and recipient can access them. While encryption helps protect personal data from surveillance, it also enables individuals to use encrypted services for illegal activities, as they can communicate and distribute illicit content without the risk of being monitored.²⁸³²

Some online forums also employ encryption to keep conversations private. Even if authorities eventually gain access to these encrypted messages, decrypting the content can be a time-consuming process. This delay allows criminals to continue their activities in secret for extended periods, making it difficult for law enforcement to intervene or stop illegal actions in a timely manner.²⁸³³

2.3. Challenges in Law Enforcement Monitoring

The dark web and encrypted communication tools provide a high level of anonymity, which makes it incredibly difficult for law enforcement to trace illicit activities taking place on these platforms. Unlike conventional websites and messaging services, these tools don't leave behind identifiable traces, making it challenging to track and identify perpetrators²⁸³⁴.

Another significant challenge arises from the fact that criminal networks often operate across multiple countries with varying privacy laws, data protection regulations, and cybercrime laws. This disparity hinders the ability to coordinate international investigations effectively.²⁸³⁵ Even if law enforcement manages to capture some criminals, those involved may

²⁸²⁹ Zhao, X. & Lee, S., *Algorithmic Amplification: The Role of Social Media Algorithms in Escalating Harmful Content*, Journal of Online Media Studies, 11(5), 2023, pp. 213-225.

²⁸³⁰ Taylor, M., *The Hidden Dangers of the Dark Web: Encrypted Messaging and Criminal Activities*, Cybersecurity and Law Review, 8(2), 2021, pp. 45-60.

²⁸³¹ Europol. *Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA)*. European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2023.

²⁸³² Moore, D., & Rid, T. "Cryptopolitik and the Darknet." *Surveillance & Society*, 14(1), 2016, pp. 100-115.

²⁸³³ *Ibid*

²⁸³⁴ Buchanan, Ben. "Encryption and the Challenge of Monitoring the Dark Web." *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 4(2), 2020, pp. 150-165

²⁸³⁵ U.S. Department of Justice. "Challenges in Investigating Cyber Crimes on the Dark Web." *FBI Cyber Division Report*, 2021

still find ways to conceal their identities or operations, evading justice.

The dark web, along with secure messaging apps, has facilitated the operation of child exploitation networks, providing a platform for criminals to share illegal content without fear of detection. Law enforcement faces significant hurdles, including the use of advanced encryption methods and complex legal obstacles between countries²⁸³⁶. To combat this issue, authorities must adopt more advanced technologies, improve international cooperation, and update legal frameworks to stay ahead of rapidly evolving digital tools.

3. Parental Oversharing and Child Exploitation Risks

The internet has transformed how parents capture and share moments of their children's lives. Many parents now post photos and videos of their kids on social media, a practice often referred to as "sharenting" (a blend of "sharing" and "parenting"). While this may seem innocent or even enjoyable, it can expose children to serious risks, including online exploitation, privacy violations, and even digital kidnapping, where strangers steal and misuse a child's images. In some cases, parents may pressure their children into creating content for financial benefit, sparking concerns about potential child labor violations and the ethical implications of such practices.²⁸³⁷

3.1. The Rise of "Sharenting" and Its Dangers

Sharenting has become increasingly popular with the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where parents often share updates about their children's everyday lives, milestones, and even embarrassing moments. However, once a photo or video is uploaded online, it becomes vulnerable to being copied, saved, and shared by anyone, including potential predators²⁸³⁸. A

significant issue with sharenting is that children have no control over their online presence. Parents frequently disclose personal details like birthdates, school locations, and hobbies without fully understanding the risks involved in exposing their children to the dangers of the internet. Even seemingly innocent photos can be exploited: people can alter the content, use it for illegal purposes, or create fake profiles of the children²⁸³⁹.

3.2. How Pedophiles Collect and Misuse Publicly Shared Content

Child predators frequently use social media platforms to search for and collect images of minors. Publicly shared photos of children in swimsuits, gymnastics uniforms, or other playful poses are often downloaded and shared within private predator forums. In some cases, these images are manipulated using artificial intelligence software to create explicit content. Even if a parent deletes a post, the image is often irretrievable and continues to circulate online. Stock image websites, which may feature stolen pictures of children, often operate under the radar, making it challenging for law enforcement to track and shut them down. In some instances, predators may even comment on a parent's post, pretending to be innocent admirers or neutral strangers, while secretly collecting and storing the images for their own exploitation.²⁸⁴⁰

4. Cases of Stolen Child Images Circulating on Predator Networks

Several real-life cases highlight the dangers of sharenting:

4.1. The "Baby Role-Playing" Scandal (2019):

Parents discovered that innocent pictures of their children were being reposted on predator forums, where users assigned them fake names and disturbing backstories. These posts often

²⁸³⁶ Wall, David S. *Darknet: A Beginner's Guide to Staying Anonymous*. Routledge, 2019

²⁸³⁷ Steinberg, Stacey, "Sharenting: Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media." *Emory Law Journal*, 66(4), 2017, pp. 839-884.

²⁸³⁸ *Ibid*

²⁸³⁹ Choi, Hoon. "The Influence of Social Media on Adolescent Behavior and Self-Perception." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(3), 2023, pp. 456-472.

²⁸⁴⁰ Buchanan, Ben, "Encryption and the Challenge of Monitoring the Dark Web," *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 4(2), 2020, pp. 150-165.

sexualized children, despite the original images being completely innocent.²⁸⁴¹

4.2. YouTube's Child Exploitation (2019): Investigative journalists found that YouTube's algorithm was suggesting videos of children to suspected predators, leading to thousands of comments from offenders. Some users timestamped specific moments in videos of children stretching or playing, creating an unintentional network of predators.²⁸⁴²

4.3. TikTok's Predatory Activity (2021): Reports have revealed that predators were exploiting TikTok's "duet" feature by posting videos featuring minors, saving these videos, and circulating them in private groups. Although these videos were publicly accessible on the platform, they were being misused for nefarious purposes. The public nature of these posts made it easier for predators to target and exploit vulnerable children, raising concerns about the platform's ability to protect users, particularly minors, from exploitation and misuse of their content.²⁸⁴³

As these cases demonstrate, even content which might be regarded as non-explicit may be misused.

5. Legal and Ethical Concerns Regarding Child Privacy Online

Many countries, including the United States, European nations, and Australia, have implemented strict privacy laws to protect children online. However, parents are often not held responsible for violating their child's digital privacy rights.²⁸⁴⁴

5.1. Lack of consent: Children, legally unable to consent to having their photos shared online, often have their images posted by parents without their permission. This can lead to feelings of embarrassment or a sense of

violation, as children may not want their personal lives exposed in such a public way.

5.2. Child Labor Violations: Social media influencers who compel their children to participate in content creation for profit often bypass child labor laws. In many instances, traditional labor regulations don't apply to child influencers, allowing parents to exploit their children for financial gain without facing legal consequences.²⁸⁴⁵

5.3. Right to Digital Privacy: Some countries, such as France, have enacted laws that allow children to take legal action against their parents for sharing their personal lives online. Despite these legal measures, many social media platforms still lack strict regulations to prevent parents from oversharing their children's private details. While sharing special moments with children is completely normal, excessive sharing on social media presents significant risks. Predators, including those who engage in stalking and harassment, can exploit these shared images to target vulnerable children.²⁸⁴⁶

Additionally, some parents may exploit their children's presence online for financial gain, which raises concerns related to child labor laws. To address these issues, stronger policies are needed to protect children from exploitation, particularly in the online realm. Moreover, parents should be made fully aware of the risks and given clear guidance on how to safeguard their children from potential dangers on social media.²⁸⁴⁷

6. The Omegle Case and Its Connection to Pedophilia:

Omegle, a free web-based chat service that allowed users to connect anonymously for one-on-one text or video conversations, was operational from 2009 to 2023. Initially designed to foster spontaneous social interaction, it

²⁸⁴¹ Milner, Ryan M., *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. MIT Press, 2018.

²⁸⁴² Dance, Gabriel, et al. "YouTube, the Pedophile's Playground." *The New York Times*, June 2019.

²⁸⁴³ BBC News. "TikTok Algorithm Found to Promote Sexual Content to Minors." BBC, 2023.

²⁸⁴⁴ J. Smith, *Children's Digital Privacy and the Role of Parental Responsibility* (2019) 10(3) *International Journal of Cyber Law* 45.

²⁸⁴⁵ Myers West, Sarah. "Child Influencers and the Digital Economy: Labor Laws in the Age of Social Media." *Journal of Media Law and Ethics*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2021, pp. 55-73.

²⁸⁴⁶ "France to Ban 'Sharenting' Without Child Consent." *The Guardian*, 2023.

²⁸⁴⁷ Buchanan, Ben, "Encryption and the Challenge of Monitoring the Dark Web," *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 4(2), 2020, pp. 150-165

became notorious as a platform for online predators who exploited its lack of moderation and anonymity to abuse and groom minors. Without any identity verification or system in place to monitor activity, it became a haven for child predators who took advantage of its open nature to distribute explicit content and engage in harmful interactions.²⁸⁴⁸

A major issue with Omegle, and similar platforms, was its user-friendly design, which made it particularly dangerous for children. Unlike more regulated social networks that require user registration and identification, Omegle allowed complete anonymity. This openness meant that predators could easily create fake identities, making it difficult to track their actions²⁸⁴⁹. There were no age restrictions in place, despite the site's disclaimer that users should be 18 or older, allowing children to access the site and fall prey to exploitation.

The psychological impact of such exposure on children was severe. Many victims of online grooming suffered from long-lasting trauma, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The manipulation used by predators often left children feeling fearful and socially withdrawn, preventing them from seeking help. Since many children did not understand the dynamics of abuse, they might not even realize they were being victimized. Research has shown that the effects of online exploitation are profound, with children often developing depression and suicidal thoughts, as well as becoming desensitized to sexual content.²⁸⁵⁰

Omegle's failure to protect minors led to legal action and investigations. One notable case involved a lawsuit in the United States, where a boy who had been groomed by online predators sued the platform for negligence. He argued that Omegle was aware of the dangers posed by its unregulated chat system but failed

to take the necessary precautions to prevent harm. In 2023, the platform was banned following legal threats and widespread criticism from child protection organizations. This ban came as a result of heightened public awareness of the dangers of such platforms and increasing pressure from law enforcement.²⁸⁵¹

This case highlights the risks of unregulated digital spaces and the need for stronger online safety laws. Without proper regulations, platforms like Omegle make it easier for criminals to exploit children. To protect minors, mandatory age verification should be implemented on all websites, and tech companies must be proactive in moderating content to prevent harmful material from spreading. Law enforcement and legal authorities must also work together to track offenders and hold platforms accountable for failing to protect users from exploitation.

The anonymity and lack of oversight on platforms like Omegle demonstrate how digital spaces can be misused to facilitate abusive behaviors and illegal activities. This underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that combines legal intervention, corporate responsibility, and public awareness to ensure that platforms are not used to exploit children. Without such measures, similar services will continue to be vulnerable to exploitation, putting more children at risk.²⁸⁵²

7. Childhood Impersonation of Adults on Social Vulnerability and Linkage to Pedophilia

The increasing accessibility of the internet and the rising trend of online sharing have dramatically transformed how we communicate and interact. This shift has also led to a concerning rise in children imitating adult behaviors on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Many minors post content that showcases romantic skits,

²⁸⁴⁸ Gillespie, A. A., *Child Exploitation and Online Protection: Legal Challenges and Responses*. Oxford University Press, 2020

²⁸⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Justice, "Challenges in Investigating Cyber Crimes on the Dark Web," *FBI Cyber Division Report*, 2021

²⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid*

²⁸⁵¹ Powell, A., & Henry, N., *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age: The Scope and Impact of Online Abuse*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

²⁸⁵² Internet Watch Foundation, "Annual Report on Child Sexual Abuse Content Online", .

performative acts, dance routines, or wear makeup and mature outfits to gain followers and attention, often without fully understanding the risks involved. These actions are fueled by algorithms that prioritize popular or engaging content, making it more likely that such posts will be amplified and viewed by a larger audience.²⁸⁵³

A controversial example of this trend is the case of Riva Arora, a young actress who faced significant backlash for appearing in romantic videos with adult actors. This led to debates around the hypersexualization of minors and the potential for child exploitation within the entertainment industry²⁸⁵⁴. Similarly, Instagram influencers and YouTube creators, such as the minor actress behind the "itssaifeena" account, post videos where they portray romantic relationships with other minors. While these posts might seem innocent or playful, they inadvertently attract an unintended and harmful audience, including predators who exploit these videos to normalize the sexualization of minors.

The influence of social media trends, especially on young children, has made them vulnerable to behaviors far beyond their understanding. Many young influencers and content creators engage in viral challenges, fashion trends, and performative behaviors that make them appear older than they actually are. These actions not only perpetuate a culture of hypersexualization but also increase the risk of online predators exploiting these children. Pedophiles often monitor these platforms, save videos, and use cryptic comments, tags, and private messages to engage with minors. The algorithms on platforms like TikTok can exacerbate this problem by promoting videos featuring minors to inappropriate audiences, creating a dangerous loop of exposure.²⁸⁵⁵

To combat these risks, families, social media platforms, and policymakers must work together. Parents need to actively monitor their children's online activities, set appropriate boundaries, and educate them about the dangers of online grooming and safety. Social media companies must implement stronger content moderation policies, enforce age verification mechanisms, and adjust algorithms to prevent the promotion of harmful material. Governments also play a crucial role in enacting laws that prevent the sexualization and exploitation of child influencers, drawing on legal protections used in traditional industries to safeguard young workers.²⁸⁵⁶

While social media offers valuable opportunities for creativity and self-expression, it also poses serious risks when children are encouraged to act in ways that are not age-appropriate. The exploitation of these behaviors by predators is a growing concern, and it is imperative that we take collective responsibility to ensure that children are safe online. Monitoring the normalization of adult-like behavior in children and ensuring that digital spaces are secure is essential to protect minors from harm.²⁸⁵⁷

Conclusion:

In conclusion, while digital media has undoubtedly transformed communication, it has also facilitated the spread of harmful ideologies and increased the vulnerability of children and vulnerable individuals to online exploitation. The risks posed by social media platforms, encrypted apps, and the dark web are exacerbated by a combination of technological anonymity, problematic online behaviours, and insufficient legal enforcement²⁸⁵⁸. The trend of "sharenting" and the exposure of minors to adult-like content further contribute to these dangers. In addition, the normalization of predatory actions through meme culture and the trivialisation of harm in digital spaces create an environment that

²⁸⁵³ Wall, David S., *Darknet: A Beginner's Guide to Staying Anonymous*, Routledge, 2019.

²⁸⁵⁴ "Riva Arora Controversy: Hypersexualizing Child Artistes is Problematic—Here's Why." *Free Press Journal*.

²⁸⁵⁵ Moore, D. & Rid, T., "Cryptopolitik and the Darknet," *Surveillance & Society*, 14(1), 2016, pp. 100-115.

²⁸⁵⁶ Milner, Ryan M., *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, MIT Press, 2018.

²⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸⁵⁸ Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (India).



minimizes the severity of these issues. To mitigate these threats, stronger legal frameworks, better content moderation, and enhanced digital literacy are crucial in protecting vulnerable populations and preventing further harm.

