WE HAVE A **BIGO** PROBLEM ON THE INTERNET AND IT NEEDS TO BE STOPPED

This observations report is a summary of an investigative research conducted by Nitish Chandan from Cyber Peace Foundation. It explores the proliferation of several types of unlawful content and activity through a live streaming app; paving way for several violations of the law and harmful impact on the society at large.

SENSITIVE CONTENT

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There's this app on the Play Store, yes this one that's often in top 10- It's called Bigo Live and it is one of the ‘bigoest’ names in India when people talk about live streaming. Not only has this live streaming been adopted and appreciated by Indians but it has let people from the farthest reaches of the country express themselves and be a part of the mainstream internet at the ease of still being in their homes, connected 24x7.

On a regular day, I would never seek bans or any restrictions on the free flow of information and communication that's empowering- because that's what the Internet's power is but this is one of those days when I feel different and stand strongly opinionated about something.

It starts with a random Play Store search for Bigo Live, after having heard its name during several workshops. Rated suitable for ages 12+, 4.5 stars and over 100 million downloads, the creators of the app seemed to know what they were doing. Anyway, after a simple sign up using my phone number, I could see a flood of options to watch live broadcasts on the app. Observations begin at this stage.

The very first screen for this app rated safe for users aged 12+ shows a broadcaster named ‘xxxvideos’. Maybe this was a one time incident. But, as it turns out, that's not the case. The next time this app is opened, it shows ‘erotic fun’ as one of the potential broadcasts to look at.
Before jumping to looking at actual broadcasts, I thought it would be a good idea to look at the platform itself, first. With no information like my gender or preferred broadcaster gender, all of the popular live streams that are shown involve young girls. Many accounts had thumbnail pictures that one might call suggestive, mildly pornographic or even obscene. For the purposes of documentation, I also recorded a video with tens of scrolls- with each screen showing broadcasts involving women only.

One specific picture rang a bell while writing this report. In my last report about WhatsApp groups disseminating CSAM, one of the pictures that was the icon for a group circulating CSAM, was actually the picture of one of the broadcasters in one of the screenshots on the first page. I haven’t been able to locate this profile and verify any further.

This app is like those text messages asking you to dial a few phoney numbers if you feel lonely. Even when you don’t use the app, it urges you to with notifications like “I’m waiting for you”, “Will you be my friend?” decorated with hearts pictures of girls on them. And once you do open the app, you are prompted to buy these diamonds to gift to the broadcasters. It pays to be a broadcaster!

Within the dynamics of the application, I had heard and there were numerous reports about the application being a source of earning for these broadcasters but all of it was secondary information. While going through one of the broadcasts, I came across a discussion that two of these people were having on a live one-to-one call that everyone could hear. It is here that one girl explains how she did not get the right amount of her salary that month from Bigo, while the other explains how she completed her daily tasks and got the right amount. At this point, the one who hasn’t received the right amount is crying live. Now, it is to be understood that what broadcasters receive is the encashment of the gifts and
awards that they receive within its ecosystem. Stumbling upon some more broadcasters talking about this, I came to the conclusion that this monthly salary ranges anywhere between 50,000 to 4,00,000 INR.

This gratification is making broadcasters do things that the law of this land and many others would term obscene, lascivious and bordering on pornography but wait, there’s pornography as well.

Broadcasters urge their audience to follow and share their live feed, send them gifts etc. with a promise to do something in return. In one of these videos, a girl, while taking a bath asks the viewers to send some gifts promising to come in front of the camera naked when she reaches a target. While some people write lustful and obscene comments, others drop their phone numbers to receive a call back. One broadcaster could be seen throwing mugs of water on herself in a bathroom discussing penis sizes with approximations of her fingers.

Another very popular MO that was found was broadcasters seducing and luring audience into believing offers like “talk to me for 10 minutes but first transfer Rs. 500 into my Paytm account”. People did come back to the broadcasters’ live feeds to confirm their transfers and demanding chat (both live and taken to WhatsApp audio and video calls for private sexual activity.

The sad situation of affairs is that this is only the tip of the iceberg as far as obscenity is concerned and I couldn’t possibly uncover all of what happens but there are some shocking discoveries which need to be mentioned.

Virtual Dance Bars?
I know what readers might think- it should be the opinion and right of an end user and a broadcaster in this case to do whatever they want. I agree! The most interesting part about the internet is the empowerment that it has brought about but what really of situations when these are really virtual dance bars?

There were several instances where dances were lascivious, with the intention to arouse the audience and wait for it- directed by several other people who could be seen within the video frames. These dances happen with all types of sexually explicit comments and
solicitations and continue with caveats of love in the form of these diamonds and gifts that the broadcaster then wants to encash for real money.

The law in the country about obscenity in the electronic form is quite clear about lascivious activity of this kind. With the ease that such a platform offers, it is almost impossible to enforce these laws. In the self-regulation space, it also offers a so-called “reporting” mechanism on which I did find a few takedowns, honestly. But out of the total 23 reports that I made about clearly obscene content, only 3 accounts were removed. To follow up when I investigated further, I found that one broadcaster was using multiple phones and accounts to work around getting blocked by the platform. In another conversation between two people who hurled abuses at each other and one with two people literally engaging in sexual demeanour on voice, they can be clearly heard being relieved that Bigo moderators and the company doesn’t understand what they do in Hindi. They felt that if the company was Indian, they’d be behind bars.

In one of these live streams at 01:30 AM, a man can be seen requesting his 900 strong audience to send him the same game goodies, in lieu of him sexually abusing his wife on live stream. He goes on to abusing her breasts with her clothes on while she slept. I had to report this- but to my surprise, the account was not taken down.
Teenagers and young adults, who we feel are really empowered with this live stream construct are actually seen on this app streaming live conversations with random strangers in the middle of the night clearly in their homes with their parents asleep. They’re afraid that their parents might catch them, so they go out and stream their whispers to the world instead.

**There’s a Versus mode**

Now, within the app ecosystem, there is a mode/game what is referred to as PK. In this mode, people compete against each other on live streams to gather more points from their respective audience. The winner gets some extra points maybe along with an edge to get the loser to do anything.

Empowering? No. People can be seen going off limits abusing each other with words that are unpleasant not just for children, but everyone. In that race for the last points, people can be seen going to extents that they would not normally do. And this goes beyond seduction. In one particular stream where two of such broadcasters are competing to win the round, a child can be seen in the background while this lady on the live stream hurls all types of abuses and touches herself inappropriately to gather more points. Later in her stream she reveals that it’s her 12 year old son.
Is there pornography?

Needless to say, if there is such lawlessness on the app, there has got to be pornography on there too. The readers are again made aware that as per the Play Store, this app’s content is rated 12+ based on the minimum maturity level.

I will not go into the different types and modus operandi that leads to pornographic and sexually explicit but will highlight that it does not need any special searches. Without practically typing anything, just a few swipes, one comes across sexually explicit content. This includes both men and women, without clothes.

What happens in other parts of the world?

BIGO claims to be operating in 150+ countries all over the world. One can freely go to any country’s feed and browse streams directly without any hassle. This report does not touch upon this aspect thoroughly but interestingly, I would like to point to one of the very few streams that I browsed from Thailand. This shows a Thai girl dancing to a tune with an Indian name Rahul written near her breast.
Is there something else going on? Sadly enough, obscene content is not the only thing that's happening on this application. There's another menace—*copyright infringement*. In my personal investigation and experience of reporting more than 40 accounts that were streaming movies 24x7, not even a single account was removed.

Another aspect that needs some serious attention is *fraud*. On many occasions, there are *blanket scenes exposing bare skin around some body part* and then solicitation to transfer money into Paytm accounts to start sexting on WhatsApp. Now, many of these accounts and feeds sounded like men modulating their voices to sound like women. Whether or not these attempts actually converted into fraud is to be seen but the modus operandi to lure people into sexual conversations in lieu of money is evident.