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Algorithmic Media Trials and Digital Manipulation of Judicial Perception in India

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have dramatically shaped the connection between public opinion, media presentation and judicial proceedings in India. Criminal investigations and court cases are now a topic of discussion, including on social platforms like Instagram, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, all of which are sources of viral content that often influences perceptions of guilt and innocence before court rulings are announced. The current research examines the impact of viral exposure to trial-related information on perceptions of fairness, trust in the system and opinion development by urban Indian adults. Data were gathered using structured survey based methodology and analysed by statistics of description, thematic analysis, reliability testing and Spearman's rank correlation among 43 respondents from different states in India. The results show that there are statistically significant relationships between exposure with viral trial content and perception of social media influence ($\rho = .588$, $p < .001$), opinion shaping ($\rho = .575$, $p < .001$), rapid judgment formation ($\rho = .337$, $p = .027$), and unverified information sharing behaviour ($\rho = .451$, $p = .002$). While most respondents considered social media to be more timely when it comes to information on trials than traditional media, many were also aware of how information is emotionally framed, misinformation and how information is algorithmically amplified on social media platforms. The study is based on the ideas of agenda-setting theory, cultivation theory, and framing theory, and suggests that consistent exposure to emotionally charged legal messages may create a misperception of justice and erode trust in institutions over time. The study findings are applicable to broader debates on digital propaganda, media ethics, democratic accountability, judicial integrity in the evolving digital public sphere in India.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has altered the dynamics among media, opinion and democratic institutions. Social media, such as Instagram, X/Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Reddit, and YouTube, have revolutionized communication from monostatic broadcasts to interactive, algorithmically engineered systems that allow for the instant transmission of information across social and spatial divides (Castells, 2012). In the past journalists and editors served as gatekeepers of public information, but today, and in the digital era more particularly, the information is being produced, circulated and interpreted by the people themselves in real time (Loader & Mercea, 2011). While this change has made information more readily available, it has

also helped to create misinformation, propaganda, emotional polarization, and premature public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The most noticeable result of this shift is the rise of what has been dubbed "media trials" which are the public debate and interpretation of legal proceedings that frequently takes place prior to the delivery of judgments.

Media trials have not been uncommon in India. The K.M. Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra (1959) case and the murder of Jessica Lal (1999) were widely covered in the media and attracted a lot of public interest. The recent passing of actor Sushant Singh Rajput in 2020, in particular, has brought the role of digital platforms in creating criminal narratives using hashtags, speculations and public discussion to the fore, leading to what Bennett and Livingston (2018) called "trial by media".

The fast dissemination of trial content is tightly coupled to algorithmic amplification. Social media algorithms tend to favour content that is emotionally engaging and sensational, which boosts its visibility and reach (Tufekci, 2015). As a result, emotionally charged legal stories, little videos, memes and selective coverage often receive more attention than evidence-based coverage. These can create echo chambers, amplify pre-existing biases and influence perceptions of guilt and innocence, as well as institutional performance (Pariser, 2011). The more one is exposed to emotionally contextualized information, the more one's perception of reality and attitude towards public issues might be shaped over time (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

All of these developments give cause for concern in terms of democratic institutions and the judicial system. Presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial are of paramount importance in a constitutional democracy and guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, under Article 21. But a large volume of public discussion of an ongoing legal case may help to damage a corporation's reputation, cast a shadow of social stigma and put strain upon a court or other institutions before it reaches a verdict (Katsh, 1995). Misinformation can also contribute to polarization in society and a decline in institutional trust (Lazer et al., 2018). The government's lack of control over WhatsApp has a wider impact on society, evidenced by other reports of misinformation during the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests and reports of WhatsApp-related lynching incidents in India (Arun, 2019).

There are a number of theories that are used to explain these phenomena. According to the agenda-setting theory, the more exposure one has to a media message, the greater the impact on the person's perception of the issue's importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The cultivation theory states that over time, repeated messages create perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The framing theory of the presentation of the language and visuals in relation to the interpretation of the events by the audience (Entman, 1993). These frameworks imply not only that public opinion is mirrored in social media, but also that social media has an influence on the public opinion.

In spite of the increasing scholarship on misinformation and digital communication, there has been little empirical work that focuses on the impact of viral trial content on perceptions of judicial fairness and institutional trust in India. There is currently limited research into the behavioural and psychological effect of digital media trials, with most studies looking at political communication or at the traditional media effects. With India's growing digital population and growing use of online platforms to gain access

to news, the understanding of the impact of algorithmically amplified legal narratives is becoming all the more critical.

The aim of the present study is to explore the association between exposure to viral trial-related social media content and its effects on the perceptions and behaviors of urban IAs about the current trial proceedings. Specifically, the researchers looked at whether exposure to viral trial content was correlated with (a) opinion development of legal cases, (b) perceptions of the influence of social media on judicial proceedings, (c) quick decision-making in regards to guilt or innocence, and (d) sharing of unverified information about the trial. The study targets urban Indian social media users to examine how digitally mediated legal narratives influence India's notions of fairness, trust and information-sharing practices in the Indian judicial system.

Based on the existing literature and the theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting, cultivation, and framing theories, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Greater exposure to viral trial-related content is positively associated with opinion shaping regarding legal cases.

H2: Greater exposure to viral trial-related content is positively associated with perceptions of social media influence on judicial processes.

H3: Greater exposure to viral trial-related content is positively associated with rapid judgment formation regarding guilt or innocence.

H4: Greater exposure to viral trial-related content is positively associated with the tendency to share trial-related information from unverified sources.

To test these hypotheses, data was obtained by using a structured survey that was completed by urban Indian adults who use social media platforms. Spearman's rank correlation analysis was used to evaluate the correlation between the four outcome variables and the exposure to viral trial related content. The research design, sampling technique, data collection and data analysis techniques used in this study are described in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent studies of media trials and digital communication, the importance of social media in the reinterpretation of public events, the constitution of public authority and the dissemination of information have been highlighted. Unlike traditional media, digital media ecosystems are immediate, interactive and algorithmically personalized (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Social media platforms promote “engagement communication,” a type of communication where emotionally charged information can spread widely, even if it's incorrect (Tufekci, 2015). This has increased concern amongst academic scholars about the interplay between digital media exposure and public perceptions of justice.

A wide body of literature studies how systems that are algorithmic in nature amplify sensational and emotional content. Outrage, fear, sympathy and engagement are all common motivators for social media algorithm favouring content (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Such digitally mediated emotional networks are referred to as "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2015), in which public participation is more emotional than rational deliberative. As for media trials, hashtags, memes and edited content, or false narratives, tend to be viewed more often than verified legal reporting. Likewise, Lazer et al. (2018) demonstrate that misinformation can also propagate quickly on the Internet, sometimes before the factually correct information is disseminated to the same audience.

The structure of these media platforms also influence the distribution of false information. Encrypted forwarding and interpersonal trust have been cited as WhatsApp's advantages in India, which have led to its identification as a channel for misinformation (Arun, 2019). Instagram and YouTube visually represent complex legal matters with short videos, images and enticing content. The pace and length of this type of information limits the audience's ability to interpret, and can lead them to make assumptions about guilt or innocence based on select facts instead of substantiated facts.

Another is the psychological process associated with the effect of the media. Studies indicate that people tend to use heuristics, emotions and familiarity to assess information (Sunstein, 2018). The more often people see a piece of content, the more believable it will seem, even if it's unverifiable. By serving up ideologically or emotionally reinforcing content, online echo chambers can also reinforce confirmation bias (Pariser, 2011). Such procedures can play a role in reaching hasty decisions, moral certainty and diminishing faith in institutions in high-profile legal instances.

The institutional aspects of digitally mediated public judgment are also studied. Media trials can undermine the supposed legitimacy of the courts by diverting the focus away from the legal process to a "spectacle of emotion" (Katsh, 1995). The independence of courts is expected, but if the digital public space puts pressure on the legal process, this can also have a certain social impact on legal proceedings, particularly in criminal cases that are prevalent in the media. Likewise, the loss in the trust of the traditional news media has led to an increased dependence on decentralized digital sources, thus putting audiences at risk for misinformation and speculation (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020).

Media Literacy has been suggested as a solution to misinformation and propaganda. Scholars highlight that it is crucial to verify sources, be aware of algorithmic bias, and critically reflect on online content as important safeguards (Livingstone, 2004; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). But, the perception of being "media literate" does not always result in responsible online behaviour. This doesn't mean that users cannot share unverifiable information due to emotional involvement, social conformity, or because they are used to using digital media (Guess et al., 2019).

It is clear, based on the current research, that there are some gaps, but also important findings regarding digital propaganda, misinformation and audience behaviour that are identified. The literature is mainly concerned with electoral communication and the propagation of political misinformation, rather than media trials and perceptions of judicial fairness. Further, many studies are conducted in western contexts which do not necessarily reflect the socio-political and media context of India. There are only a few

empirical studies that explore the link between viral trial exposure, quick decision-making, trust in institutions, and unverified sharing by general social media consumers. The present study seeks to fill some of these gaps by empirically examining the influence of exposure to viral trial-related content on the perception, attitude, and information sharing behaviour of the adult population in urban India.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey quantitative design with open-ended qualitative responses to explore the association between exposure to viral trial-related social media content and perceptions of judicial fairness, opinion shaping, institutional trust and information sharing behaviour among adults in urban India. The design selected was aimed to elicit both observable patterns of media exposure and personal feelings about media trials and digital misinformation.

Participants and Sampling

The final sample was drawn from 43 valid respondents from various states in India. The participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. The survey link was sent via the researcher's personal WhatsApp groups and social media contacts and respondents were asked to share the survey with their contacts. The invitation to participate in the survey was sent to about 150 people.

The study was targeted to people living in urban areas, as urban people tend to be more digitally connected and engaged with social media. Those questionnaires which were incomplete or had significant missing data were not analysed and the final sample comprised 43 complete questionnaires.

The sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, residence, income and social media usage. The female respondents accounted for 69.8% of the respondents in the sample, and the male respondents constituted 30.2% of the sample. The largest age group was respondents aged 45 years and above (39.5%), followed by those aged 25–34 years (25.6%) and 18–24 years (20.9%). Over half of respondents were from Delhi (53.5%) with 60.5% reporting a monthly income of more than ₹1,00,000 in their homes. The majority of participants (84.7%) reported moderate to high levels of social media use daily.

Questionnaire Design

A structured on-line questionnaire was developed based on literature on media influence, misinformation, digital propaganda, and online information-sharing behaviour (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Guess et al., 2019) and was used to gather data. The questionnaire was pretested by two researchers on content relevance and clarity and was also pretested with 10 respondents before it was administered. Some minor changes were made to the wording and question sequence.

A questionnaire was created that included five sections with closed and open-ended questions:

1. Demographic characteristics – age, gender, location, state, income and social media usage;

2. Media Exposure (frequency of exposure to viral trial-related content, preferred platforms, forwarding behaviour and content consumption patterns); and
3. Perception and opinion shaping (perceptions of guilt, fairness, emotional influence and framing narratives);
4. Propaganda Recognition and Institutional Trust (ability to identify misinformation, perceptions of the influence of the media and trust in judicial institutions); and
5. Behavioural Outcomes (verification practices, information sharing behaviour, and perceptions of social media's role in public opinion formation).

The majority of items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) or Never (1) to Very Often (5). Platform choice and demographic data were collected using multiple-choice and checklist questions. Five open-ended questions were also asked to gain deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions of credibility, trust in the justice system and suggestions for reducing the effect of media trials.

Procedure

The data was gathered using Google Forms; it was a two-week period. A survey link was sent to all WhatsApp platforms. An information sheet was provided before the questionnaire, explaining its purpose, time required to complete the questionnaire, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Respondents were not allowed to advance in the survey without undergoing electronic informed consent. No personal identification information such as names, telephone numbers or email addresses were obtained. Participants were allowed to opt out from answering the questions if they did not want to and were also allowed to withdraw from the process anytime before the submission.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyse quantitative data. Demographic characteristics, social media usage patterns, and participant attitudes toward media trials were summarized using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations.

The study examined four hypotheses: (a) Exposure to viral trial-related content influences the opinion about the product, (b) Exposure to viral trial-related content leads to a perception of social media influence, (c) Exposure to viral trial-related content affects the speed of product opinion formation, and (d) Exposure to viral trial-related content affects the sharing of unverified information. Because the primary variables used were ordinal Likert-scale responses and the sample size was rather small (N = 43), Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to determine the direction and strength of associations between variables. The significance was determined at the .05 level and .01 level.

Manual thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative responses. Responses were subjected to multiple re-reading and coded to identify common themes and patterns.The qualitative findings were discussed with quantitative findings to clarify and support the quantitative findings.

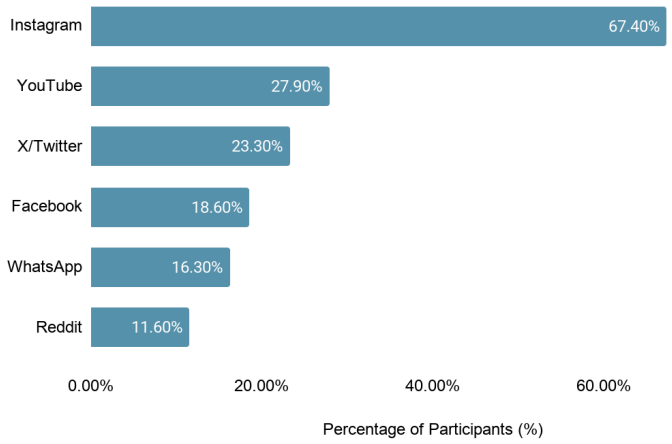
Ethical Considerations

The study conformed to the ethical standards for social science studies with human subjects. Respondents were informed that the data would be used only for academic purposes and had informed consent, and participation was voluntary. No personal information was gathered and all responses were anonymous. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the survey before it was completed. The questionnaire did not resort to any forms of malingering and used non-leading, neutral manner to reduce response bias. Data was protected, and it was only used for research and reporting. An attempt was made to avoid any subjective interpretation and the presentation of the results at every point of the study.

RESULTS

Social Media Exposure and Viral Trial Content

Figure 1: Distribution of social Media platforms used for exposure to unverified trial content



The level of social media participation was reported as moderate to high level. Half of the respondents (51.2%) used social media for 1-3 hours per day, and 23.3% used social media 3-5 hours per day. The exposure to viral related trials content was widespread with 48.8% reporting to sometimes see such content and 39.5% seeing it occasionally. The most common platform to encounter a viral legal story was Instagram (67.4%), followed by X/Twitter (27.9%) and YouTube (23.3%).

The majority of the participants agreed that the information about the trial on social media is easier to access than through conventional media sources. Overall, 79.1% agreed or strongly agreed that the social media platforms offer up-to-date information on court cases ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.72$). Furthermore, 65.1% believed that emotional posts have a greater chance of going viral on social media ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.04$).

Relationship Between Viral Exposure and Opinion Shaping

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was performed to analyze the correlation between exposure to viral trial-related content and opinion shaping. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between Viral Exposure and Opinion Shaping ($\rho = .575$; $p < .001$). Table 1 shows the correlation matrix for exposure to viruses, opinion shaping, perceived influence of social media, and quick judgment formation for the time period.

Table 1. Spearman Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Viral Exposure	1			
2. Opinion Shaping	.575***	1		
3. Perceived Social Media Influence	.588***	.612***	1	
4. Rapid Judgment Formation	.337*	.421**	.498**	1

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

The results support Hypothesis 1, which proposed a significant positive association between exposure to viral trial-related content and opinion shaping.

Relationship Between Viral Exposure and Perceived Social Media Influence

There was a significant positive correlation between the viral trial content exposure and the perceived social media influence, $\rho = .588$, $p < .001$. In addition, 58.1% of respondents found that social media plays a very high or high role in influencing their opinions about trials.

Thus, Hypothesis 2 was accepted.

Relationship Between Viral Exposure and Rapid Judgment Formation

Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between exposure to viral trial-related content and rapid judgment formation, $\rho = .337$, $p = .027$. Additionally, 48.8% of participants reported that social media often encourages quick judgments regarding guilt, while 30.2% indicated that this occurs sometimes.

Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Relationship Between Viral Exposure and Unverified Sharing Behaviour

Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to explore the relationship between exposure to viral trial related content and unverified information sharing behaviour. There was a positive association, $\rho = .451$, $p = .002$ that could be considered statistically significant. A correlation analysis between viral exposure and the unverified sharing behaviour is shown in Table 2.

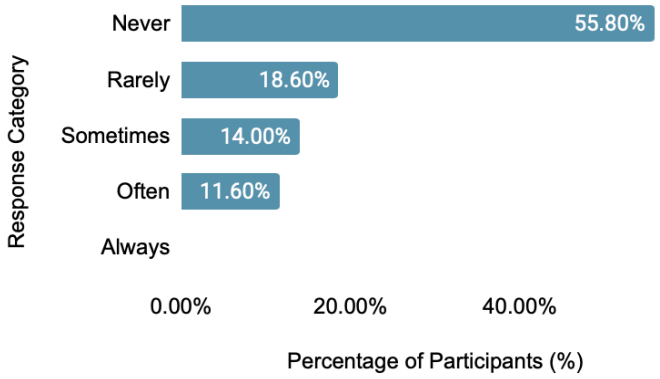
Table 2. Correlation Between Viral Exposure and Unverified Sharing Behaviour

Variables	Viral Exposure	Unverified Sharing
Viral Exposure	1	
Unverified Sharing	.451**	1

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

The relationship between viral exposure and sharing unverified content did not appear in the overall results of the respondents as shown in figure 2 (55.8% never shared unverified content), but the correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between the two.

Figure 2: Distribution of participants by frequency of sharing unverified trial content (%)



Hence, it is concluded that Hypothesis 4 was accepted.

Misinformation and Institutional Trust

Participants reported perceptions regarding algorithmic amplification, dissemination of misinformation and institutional trust. 81.4% of respondents agreed that there was a decline in trust in institutions due to algorithmic bias ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.94$). Likewise, 79.1% stated that they feel that propaganda uses emotionally charged language ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.72$) and 65.1% said media trials negatively impact how they view judicial fairness ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.84$).

Qualitative Findings

Using thematic analysis on open-ended answers, the two major themes that emerged were:

Theme 1: Emotional Amplification of Legal Narratives

Participants often complained that the information they saw in the viral trials was vague and highlighted emotional aspects of trials rather than contextual information. Emotionally loaded stories were mentioned to be more easily shared than detailed legal reporting, and at times simplified judicial processes.

Theme 2: Credibility Assessment and Institutional Trust

Source credibility, supporting evidence, official verification, and expert opinion were all identified as important factors for evaluating information about a trial. A number of respondents also cited algorithmic amplification, fake accounts and misleading material as problem areas creating challenges to understand what information is reliable and what information is misinformation. While the information about viral trial content was still present, some responses showed understanding of the risks of misinformation.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how the exposure to viral trial-related content on social media is related to perceptions of judicial fairness, opinion formation, quick judgment and unverified information sharing behaviour among the urban Indian adults. Results indicated very strong positive correlations between exposure to viral trial content and all four of the outcome measures. The results indicate that increased exposure to viral legal narratives is related to higher perceptions of social media influence, more opinion shaping, quicker opinion formation and an increased risk of disseminating unverified information.

The first finding indicated a strong positive correlation between exposure to content about vaccines and opinion shaping ($\rho = .575$, $p < .001$). This result aligns with the agenda-setting theory that posits that the mass media work to shape and affect people's perceptions, understanding and evaluation of societal issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Other research has found that emotionally charged online information can influence perceptions and attitudes to social issues, especially when it is repeated across platforms (Papacharissi, 2015). Viral hashtags, edited clips and emotionally charged content were mentioned by participants in the present study often as contributing factors to public perceptions of legal cases.

The second result indicated that exposure to viral content was strongly positively correlated with social media influence ($\rho = .588$, $p < .001$). In general, the respondents saw social media as having a significant impact on the people's awareness of the legal proceedings. The results echo prior work that indicated digital platforms are becoming the first place people turn for information and public discourse, and sometimes usurping the place of traditional news media in forming public opinion (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013).

There was a significant relationship between exposure to viral trial-related content and rapid judgment formation ($\rho = .337$, $p = .027$) as shown in the third finding. Those who had higher exposure were more likely to agree that social media leads to a sense of guilt or innocence being decided before the time of judicial proceedings. This result echoes previous research on “trial by media” and the role of “emotional”

online stories on public judgment (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011). It is also in line with cultivation theory which proposes that over time, frequent re-exposure to common media messages can influence one's sense of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The fourth finding was that there was a significant positive correlation between the content exposure of viral information and the unauthoritative sharing of information ($\rho = .451$, $p = .002$). While the majority of respondents said they check information they share, the more they were exposed to viral content, the greater the likelihood of sharing unverified information. This result fits with previous studies that found repeated exposure leads to familiarity and perceived credibility of information, whether or not it is accurate (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Research on the spread of misinformation has also demonstrated that emotionally charged information can be more likely to be diffused faster than verified information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The qualitative results are in line with quantitative results. The thematic analysis yielded two themes: the emotional magnification of legal narratives and issues of credibility in assessing information. The participants often cited the viral content of the trials as being emotional, lacking context and hard to be verified. The use of algorithmic amplification, fake accounts and selective editing to influence online discussions were also recognised by many of the respondents. The results further validate the quantitative data which suggested that viral legal narratives can impact perceptions and information-sharing practices.

Overall, the results show how social media is increasingly influencing the interaction of the public with legal matters in India. With all of the trial-related information being passed around algorithmically driven platforms, the issue of "judging too soon," misinformation, and the public's perception of “fairness” becomes more important. The study adds to the literature by offering empirical data from the Indian context which has been comparatively less explored by research on the issue of media trials and digital misinformation.

It is important to recognize that there are some limitations. First, the number of individuals in the sample was relatively small which meant that the results were not easily generalisable. Secondly, the study was limited to urban respondents, and may not represent the experiences of rural or less digitally connected population groups. Thirdly, convenience and snowball sampling may have led to sampling bias, and self-reported responses can be influenced by social desirability bias. Lastly, because of the cross-sectional design, no causal inferences about the effect of social media exposure on behaviour can be made.

Larger and more representative samples from different areas around India need to be used in future studies. Longitudinal studies could contribute to a better understanding of the long-term impact of viewing viral trial related media on justice and trust of institutions. Comparisons of these platforms with a particular focus on Instagram, WhatsApp, X/Twitter and YouTube might also aid in determining the more legato impacts on law and public opinion across the platforms.

CONCLUSION

The current research focused on the linkage between exposure to viral trial-related content on social media platforms with perceptions of judicial fairness, opinion formation, quick judgment on trial and unverified information sharing behaviour among urban Indian adults. All four hypotheses were confirmed with significant positive relationships between exposure to a viral legal narrative and opinion shaping, perceived social media influence, rapid judgment formation, and information sharing of unverified information. Participants also believed that social media is a quicker way to get information about trials than traditional media, while recognizing misinformation, algorithmic amplification, and emotionally charged information. These results can be combined to argue that social media can be a significant factor in the way people interact with and receive information about the law in today's digital age.

The results reveal some concerns of judicial processes, media ethics and communication with the public. The public perception of case trials is becoming a reality with the ever-ongoing spread of trial-related information through social media outlets, the public opinion can be formed before the judges have even reached trial. The present study cannot claim any causal relationships, but the observed associations suggest that there could be a connection between exposure to viral legal content and guilt, fairness, and institutional credibility. The results add to the current debate about media trials, misinformation, and how to ensure procedural fairness in digitally mediated processes.

The study also suggests that knowledge of misinformation is not enough to stop people being affected by viral narratives or being drawn to unverifiable content. This underscores the opportunity that education on media literacy, and better practices of media reporting can offer, as well as the necessity for platforms to continue their work on tackling misleading and sensationalized content. The results of this study must be treated with caution due to the exploratory nature and the fairly limited sample. Still, the findings offer initial insights into the link between social media use and perceptions and discussions of legal issues among urban Indians. There is a need for more research with larger and more diverse samples to understand how the content of viral trials affects public opinion and trust in institutions over time.

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