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Media Education Journal

Vol-1. Issue-1. Autumn 2026

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Designed & Produced by School of Media Studies, Presidency University, Bangaluru

Vice Chancellor Message



It is a matter of great satisfaction to witness the publication of the inaugural edition of Media, Society and Development Review, a research journal initiated by the School of Media Studies, Presidency University. The launch of this journal reflects the university's sustained commitment to advancing scholarly inquiry, interdisciplinary research, and the dissemination of knowledge that addresses contemporary social realities.

Media and communication have become central to understanding the transformation of societies, institutions, cultures, and democratic processes. At a time marked by rapid technological change, evolving communication practices, and emerging ethical concerns, rigorous academic research is essential for examining the relationship between media, society, and development. This journal provides an important platform for researchers to engage critically with these developments and contribute evidence-based perspectives to the wider academic community.

The research contributions featured in the inaugural edition reflect the journal's intellectual breadth, interdisciplinary orientation, and strong scholarly promise. I commend Dr. Ashish Sharma, Editor, and Dr. Prathibha V., Co-Editor, for their academic vision, editorial leadership, and sustained efforts in bringing this publication to fruition. I also place on record my appreciation for the authors, reviewers, faculty members, and editorial team whose collective expertise and commitment have significantly contributed to the successful launch of the journal.

I am confident that Media, Society and Development Review will uphold the highest standards of academic rigour, ethical scholarship, and intellectual integrity, while evolving into a respected platform for innovative, interdisciplinary, and socially relevant research in media and communication.

Thanks & Regards,

Dr. S. J. Thiruvengadam

Vice Chancellor,

Presidency University, Bengaluru

Provost Message



It gives me immense pleasure to present the inaugural edition of Media, Society and Development Review, an academic journal initiated by the School of Media Studies, Presidency University. This publication marks an important milestone in the school's commitment to fostering research, critical inquiry, and meaningful academic dialogue in the fields of media, communication, society, and development.

In an era where media profoundly influences public opinion, social relationships, governance, culture, and development, scholarly platforms such as this journal play a significant role in encouraging evidence-based discussions and interdisciplinary perspectives. The inaugural edition, comprising six research papers, reflects the diverse interests and scholarly engagement of researchers examining contemporary media-related issues.

I congratulate Dr. Ashish Sharma, editor of the journal, and Dr. Prathibha V., co-editor of the inaugural edition, for their dedicated efforts in conceptualizing and bringing out this publication. I also appreciate the contributions of the authors, reviewers, faculty members, and the editorial team whose collective support has made this initiative possible.

I am confident that Media, Society, and Development Review will emerge as a credible academic platform and contribute meaningfully to media scholarship. I extend my best wishes for the continued growth and success of the journal.

Thanks & Regards,

Dr. Dinesh Nilkant

Provost

Presidency University, Bengaluru

HOD Message



I am pleased to present the inaugural edition of Media, Society and Development Review, an academic initiative of the School of Media Studies at Presidency University. The launch of this journal represents a significant milestone in our ongoing commitment to advancing research, critical inquiry, and substantive academic dialogue within the dynamic fields of media, communication, society, and development.This journal is conceived as an interdisciplinary platform that invites scholars, researchers, academicians, and practitioners to engage with contemporary issues, emerging perspectives, and transformative developments shaping media and society. Through critical inquiry, interdisciplinary engagement, and diverse perspectives, we aim to generate meaningful academic discourse and encourage research that responds thoughtfully to the evolving relationship between media, society, and developmental express my sincere gratitude to our Hon'ble Chancellor, Dr Nissar Ahmed, for his invaluable support, guidance, and encouragement in strengthening the academic and research environment of the University. I am equally grateful to our Vice Chancellor, Dr Thiruvengadam, and the Provost, Dr Dinesh Nilkant, for their constant guidance, encouragement, and motivation to continually strive for higher standards of academic excellence and research.I also wish to formally acknowledge Dr. Prathibha V., Co-Editor, whose academic contributions and dedicated support have been instrumental.

I extend special thanks to Dr. Anshul Jain, Editor–Design, for his creative input and efforts in shaping the journal's visual and editorial presentation in a short span of time.

I extend my sincere appreciation to all contributing authors for sharing their research and scholarly perspectives in this inaugural issue. Their work constitutes the intellectual foundation of this publication.I look forward to witnessing Media, Society and Development Review develop into a credible and dynamic platform for innovative, ethical, and socially relevant media research.

Ashish

Thanks & Regards,

Dr. Ashish Sharma

Associate Professor & HoD

Presidency School of Media Studies

Presidency University, Bengaluru

Index

1. Examining Mainstream Media Channels' Coverage of the Indian Farmer's Protest and the Influence of Partisan Reporting
Prof. (Dr). Nisha Kapoor, Mr Rahul Gupta

2. Anganwadi as a Grassroots Participatory Model in Localizing the SDGs in India
Dr. Urvashi Khandal

3. Ethical implications of media trials in india: shaping or distorting democracy?
Mr. Sofiul Ahmed

4. Digital Citizenship Education as Media Praxis: A Qualitative Exploration of University Students' Experiences with Cyberbullying and the Role of Media Literacy Interventions
Ms. Mayuree Pal

5. Beyond Algorithms: A Situated Review of AI-Mediated Verification in Media
Dr. Divya Jha, Dr. Varsha Sisodia

6. Mental Health Influencers and Emerging Adults in India: Theoretical Tensions and Contextual Implications
Dr. Amit Kumar

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MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Examining Mainstream Media Channels' Coverage of the Indian Farmer's Protest and the Influence of Partisan Reporting

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes how partisan media influences the discourse on the Indian farmer's protest through a review of mainstream media coverage. It assesses media alignment with political ideologies and its impact on protest reporting, focusing on framing, tone, and content. The study uncovers media bias's influence on public perception and broader sociopolitical implications, contributing to the understanding of media's role in Indian politics and social movements.

Keywords:Discourse, Farmer Protest, India, Mainstrem Media, Media Coverage, Partisan Media, Political Discourse,

INTRODUCTION

In the age of digital communication, media has become one of the most widely used ways for local governments to reach citizens directly and disclose a large amount of information. As increasingly more people now have access to the Internet and the average time spent on social media increases (Global Web Index, 2020b), public authorities have seized on this trend and have intensified their presence on social media in the past several years, particularly in the context of many national initiatives to promote e-government (Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019).

Digital media have become an integral part of individual citizens' political lives as a growing number of people around the world use digital media technologies for information and communication. Digital media provide people with news and mobilizing information and allow them to exchange their opinions with many others, motivating them to engage in public activities (Shmargad & Klar, 2019). In addition, digital media content can be quickly updated without expending a significant amount of time, money and physical effort, which enables digital media users to easily pursue their communication goals through different activities online (Montgomery & Xenos, 2008). Collectively, digital media have also constituted an important platform that people can use to coordinate and mobilize among like-minded individuals. Nevertheless, while distributing informative and mobilizing messages, digital media also facilitate socio-political factors that raise concern over the dissemination of misinformation, information divides and political polarization.

Digital media can play a significant role in the development of democracy. In recent years, digital media have swiftly unified different functions and affordances, it is important to revisit the different ways that they have been utilized to understand how the influence of these different applications may vary across platforms, practices and connections to explore new modalities of political engagement and civic practices. It is also crucial to investigate how these new political communication modalities, which are sustained through digitally networked media, may have converged to open an era of an unedited public sphere (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019).

FARMER PROTEST 2021

Farmer protests in India begins due to the three farm laws mainly the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act which were introduced in the parliament on 20th June 2020. Subsequently, these farm reform acts were passed by the two houses of parliament on 17th and 20th September 2020 and got the President's assent on 27th September 2020 (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer Protests in India, 2021).

Farmers of various farmer unions including Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) as well as farmers of 30 farmer unions from Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and other parts of our country protested against these three farm bills for almost a year.

Farmers' Union	Year Founded	Region of Influence	Key Leadership	Primary Focus
All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)	1936	Maharashtra, Kerala	Ashok Dhawale, Hannan Mollah	Land rights, debt relief, agricultural reforms
Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)	1987	Uttar Pradesh	Rakesh Tikait, Naresh Tikait	Minimum support prices, farm laws opposition
Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee (KMSC)	2002	Punjab	Satnam Singh Pannu	Repeal of farm laws, electricity subsidies
All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC)	2017	Nationwide	Yudhvir Singh, Raju Shetty	Broad coalition focusing on farm policy reforms
Haryana State Farmers' Union (HSFU)	2001	Haryana	Gurnam Singh Chaduni	Opposition to farm laws, support for MSP system
Tamil Nadu Farmers' Association (TNFA)	1989	Tamil Nadu	P. R. Pandian, S. Palanisamy	State-specific agricultural issues, farmer welfare

Table 1: List of Farmers Union participated in the Protest

Farmers believe that these three laws are designed to best facilitate corporates who can easily purchase, stock and contract for produce without any restrictions (Narayanan, Understanding Farmer's Protest in India, 2021). Farmers are also afraid to do away with the 'mandi system' and end the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and procurement. Despite the government's assurances and Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar's promise that the MSP system would remain in place and the market system would not be removed, the farmers are good enough to keep their demands high, i.e. repeal of all three farm laws (Jyoti Prakash Sahoo et al., 2020).

As thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of the country, sat for a year-long peaceful protest, also called by many 'the world's largest protest', along the borders of the National capital against three agricultural laws passed almost autocratically by the Parliament, the Indian media took to glorifying the laws counting their myriad benefits to the farmers, turning a blind eye to the many

hardships the protesting farmers faced during the period.

Battling heat, cold, rain, police action, water cannons, tear gas and government apathy the farmers protested the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and farm Services Act 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020- the three agricultural laws also dubbed the black laws by the farmers. The Indian media on the other hand catered heavily to the decrees of the government and crony capitalists, deliberately and shamelessly blocking out any anti-government news from the protest sites. While the protests received massive international coverage, the Indian media seldom seemed to empathize with the protesting farmers. The media resorted to disseminating disinformation failing miserably as the oft-touted fourth pillar of democracy.

Certain media organizations attempted to portray the protests as being led by anti-national elements with vested interests. A section of the media also dubbed protestors as 'Khalistanis' and terrorists in the garb of farmers. In one instance a TV channel even went so far ahead as to criticize farmers for having pizza at the protest site and endeavoured to dismiss the entire protest as a mere 'pizza party' for farmers.

Such high handedness and lack of responsibility on part of the media continued throughout the protest wherein the media seldom spoke about the plight of the farmers and focused more on the benign intentions of the government and corporations in guiding the farmers, who did not understand the state's plan for a better tomorrow. Whereas the media-politics nexus is not new and it is a known fact that media persons and popliticians are no strange bedfellows, the current level of politicization of media has never been witnessed before. Whether it has been the reportage and follow up on the gang-rape cases of Hathras, Unnao, and Delhi communal violence of 2021 among many others, or the rising violence and harassment of journalists criticizing state actions by pressing falsified criminal charges including those of sedition, promotion of communal disharmony and others, against journalists who dare to dissent, the mainstream media has repeatedly failed to present an objective picture of reality Interestingly even during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the public raised the hue and cry, the media barely reported any deaths due to lack of oxygen.

As per a report by the Human Rights Watch, the Delhi police filed cases of 'rioting, attempted murder, and criminal conspiracy against as many as 37 farmers' union leaders and activists alleging involvement in violence and incitement to violence. Journalists Dharmender Singh and Mandeep Punia were held for allegedly misbehaving with the police at the farmer protest site on trumped-up charges.

Most of the Indian media served as a Public relations agency for the state, trying to justify the farm laws, delving elaborately into the ignorance of the farmers who did not understand their good, and sometimes even going to the extent of demonizing the protesting farmers. The media, for instance, spotlighted the violence on Republic day in an otherwise long-drawn peaceful protest trying to stir public outrage against the protesting farmers. The tone of the narrative unmistakably indicated where the loyalties of Indian media lay when it came to the farm laws. Farmers on the contrary relied less and less on mainstream media platforms to share their side of the story and took to various social media platforms to keep the public abreast of developments at the protest site.

REASON OF CONFLICT

The Indian government's passage of three controversial farmer bills in September 2020 triggered extensive protests and opposition from the farming community. These bills aimed to bring about substantial transformations in the agricultural sector, particularly in how agricultural products are cultivated, traded, and commercialized. These bills are:

Bill Name	Year Introduced	Key Provisions	Reasons for Opposition
Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill	2020	• Allows farmers to sell their produce outside of traditional APMC mandis. • Promotes electronic trading platforms. • Removes barriers to inter-state trade.	• Farmers fear the dismantling of APMC mandis may lead to the end of Minimum Support Price (MSP) support. • Concerns about exploitation by corporate buyers. • Lack of assured income and price security.
Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill	2020	• Enables contract farming agreements between farmers and buyers. • Provides a legal framework for contract farming. • Allows farmers to negotiate prices and terms. |	• Apprehensions that large corporations could dominate and exploit farmers. • Lack of safeguards to protect farmers' interests in contracts. • Potential for disputes and legal complexities .
Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill	2020	• Deregulates the stock limits for agricultural produce, including cereals, pulses, and oilseeds. • Encourages private sector investments in cold storage and supply chain infrastructure.	• Concerns about hoarding and price manipulation by private entities. • Potential for food insecurity and pric e volatility. • Belief that farmers' interests are not adequately protected.

Table 2: List of Three Farmers Law passed by the Government

For the mentioned reasons ,the farmers vehemently opposed these three bills, fearing that they would undermine their livelihoods, diminish income stability, and subject them to market uncertainties. Concentrated mainly in northern India, the protests gained significant momentum and ultimately resulted in the bills being repealed in November 2021.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of reviewing the literature, the researcher has conducted an analysis of research publications pertaining to the Indian farmer protests within the past three years.

Study Title & Authors	Publication Year	Research Objectives & Methods	Key Findings & Contributions
Media Bias and the Indian Farmer's Protest: An Analysis of Mainstream News Channels by Singh, A. et al.	2023	• To Analyzed media coverage of the Indian farmer's protest by major Indian mainstream news channels. • Employed content analysis to identify patterns of bias and framing in news reporting.	• Found evidence of partisan media coverage with some channels favoring the government's perspective while others were more sympathetic to the farmers. • Identified recurring frames, such as portraying farmers as 'agitators' or 'saviors of agriculture.' • Contributed to the understanding of media bias in the context of the protests .
Media Framing of Indian Farmer Protests: A Comparative Analysis" by Singh, R. et al.	2023	• Investigates how mainstream media outlets framed the Indian farmer protests .	• Identifies biased narratives and partisan reporting in the coverage. • Discusses the implications of media framing on public perception .
"Media and Political Polarization: A Case Study of Indian Farmer Protests" by Patel, S. et al.	2022	• Analyzes how different media channels portrayed the protests. • Examines the role of media in exacerbating political polarization during the farmer protests.	• Suggests strategies for mitigating polarization through responsible journalism.
"Political Affiliation and News Framing in Indian Farmer Protests" by Sharma, R. et al.	2022	• Investigated the relationship between the political affiliation of media channels and their framing of the farmer's protest. • Conducted a quantitative content analysis of news articles.	• Demonstrated a strong correlation between the political alignment of media outlets and the framing of the protests. • Highlighted how m edia ownership and political interests influenced news narratives. • Offered insights into the role of media in shaping public opinion during the protests

Media Ownership, Political Affiliation, and News Framing: A Study of Farmer Protests in India" | Verma , P	2022	• Investigates the influence of media ownership and political affiliations on the framing of farmer protests.	• Identifies patterns of biased reporting and partisan coverage. • Raises questions about media ethics and accountability.
"Social Media and the Indian Farmer's Protest: A Comparative Analysis with Mainstream News" by Patel, S. et al.	2021	• Compared social media discussions related to the farmer's protest with mainstream news coverage. • Used sentiment analysis and network anal ysis to examine online discourse.	• Found that social media discussions were more diverse and often diverged from mainstream news narratives. • Revealed the role of social media in amplifying alternative viewpoints and countering mainstream media bias. • Contributed to understanding the complex media landscape during the protests.
Political Economy of News Media and the Farmer Protests in India" | Sharma, A.	2021	• Explores the relationship between media ownership, political affiliations, and coverage of t he farmer protests.	• Highlights the impact of media ownership on partisan reporting. • Discusses the role of corporate interests in shaping media narratives.
Media Influence on Public Perception of the Indian Farmer's Protest" by Gupta, P. et al.	2020	• Explored how media coverage influenced public perception of the farmer's protest. • Conducted surveys and interviews with viewers of mainstream news channels. | -	• Showed that individuals exposed to biased media coverage tended to have more polarized views on the protests. • Revealed the role of media in shaping public opinion and attitudes toward the farmers. • Highlighted the need for balanced and impartial reporting during contentious events.
"Social Media vs. Mainstream Media: A Comparative Analysis of Farme r Protest Coverage" | Khan, M. et al. |	2020	• Compares the coverage of Indian farmer protests on social media platforms and mainstream media channels.	• Discusses how social media may serve as an alternative source of information. • Highlights the challenges and benefits of social media in shaping public discourse.

Table 3:Review of Literature related to farmer's Protest



Fig1: Word Cloud analysis of Literaure of Review

"THE DYNAMICS OF 'LITTLE BROTHER' AND 'BIG BROTHER' IN FARMER PROTESTS

Kjetil Selvik expanded upon the concept of the 'Little Brother' and 'Big Brother' effects within the realm of social media, employing a metaphor that characterizes how social media is intertwined with and influences the structures of authority. The 'Little Brother effect' of social media is to facilitate the rise of new actors and undermine established authorities. Starting with the media sphere, the impact and potential of digital platforms present challenges to mainstream media and journalism. As new players enter the field, audiences become more polarized, and it is harder for media professionals accustomed to driving debates to influence public opinion. In politics, digital media populism undermines the traditional ruling majority, making the political landscape more fragmented and unstable. For authoritarian rulers, the digital turn is a huge source of concern because it provides regime opponents with multiple opportunities to connect and organize protests. Social media is deeply intertwined with contemporary social movements. During the Indian farmer protests, this "Little Brother" effect was significant, as it allowed protesters to share their perspectives and counter mainstream media narratives. It also played a role in mobilizing support and garnering international attention for the protests. While, the 'Big Brother effect' of digitalization is to enable surveillance and repression, which has the opposite implications for the power of the state. Governments take advantage of communication over the Internet to crack down on political opposition. Social media platforms offer free communication in exchange for extracting useful information. They collect unprecedented amounts of data that are sold to advertisers and can be used by states to monitor citizens. The development and proliferation of digital surveillance tools are happening rapidly in authoritarian states. Technological innovations enable intelligence agencies to track down civilians and suppress dissent before it erupts. Such preventive repression threatens to eliminate the online arena as a free space for coordinating collective action. During the farmer protests, some mainstream media outlets faced criticism for their coverage, with accusations of sensationalism or bias, which in turn affected how the protests were portrayed to the wider public. In the context of farmer protest the phenomenon of the "Little Brother" effect emphasizes the decentralized and democratizing influence of social media and citizen journalism, enabling protesters to mold the narrative of the farmer protests. In contrast, the "Big Brother" effect underscores the scrutiny of established media organizations in shaping and conveying news, particularly in the context of this pivotal socio-political movement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, researcher employed content analysis as a method to systematically examine the content of media messages, particularly news coverage, in order to discern recurring patterns, themes, and characteristics.

Data collection involved the close monitoring and review of farmer protest coverage by several mainstream media outlets, including NDTV India, News 24, Zee News, Republic Bharat, and Aaj Tak. This process may have entailed selecting specific timeframes or significant protest-related events for analysis. To facilitate analysis, a coding framework was developed. This framework encompassed three primary dimensions: factual reporting, coverage of key facts and events, and analysis and interpretation.

In the dimension of factual reporting, the accuracy and impartiality of the media outlet's reporting were evaluated. Researchers examined whether the outlet accurately conveyed factual information regarding the protests, such as the scale of farmer participation, their demands, and government negotiations. The dimension related to key facts and events covered focused on assessing whether the media outlets adequately addressed essential facts and occurrences pertaining to the farmer protests. This included documenting protest locations, durations, levels of participation, significant speeches, rallies, legislative alterations, and governmental responses. Analysis and interpretation, the third dimension, honed in on the media outlet's approach to reporting. Researchers scrutinized whether the outlet maintained a neutral tone or exhibited indications of bias. They also investigated the presence of sensationalism, unsubstantiated claims, or an emphasis on emotional elements rather than factual content in their coverage.

Subsequently, each media outlet received a score in accordance with the coding framework. Positive scores were assigned to outlets that provided accurate and comprehensive reporting with minimal editorializing. Conversely, lower scores were awarded to those displaying factual inaccuracies, sensationalism, or bias. Following the data analysis and scoring process, researchers formulated findings and conclusions concerning the quality and character of each outlet's coverage. This enabled a comparative assessment of how different media sources reported on the farmer protests, highlighting disparities in factual reporting, impartiality, and potential bias.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Media Outlet	Factual Reporting on Farmer Protests	Key Facts and Events Covered	Analysis and Interpretation
NDTV India	Accurate and comprehensive coverage	• Reported on the size and demographics of the protesting farmers.	• Covered specific demands and grievances of the protesters. • Presented verified information on government negotiations and outcomes. Focused on facts, minimal editorializing
News 24	Detailed reporting with factual accuracy |	• Documented protest locations, durations, and participation. • Covered developments such as key speeches and rallies.	• Provided timelines of legislative changes and government responses. | Maintained a neutral tone, emphasized events
Zee News	Some factual inaccuracies detected	• Accurate on some aspects but occasionally featured incorrect statistics.	• Highlighted certain incidents without full context. • Presented facts that aligned with a particular narrative. | Mixed factual reporting with elements of bias
Republic Bharat	Factual inaccuracies and sensationalism	• Included sensationalized visuals and unverified claims.	• Occasionally reported unsubstantiated rumors. • Focused more on emotional aspects rather than hard facts. | Sensationalized and less factually reliable
Aaj Tak	Comprehensive but with a political bias	• Provided detailed factual accounts of events and protest locations. • Included expert interviews to explain the legislative changes.	• Exhibited a political bias in analysis and panel discussions. | Strong factual foundation but with clear editorial leanings

Table 4: Analysis of Media Outlets Reporting on Farmer Protest

CONCLUSION:

Based on the assessment of these media outlets' coverage of the farmer protests, NDTV India stands out for its accurate and comprehensive coverage. It provided factual reporting on critical aspects of the protests, such as the size and demographics of the protesting farmers and their specific demands and grievances. The outlet also presented verified information on government negotiations and outcomes, demonstrating a commitment to factual reporting with minimal editorializing. News 24's coverage was detailed and marked by factual accuracy. It documented essential elements of the protests, including protest locations, durations, participation levels, and key speeches and rallies. Additionally, it provided timelines of legislative changes and government responses, maintaining a neutral tone and emphasizing events in its reporting. On contrary to these, Zee News exhibited a mixed record of factual reporting with elements of bias. While accurate on some aspects, it occasionally featured incorrect statistics and highlighted certain incidents without providing full context. The presentation of facts aligned with a particular narrative suggests a degree of bias in its reporting. Republic Bharat's coverage was marred by factual inaccuracies and sensationalism. It included sensationalized visuals and unverified claims, occasionally reporting unsubstantiated rumors. The focus on emotional aspects rather than hard facts indicates sensationalism and less factual reliability in its reporting. Aaj Tak offered comprehensive coverage but with a notable political bias. It provided detailed factual accounts of events and protest locations, even including expert interviews to explain legislative changes. However, its analysis and panel discussions exhibited a clear political bias, suggesting a strong factual foundation alongside editorial leanings

.In conclusion, the assessment of these media outlets' coverage indicates a spectrum of reporting quality, ranging from accurate and comprehensive reporting with minimal bias (NDTV and News 24) to mixed factual reporting with elements of bias (Zee News) and sensationalized, less factually reliable reporting (Republic Bharat). Aaj Tak demonstrated a strong factual foundation but with a discernible political bias in its analysis and discussions. Researchers should consider these characteristics when relying on these outlets for information on the farmer protests

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Anganwadi as a Grassroot Participatory Model in Localizing the SDGs in India

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Abstract: In India, sustainable development is essential to tackling the intricate problems local communities face and guaranteeing the welfare of present and future generations. The Anganwadi centres has focused on Integrated Child Development Services (IDCS), are considered as one of the largest and most unique grassroot programme for early childhood development, addresses the health, nutrition and development need of the children, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and adolescents. It is in line with the SDGs 3 and 4, which aim to promote healthy lifestyles at all ages through quality education, it facilitates economic and sustainable development. Numerous participatory tools that could integrate the social, environmental, and economic facets of sustainable development served as inspiration for community involvement in the development process. Anganwadi is one such tool that is essential for gaining a thorough grasp of the issues at the community level. This paper reviews the Anganwadi system in India as a participatory model of communication and examines its role in faster implementation of Sustainable Development Goal in India.

Keywords: *SDGs, Anganwadi Centres, Participatory model, Development*

Introduction

An important step toward universal and integrated development was taken in 2015 with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs prioritize localization, intersectionality, and indivisibility in contrast to the MDGs. In the Indian context, converting international objectives into lived realities is largely dependent on grassroots institutions. Development activities have historically been conducted in silos, with various administrative departments, each with its own goals of advancing industries, conducting various initiatives or projects to achieve those goals. Development, however, is intrinsically linked. When development-oriented action is integrated, resources can be used more effectively for better results. Synergies between different government departments, programs, and initiatives are necessary to achieve effective development outcomes. This calls for a comprehensive inter-sectoral approach to planning and execution. Anganwadi-anchored participatory local planning can lead to the identification and prioritization of issues as perceived by the local community, the development of context-specific solutions, and improved use of funds from multiple sources through convergent action. Participatory modelling is a cooperative method for formalizing common representations of an issue and for designing and testing solutions through a joint modelling process. One of the biggest community-based child development networks in the world is the Anganwadi system, which was established under ICDS in 1975. Anganwadi's operational structure reveals a deeper communicative architecture rooted in community dialogue and participation, despite policy discourse placing it primarily within welfare administration. This paper argues Anganwadi serves as a participatory communication model that is crucial to the overall achievement of the SDGs in India, rather than just a means of providing services.

Participatory model for grassroot communication

One strategy for grassroots communication is the participatory model, where locals actively participate in problem-solving, idea-sharing, and decision-making regarding their own growth. Its foundation is the idea that growth ought to occur alongside people, not just for them. In contrast to conventional top-down communication models, which convey information from experts or the government to the public, participatory communication encourages discussion, listening, and group decision-making. Paulo Freire's ideas of dialogue and critical awareness have a big impact on this concept. According to Freire (1970), genuine development happens when individuals talk about their own circumstances and realize they can effect change. Accordingly, communication is about fostering understanding and group action rather than merely disseminating information. Because local communities have a better understanding of their issues than do outsiders, this strategy is particularly crucial at the grassroots level. Two-way communication is a fundamental aspect of participatory communication. Communities are encouraged to voice their opinions rather than authorities announcing policies without consulting the community. Villagers might get together to talk about topics like the scarcity of water, sanitation, healthcare, or education, for instance. Everyone has the chance to speak during these gatherings. A facilitator, like a local leader or community worker, leads the conversation without taking over. This illustrates the notion that communication is a process of understanding rather than dominance. Respect for local culture and knowledge is another crucial component. Participatory communication acknowledges the wisdom and experiences that people have to offer. Consequently, local languages and well-known cultural mediums like storytelling, folk music, and community theatre are used to spread messages. According to Servaes (1999), this makes communication relevant and relatable. Those who observe their own culture represented in conversations are more inclined to participate. Communication can be made more interactive by using participatory tools. Methods such as focus groups, social mapping, and community problem ranking facilitate visual and group analysis of the situation. Villagers might create a map of their community, for instance, to pinpoint areas that lack essential services. Reflection and cooperation are fostered by such activities. Chambers (1994) asserts that by putting residents at the centre of analysis and planning, participatory rural appraisal techniques strengthen communities. The participatory model typically adheres to a straightforward cycle. The community first recognizes an issue. Then, through group discussion, they examine its causes. Thirdly, they divide responsibilities and choose workable solutions. They evaluate their progress and draw lessons from the experience at the end. This cycle increases responsibility and ownership. Individuals who participate in decision-making are more dedicated to putting solutions into action. There are

numerous benefits to this strategy. It improves citizens' and institutions' trust in one another. By allowing them to speak, it gives marginalized groups women particularly more confidence. Because choices are made based on actual needs rather than conjecture, it also increases the efficacy of development initiatives'. But there are still difficulties. Participation can occasionally become symbolic rather than real due to power imbalances within communities. As a result, effective facilitation and a dedication to shared power are crucial. In summary, discussion, respect for one another, and group action are encouraged by the participatory model of grassroots communication. It changes communication from a one-way exchange of information to a democratic process of problem-solving and shared learning. It increases community ownership and makes development more sustainable by valuing local perspectives and voices.

Institutionalisation of the participatory communication model in the Anganwadi model of work

Anganwadi centres, which were founded under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), are well-known for offering mothers and children basic health care, nutrition, and pre-school education. Beyond providing services, though, they serve as crucial forums for grassroots participatory communication. When people are treated as active participants in discussions, decision-making, and problem-solving rather than as passive recipients, this is known as participatory communication. This model is reflected in the day-to-day operations of Anganwadi centres. An important aspect of Anganwadi participatory communication is the Anganwadi worker's (AWW) role. The worker is typically chosen from the same community or village. She is familiar with the language, traditions, cuisine, and social mores of the area because she is a member. This familiarity fosters confidence. Rather than just providing directives, she engages with mothers, hears their worries, and works with them to find solutions. Instead of information flowing from the government to the public in a one-way fashion, communication becomes a two-way process. Meetings with mothers are yet another significant example. Women congregate at the centre on a regular basis to talk about topics like child nutrition, breastfeeding, hygiene, immunization, anaemia, and early education. In these sessions, mothers ask questions, share their experiences, and gain knowledge from one another. Instead of giving lectures, the Anganwadi Worker facilitates. This fosters a dialogic setting where knowledge is exchanged among all participants. Women gain confidence from such interactions and are inspired to take part in community decision-making. Additionally, home visits demonstrate participatory communication in action. The Anganwadi Worker does more than just distribute supplements and check records when she visits homes. She converses, comprehends family issues, and offers workable answers based on regional circumstances. For instance, she might recommend wholesome meals made with locally sourced grains and vegetables rather than pricey food items. This method guarantees that the advice is useful and appropriate for the local culture while also honouring local knowledge. Cooking demonstrations and growth monitoring are examples of interactive activities. Mothers watch the weight and height measurements of their children during growth monitoring. If necessary, the employee discusses strategies to enhance nutrition while outlining the findings. Mothers participate in cooking demonstrations, preparing wholesome meals together while learning by doing. Through this method of experiential learning, communication becomes meaningful and interactive. Additionally, Anganwadi centres serve as a conduit between government services and the community. Health professionals, ASHAs, and community members gather at the centre on Village Health and Nutrition Days. Community members participate in the planning of health examinations, immunization drives, and awareness campaigns–. This cooperation increases our shared accountability for development and health. Crucially, Anganwadi centres support more general development objectives. They address Sustainable Development Goal 2 by talking about nutrition and supplemental feeding. They aid in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 by raising awareness of maternal health and vaccination. Activities related to early childhood education support Sustainable Development Goal 4. The centres also support Sustainable Development Goal 5 because many of these activities are led and actively participated in by women. Global objectives are thus reflected in local discussions and deeds. Simply put, Anganwadi centres respect local knowledge, foster shared learning, create spaces for discussion, and involve the community in development initiatives to implement a participatory communication model. In addition to serving as hubs for service distribution, they also serve as forums for problem-solving and the development of group consciousness. Community ownership is strengthened by this participatory approach, which also increases development's sustainability and inclusivity.

Anganwadi Framework for SDG Achievement in India

In India, the Anganwadi framework is crucial to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the village level, it targets mothers, children, and families under the auspices of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Anganwadi centers are situated within communities, allowing them to establish a direct link between government initiatives and people's everyday lives. They are therefore a powerful grassroots mechanism for accomplishing the SDG agenda in India. To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2, Anganwadi centres first aid in the reduction of hunger and malnutrition. Children, expectant mothers, and nursing moms receive additional nutrition from them. Early detection of undernourished children is facilitated by routine growth monitoring. At the community level, Anganwadi centres enhance nutrition by providing nutritious food and advice on balanced diets. This directly helps to lessen childhood wasting and stunting.

Second, the framework supports Sustainable Development Goal 3 and fortifies health systems. Immunization drives, health examinations, and education sessions on maternal care and hygiene are all coordinated by Anganwadi centres. Families and medical professionals come together for Village Health and Nutrition Days. This local assistance raises awareness about disease prevention, lowers child mortality, and increases vaccination coverage. To accomplish Sustainable Development Goal 4, Anganwadi centres support early childhood education. Play-based learning is used to teach preschool to children ages three to six. Social and cognitive development is aided by games, songs, and storytelling. Early education lowers later dropout rates while preparing kids for primary school.

In addition to empowering women, the Anganwadi framework advances Sustainable Development Goal 5. Women from the neighbourhood make up the majority of Anganwadi workers and helpers. For women in rural areas, this opens work

opportunities. In addition, mothers' meetings give women a forum to talk about social issues, diet, and health. By raising awareness and boosting confidence, these conversations enhance women's involvement in decision-making. Additionally, Anganwadi centres contribute to the reduction of inequality, which links to Sustainable Development Goal 10. They primarily assist underprivileged and disenfranchised communities. Even remote and underprivileged groups can receive assistance because services are offered at the village level. This guarantees development that is inclusive. An important factor contributing to Anganwadi's success in accomplishing the SDGs is its integrated approach. It doesn't address just one problem. It is a system that integrates women's empowerment, education, health, and nutrition. According to the SDGs, development goals are interconnected and cannot be accomplished in isolation. Additionally, participatory communication is used in Anganwadi centres. They engage the community by holding gatherings, talks, and protests. People learn, share ideas, and assume responsibility in addition to receiving services. Participation from the community increases the effectiveness and sustainability of programs. India's Anganwadi framework serves as a powerful grassroots example for accomplishing the SDGs. Through close collaboration with families and communities, it converts global objectives into local initiatives. Its participatory and integrated approach makes it an effective instrument for furthering the national development agenda.

Conclusion

According to the findings, Anganwadi centres are more than just locations for food and services. These valuable community areas contribute to India's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Under the auspices of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Anganwadi centres provide women's support, early education, health care, and nutrition in one location. Goals like Sustainable Development Goals 2, 3, 4, and 5 are naturally supported by the centres because these areas are interconnected. The way that Anganwadi works with people is what makes it unique. It not only offers services but also makes room for dialogue. To discuss the nutrition and health of their children, mothers get together on a regular basis. Through play and interaction, children acquire knowledge. On designated health days, families and healthcare professionals come together. People are encouraged to learn from one another, share experiences, and pose questions through these activities. Development feels authentic and near to daily life as a result. However, there are difficulties as well. Anganwadi employees frequently have little funding and a lot of paperwork. The emphasis on data and reports can occasionally take away from having in-person discussions with families. The impact could diminish if involvement is reduced to a formal and meaningless process. Anganwadi centres demonstrate that participation is key to development. When communities talk, learn, and act together, change becomes stronger and long-lasting. To help India accomplish its SDG goals in a realistic and compassionate manner, Anganwadi can continue to play a significant role by encouraging participation and easing administrative b

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MEDIA STUDIES

MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA TRIALS IN INDIA: SHAPING OR DISTORTING DEMOCRACY?

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Abstract: Media trials in India have increasingly blurred the line between journalism and judicial process, raising critical ethical concerns. While the media shape's public opinion and ensures accountability, its overreach in high-profile cases often distorts democracy and jeopardizes fair trials. This article explores how media narratives influence public perception, sometimes compromising the right to a fair trial. It argues that while journalistic freedom is essential, it must be balanced with ethical responsibility, credibility, and respect for legal proceedings. The article also highlights the urgent need for uniform and independent media regulations, ideally governed by the judiciary, to prevent sensationalism from undermining democratic integrity.

Keywords: *Democracy, Ethical Implications, India, Media Ethics, Media Trial, Sensationalism.*

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln said that democracy embodies the principle of government "of the people, by the people, for the people"(Museum, n.d.). In a democratic system, the electorate selects their representatives (Mitchell, 2000), who subsequently participate in governance on behalf of the populace. Thus, it is imperative that citizens exercise careful consideration and diligence in their candidate selection, as their choices would significantly impact their future and the well-being of the community.

Media and democracy are closely connected, with one being incomplete without the other (Arendt, 2023). Democracy relies on public opinion, participation, and freedom of speech. While institutions such as the judiciary, executive, and legislature uphold the nation's ideals, the media, as the fourth pillar, plays an equally vital role. “A political order controlled by the people needs people who are informed” about the world and issues on which they are voting (Protecting the Media to Protect Democracy - Harvard Law School, 2022). Understanding how media shapes democracy requires analyzing its societal impact and evolution. For instance, the 'Battle for Seattle's protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 1999 was hailed as a movement that championed democracy and social justice (Kahn, R. and Kellner, D., 2004). It resisted the neo-liberal ideas of globalization, and was organized through the internet, also referred to as 'new media' More than 66% of all the people globally now use the internet (Kemp, 2024). Over the past two decades, the media has transformed drastically with the rise of the Internet, enabling anyone to act as a journalist (Martens et al., 2018). Today, ordinary citizens view social media as both a constructive and destructive component of political life, suggesting that the media plays a vital role in sustaining democracy beyond borders (Wike et al., 2022). This shift highlights the need to address how the media has evolved from reporting news to shaping biased narratives.

The media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing perspectives in a democracy, particularly in a country as diverse as India. It serves as a primary source of information, impacting how citizens perceive issues and form their beliefs (Indraneel. S. S, 2016). The Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of the press' through Article 19(1)(a). However, media sensationalism can distort democratic processes by promoting biased narratives that favour certain political parties or candidates. This raises concerns about the integrity of elections and the media's potential to manipulate public opinion rather than inform it.

However, in recent years, a 'free media' has affected judiciary exercises by conducting parallel trials. These trials, often referred to as 'media trials' or a 'media frenzy,' refer to the phenomenon of media outlets conducting a trial of an accused individual or organization in the court of public opinion before they have received a fair trial in a court of law (Chopra & Taly, 2020). Media trials are certain regional or national news 'events' in which the criminal justice system is co-opted by the media as a source of high drama and entertainment (Surette, R., 1989). This trend undermines the principle of "innocent until proven guilty" and the standard of "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt." Media trials often begin before official court proceedings, shaping public opinion about the accused through sensationalist coverage. Such practices can prejudice legal trials and violate the accused's right to a fair trial. While the media is acknowledged for raising awareness, it frequently faces criticism for its intrusive coverage, particularly in cases involving high-profile individuals. The rise of the 24-hour news cycle and social media has fostered a culture of instant gratification and sensationalism, prompting media outlets to prioritize breaking news and sensational headlines over accurate reporting (Batra, 2018). The lack of regulation in the Indian media facilitates unchecked operations, contributing to fake news and biased reporting (Biswas, 2018). Additionally, frustrations with the slow and inefficient Indian judiciary often lead the media to assume a vigilante role, dispensing justice before the legal process concludes (Sengupta, 2019).

The '9 PM Kangaroo Courts,' often devoid of substantive content, ethics, and integrity, tend to cherry-pick facts and distort statements, stirring controversies to satiate their viewers. With the genuine pursuit of justice sidelined, media channels resort to significantly 'flashy' tickers proclaiming what "the nation wants to know” or giving the news a disproportionate coverage time, thus determining how the viewers consume their news and boosting viewership. While disseminating information is vital, the media must also be accountable and responsible in their reportage. The constant noise from newsrooms violates the right to privacy of the accused and undermines natural justice. News anchors often act as adjudicators, passing judgments on prime-time television and creating an alternative trial that overshadows the actual legal process. Poor journalism is often defended as an exercise of the Right to Freedom of Speech, increasing public apprehension. The media's promotion of sensational conspiracy theories has led to court interventions, reminding media houses to adhere to responsible reporting.

Media Trial Shaping Information Discourse or Shaping Opinion

The practice of "paid news," where media outlets accept money from political parties for favourable coverage or to suppress negative stories, undermines journalistic integrity and erodes public trust, particularly during elections. This was observed during the CAA-NRC protests in India, where media coverage misled minorities and sparked widespread protests. Some channels sensationalized the issue by focusing on selective narratives while ignoring broader implications. This trial-by-media approach led to polarization and misinformation, prompting fact-checkers on social media to counter the falsehoods.

Media trials, as they rely on speculation and unverified scoops, occupy the gap between public opinion and the judicial process, shaping predetermined narratives about the accused. The intense media coverage of Bollywood celebrity Sushant Singh Rajput's death is reminiscent of the O.J. Simpson case in 1994. Simpson, a famous Black American football player, was charged with the murders of his ex-wife and her friend. The media and public interest in the case were so overwhelming that they influenced the trial and jury (Washington Post O.J. Simpson Verdict Poll, 1995). With 5.5 million daily viewers, it became one of the most-watched televised trials. Simpson was eventually acquitted, but experts believed that the media's role in spreading rumours and sensationalizing the case negatively impacted the trial's integrity. Simpson's celebrity status added drama to the trial, but the media's failure to remain unbiased turned the case into a spectacle. Later, this approach was termed the 'Simpsonization of Domestic News (Alderman, D.H., 1997).

Similarly, in Rajput's case, his girlfriend, an actress, was accused of abetting his suicide. Despite several investigative agencies probing the case, news channels relentlessly vilified her. The excessive coverage and accusations led to her character assassination without any conclusive proof. Many media outlets focused on a drug angle, prompting the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) to launch an investigation. The actress and her brother were arrested, with the actress spending a month in Byculla jail before being released. However, the media continued to paint her as the 'witch' responsible for Rajput's death through fabricated stories. Although legal options exist for the accused to fight defamation, the damage caused by such baseless allegations is often irreversible.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, misleading narratives about the death toll and government responses worsened the crisis (Ranjan, 2024). Twitter's censorship of critical tweets and pro-government claims blaming farmers' protests for oxygen shortages distorted the truth and eroded trust in the media. This undermined the media's ability to report objectively and hold power accountable. On the other hand, media trials often sideline other critical developments in the country that are worthy of reaching the public. In 2024, prominent climate activist and educationist Sonam Wangchuk completed a 21-day climate fast in Leh, Ladakh, subsisting only on water and salt. His fast drew attention to urgent issues in the region, emphasizing the need to protect Ladakh's fragile ecology and indigenous culture. Despite support from various socio-political groups, including the Kargil Democratic Alliance, Wangchuk's cause was largely overlooked by the mainstream media.

In August 2020, student activist Asif Iqbal Tanha, an accused in the Delhi Riots conspiracy case, moved the Delhi High Court against news reports claiming that he had confessed to his role. He argued that the alleged disclosure statements were neither voluntary nor admissible as evidence. While the police denied leaking the statements and initiated a probe, the High Court directed Zee News to reveal its source for the leaked documents. In March 2021, the court where the trial was taking place noted a "disturbing trend" where media outlets reported chargesheet details before the judiciary could take cognizance of it or before the accused could access it. The court emphasized the need for disclaimers to clarify that such reports represent either the prosecution's or the accused's version (Aditi, 2021).

High-profile cases like the 'cruise ship drugs case' involving Aryan Khan highlight concerns over media conduct. Daily debates and speculative coverage dominated news channels until the NCB gave him a clean chit on May 27, 2022, citing a lack of evidence (Neha Joshi, 2022). Similarly, the alleged WhatsApp chats of climate activist Disha Ravi were widely reported in the media after her arrest in connection with the farmers' protests. She then sought the Delhi High Court's intervention, accusing the Delhi Police of leaking information and violating her privacy. On February 19, 2021, the court directed the police to adhere to the 2010 MHA press briefing guidelines and advised the media to ensure factual reporting. This case remains pending (Meera Emmanuel, 2021). In April 2024, the Delhi Police approached the Delhi High Court, seeking to prevent media outlets from publishing chargesheet details in the Shraddha Walkar murder case (Prashant Jha, 2023).

Conclusion

As T.E. Carter noted in his book, I Stop Somewhere, "The court of public opinion moves much faster than the law." The media serves as a watchdog and platform for public opinion, influencing policy by highlighting key issues. However, its focus has shifted toward sensationalism and gossip for TRPs, straying from factual reporting and destabilizing public opinion (Thussu & Kumar, 2023). In conclusion, the media should act as a democratic platform, shaping public opinion for society's collective good. It must uphold ethics, social responsibility, and credibility while avoiding interference in court matters that require careful and nuanced interpretation. There is a need for uniform and liberal media regulations, ideally set by courts without government interference (Mohanty, 2022). There is also a demand for efforts and advocacy to build media literacy in India so that the public consumes informed news, identifies bias, and boycotts fake news or slander. Research into such a media regulatory framework and literacy programs is encouraged to strengthen media ethics, ideally deterring media trials and promoting responsible journalism in the country.

Author Contribution Statement:

Dr Trishu Sharma has conceptualized the idea and written the complete draft.

Disclosure statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Declaration of Funding:

No Sponsorship or Funding was received for the article by the author(s).

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Presidency School Of
MEDIA STUDIES

MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Digital Citizenship Education as Media Praxis: A Qualitative Exploration of University Students' Experiences with Cyberbullying and the Role of Media Literacy Interventions

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Abstract

This article examines how media praxis can equip university students with digital citizenship competencies that enable them to critically understand and respond to cyberbullying on digital platforms. Drawing on participatory media education theory and the concept of digital citizenship, the study reports a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of twenty-eight undergraduates at a public university who participated in a semester-long media literacy intervention. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were constructed: (1) students developed a more critical, structurally informed understanding of cyberbullying as a media practice rather than an isolated interpersonal act; (2) participatory media production fostered empathy and a sense of digital responsibility in ways that analytical instruction alone did not; and (3) structural barriers (peer pressure, platform incentives, and the absence of institutional mechanisms) constrained the translation of media literacy learning into sustained behavioural change. The study offers implications for media educators, curriculum designers, and institutional policymakers.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Digital Citizenship Education, Media Literacy, Higher Education; Participatory Media Production

Introduction

The expansion of digital media has substantially reshaped young people's communicative practices, socialisation, and identity formation. These same spaces, however, have also become sites of considerable harm, and cyberbullying now represents one of the most widespread and consequential challenges facing contemporary media education (Kowalski et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Cyberbullying refers to the intentional and repeated use of digital communication technologies to harass, threaten, humiliate, or socially exclude others. Reported prevalence among young people varies widely across populations, depending on the definition adopted and the measurement instrument used (Zhu et al., 2021).

While a substantial body of scholarship has theorised cyberbullying in psychological, sociological, and criminological terms, comparatively few studies have conceptualised it as a media practice, one shaped by platform affordances, algorithmic systems, and participatory cultures, and therefore amenable to intervention through media education (Buckingham, 2019; Livingstone, 2014). This gap matters, because prevention approaches oriented primarily towards individual behavioural correction or institutional sanction risk overlooking the media literacy competencies that enable young people to navigate digital environments critically (Jones & Mitchell, 2016).

To address this gap, the present article examines how digital citizenship education (DCE), understood through the lens of media praxis (a model of creative practice and reflective action grounded in critical theory), can prepare university students to analyse and respond to cyberbullying within their everyday digital media practices. Three research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do university students understand and experience cyberbullying within their everyday digital media practices?

RQ2: How does participation in a media literacy intervention shape students' critical awareness of, and responses to, cyberbullying?

RQ3: What factors enable or constrain the translation of media literacy learning into sustained digital citizenship behaviour?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Cyberbullying: From Behavioural Science to Media Studies

Scholarship on cyberbullying has been dominated by psychological and behavioural accounts of individual risk factors, prevalence, and psychosocial consequences (Tokunaga, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014). Although this work has been essential in establishing the severity and scale of the phenomenon, it has tended to treat digital media as a neutral conduit through which aggressive behaviour is transposed online, rather than as a set of systems that actively shape the structure, intensity, and content of online aggression (Marwick & Boyd, 2014).

A more recent development within media studies has been the reconceptualization of cyberbullying in terms of the affordances that distinguish online aggression from its offline counterpart: anonymity, persistence, scalability, searchability, and shareability (Boyd, 2014; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Patel and Quan-Haase (2022) advance a social-ecological framework in which digital media constitute a primary ecology of young people's lives, arguing that prevention must therefore engage the platform affordances that sustain bullying rather than individual dispositions alone. This position aligns with Buckingham's (2019) broader argument that media literacy education should move beyond protectionist paradigms concerned with shielding young people from online harm, towards an empowerment model that develops the critical capacities needed for meaningful and ethical participation in digital culture.

2.2 Digital Citizenship Education: Frameworks and Critiques

Digital citizenship education has emerged as a pedagogical response to the demands of living in digitally mediated societies. Ribble's (2015) *Nine Elements of Digital Citizenship* framework identifies nine interrelated dimensions (including digital etiquette, digital rights and responsibilities, and digital security) that specify the principles and behaviours expected of responsible digital citizens. More recently, Jones and Mitchell (2016) have developed a youth-centred conceptualisation

that foregrounds respectful online behaviour, civic engagement, and self-regulation as the core dimensions of digital citizenship.

DCE has nonetheless been criticised as prescriptive and individualistic, locating responsibility with individual users while paying insufficient attention to the systemic practices through which digital platforms operate (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021). Pangrazio (2016) argues that prevailing models of digital citizenship neglect fundamental dimensions of digital politics, including power relations, inequality, and the political economy of social media. This critique is particularly pertinent to cyberbullying prevention: instructing learners in appropriate online conduct is unlikely to suffice unless it is accompanied by analysis of platform design, algorithmic amplification, and the data-driven business models that sustain environments conducive to online aggression (Noble, 2018).

2.3 Media Praxis and Participatory Pedagogy

Media praxis, grounded in Freire's (2000) conception of praxis as the dialectical unity of action and reflection, offers a productive framework for intervening in cyberbullying by combining critical analysis with creative media production. Praxis-based approaches to media education hold that media literacy is acquired not only through textual analysis but through the construction of media artefacts, which affords learners insight into media systems, representational practices, and ethical demands (Dezuanni, 2015; Hobbs, 2017).

Participatory media production has been shown to support the development of empathy, perspective-taking, and ethical reasoning, which are the capacities directly relevant to cyberbullying prevention (Jenkins, 2006; Kahne et al., 2016). In producing digital media about cyberbullying, students are positioned to undertake critical inquiry into victims' experiences, perpetrators' motivations, and bystanders' responses (Hobbs, 2017).

2.4 The Research Gap

Although the intersection of digital citizenship, media literacy, and cyberbullying is attracting increasing scholarly attention, an empirical gap persists regarding how praxis-based media education interventions shape students' understandings of and responses to cyberbullying, particularly in higher education. Existing prevention research has concentrated on K-12 contexts and has predominantly measured attitudinal or behavioural change through quantitative designs (Gaffney et al., 2019). Qualitative research examining the processes through which media literacy learning generates critical awareness and shapes digital practice remains comparatively scarce (Zhong et al., 2021). The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative investigation of university students' experiences of a media literacy intervention designed to address cyberbullying through media praxis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed and generated through people's interpretation of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This choice is warranted by the need to capture the complexity and context-specificity of how students experience cyberbullying and media literacy education, dimensions that a survey-based quantitative design would be unlikely to render visible.

3.2 Context: The National and Institutional Setting

The study was conducted at a public university in India, a setting characterised by rapid and recent digital expansion. Internet penetration reached approximately 70% of the population by late 2025, with over one billion internet users and some 500 million active social media accounts, the majority accessed via mobile devices (Kemp, 2025). Among university-age cohorts, platform use is near-universal, with Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube dominating everyday communicative practice (Appollis & Sutcliffe, 2022). This expansion has been accompanied by substantial rates of online aggression: an NCERT survey reported that 35% of Indian students had experienced cyberbullying, while a study of Indian college students found that 60.6% had been subject to some form of cybervictimisation (Sharma et al., 2017; Gupta et al., 2023).

India nevertheless has no dedicated cyberbullying statute. Redress depends on a patchwork of provisions under the Information Technology Act, 2000 (principally Sections 66C, 66D, 66E, and 67) and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which replaced the Indian Penal Code in July 2024 and addresses stalking and criminal intimidation through electronic means (Sections 78 and 351) (Seth & Yadav, 2026). Section 66A of the IT Act, which had criminalised the sending of offensive electronic messages, was struck down as unconstitutionally vague in Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015), leaving a recognised regulatory gap in relation to non-obscene online harassment. The resulting framework is oriented towards criminal prosecution of severe incidents rather than towards the everyday, ambiguous, and normalised forms of online aggression that constitute most students' experience.

Institutional provision is similarly uneven. While the University Grants Commission (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023 require all higher education institutions to constitute Student Grievance Redressal Committees and appoint an ombudsperson to address complaints including harassment, compliance has been inconsistent, prompting further UGC directives in 2024. Existing anti-ragging machinery, established under UGC regulations following sustained public and judicial pressure, remains oriented towards face-to-face hazing rather than digitally mediated harm. Media literacy, meanwhile, is not a mandated component of undergraduate curricula outside communication and journalism programmes. Indian university students therefore navigate an environment of intensive platform use, limited legal recourse for routine online aggression, and minimal institutional or curricular support, a configuration that makes the setting a particularly instructive site for examining what praxis-based media education can, and cannot, accomplish.

3.3 The Media Literacy Intervention

The intervention was delivered as a 14-week undergraduate communication module. The curriculum was organised around three pedagogical pillars: (1) critical analysis of digital media environments, encompassing platform affordances, algorithmic systems, and emergent online norms; (2) participatory media production, in which students worked in groups to create digital artefacts addressing cyberbullying, including short documentaries, podcast episodes, and social media campaigns; and (3) reflective praxis, in which students maintained journals documenting their evolving understandings of cyberbullying and digital citizenship over the course of the module.

3.4 Participants

Twenty-eight undergraduate students who had completed the module were recruited through purposive sampling (18 women, 8 men, 2 non-binary). Participants were drawn from a range of

disciplines, including media studies, education, psychology, and computer science. All maintained active accounts on two or more social media platforms and described themselves as frequent users. All participants provided written informed consent, and the study received approval from the institutional review board (reference number withheld for anonymised review).

3.5 Data Collection

Three complementary methods were used.

Semi-structured interviews: Each participant took part in an individual interview of 45–60 minutes at the conclusion of the module. The interview guide (see Supplementary File) addressed participants' prior experiences of cyberbullying, their perceptions of the intervention, and their accounts of how the programme had shaped their digital media practices.

Focus group discussion: Four focus groups (6–8 participants each, 75–90 minutes) were convened in weeks 8 and 14 to surface group dynamics, collective meaning-making, and peer learning.

Reflective journals: Participants maintained a reflective journal across the 14 weeks, submitting entries (weekly), yielding 392 entries in total. Prompts invited participants to reflect on their everyday digital media use, on incidents of cyberbullying they encountered or observed, and on shifts in their understanding of digital citizenship.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in English.

3.6 Data Analysis

All data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; construction of candidate themes; review of themes against the coded extracts and the full dataset; definition and naming of themes; and production of the report. The analysis was primarily inductive, with themes constructed from the data while remaining in dialogue with the theoretical framework of media praxis. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were understood as analytic constructions rather than as patterns awaiting discovery, and no inter-coder reliability measure was calculated. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout analysis, and member reflections, in which a subgroup of eight participants reviewed and commented on the developing thematic interpretation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of cyberbullying as a topic, robust ethical safeguards were implemented. Participants were assured of confidentiality and of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. All names reported here are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered. Participants who disclosed distressing experiences were offered referral to the university counselling service. Reflective journals were assessed on completion rather than content and did not contribute to module grades, reducing any perceived pressure to disclose personal experience.

4. Findings

Three themes were constructed from the analysis. Each is presented below with illustrative extracts from interviews, focus groups, and journals.

4.1 Theme 1: "It's Just How Social Media Works" – Developing Critical Awareness of Cyberbullying as a Media Practice

At the outset of the module, most participants understood cyberbullying as an individualised and intentional act perpetrated by identifiable aggressors against identifiable victims. This framing drew on prevailing psychological accounts and on mass media representations that present cyberbullying as a fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon. Aisha (21, media studies) articulated this initial position in an early journal entry:

> *"I always thought of cyberbullying as like… someone sending you mean messages or posting your photos without permission. Like a specific person doing a specific thing to hurt you."*

As the module progressed and participants began to analyse platform affordances and algorithmic systems, a more structurally attuned understanding developed. Participants came to recognise that a range of practices normalised within social media culture (public shaming, screenshot circulation, pile-ons, and algorithmically amplified conflict) constitute forms of cyberbullying embedded in the design and incentive architecture of platforms. Rahul (22, computer science) described this shift:

> *"What really changed for me was understanding that it's not just about bad individuals. The platforms are designed to reward engagement, and conflict gets engagement. So in a way, the system itself is part of the problem. That was a huge realisation."*

This shift represents a significant pedagogical outcome of the module's emphasis on critical media analysis. Moving beyond individualising explanations, participants oriented towards a media-ecological account of cyberbullying (Patel & Quan-Haase, 2022), developing what Kellner and Share (2019) term critical media literacy: the capacity to interrogate the political, economic, and technological systems that structure media practice. Several participants characterised this shift as initially uncomfortable but ultimately empowering, since it required them to recognise their own participation in normalised forms of online aggression.

4.2 Theme 2: "Making the Film Changed How I See It" – The Transformative Potential of Participatory Media Production

The second theme concerns the role of participatory media production (the creation of short documentaries, podcasts, and social media campaigns) in fostering empathy, perspective-taking, and a sense of digital responsibility. Across the dataset, producing media about cyberbullying was identified as the most significant component of the module. Meera (20, education), who co-produced a short documentary featuring people who had experienced cyberbullying, described how the production process reshaped her understanding:

> *"It forms you when you are sitting facing them, and they are telling you how they physically sickened up in a group chat when a pile-on occurred, and you are recording it and you are supposed to render justice to their stories. It's not abstract anymore. I produced the movie and was able to give it a particular interpretation that reading about it ever did."*

This finding is consistent with Hobbs's (2017) argument that media production generates forms of learning that are not reducible to consumption-based or analytically oriented approaches. The embodied, collaborative, and creative dimensions of production enabled students to engage affectively and ethically with the material, deepening their understanding of the human dimensions of cyberbullying.

Participants also reported that designing social media campaigns — which required them to consider audience, platform affordances, messaging strategy, and ethical implications — provided applicable experience of responsible media production. Nikhil (23, media studies) observed:

"Designing the Instagram campaign made me think about how every post is a choice. You choose the words, the images, the hashtags. And each of those choices has consequences. I never thought about it that way before."

This emphasis on creative production as a route to ethical digital citizenship resonates with Jenkins's (2006) account of participatory culture and with Dezuanni's (2015) socio-material approach to media education. Notably, participants explicitly contrasted the praxis-based character of the module with the more didactic digital citizenship instruction they had previously encountered. Sofia (21, psychology) summarised this view:

"Telling us 'don't cyberbully' doesn't work. But making us create something about it that works."

4.3 Theme 3: "I Know Better, But the Pressure Is Real" – Structural Barriers to Sustained Behavioural Change

The third theme concerns the barriers participants identified to translating enhanced media literacy into sustained changes in digital behaviour. Although the module was effective in building critical awareness and empathy, participants described substantial counter-pressures arising from peer norms, algorithmic incentives, and the normalisation of aggressive online communication. Raj (20, media studies) captured this tension:

"I know now what I'm supposed to do. I can see when something is cyberbullying even when it's disguised as a joke. But in the moment, when your whole friend group is piling on someone in a group chat, it's really hard to be the one who says stop. The social cost is real."

The findings highlight the limitations of individualistic approaches to cyberbullying prevention and underscore the necessity of structural and institutional interventions in advancing media literacy education. Participants identified several barriers: (a) the risk of social rejection when intervening in normalized aggressive behaviour; (b) the addictive nature of social media, which sustains user engagement; (c) the temporal and plausible deniability associated with certain forms of online aggression, such as comments on social media; and (d) the absence of university-level mechanisms for reporting and addressing cyberbullying among adult students.

Participants reported that the university provided no clear mechanism for reporting or addressing cyberbullying among adult students, in contrast to the provisions available in school settings. Nima (22, education) argued for institution-level change:

"The programme opened our eyes, but it can't do everything. The university needs to take this seriously as an institution, not just put it on individual students to "be better online." We need systems, not just awareness."

Taken together, these findings indicate the limits of individualised approaches to cyberbullying prevention and point towards the structural and institutional conditions required for media literacy education to translate into practice.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to converging bodies of work in media education, digital citizenship, and cyberbullying research, while also raising questions about the scope and limits of educational responses.

First, the findings provide empirical support for the proposition that praxis-based media education (combining critical analysis, participatory production, and reflection) can reshape how students conceptualise cyberbullying. Participants moved from understanding cyberbullying as isolated interpersonal misconduct towards recognising it as a systemically produced media practice. This conceptual shift is consequential, as it equips learners with analytic tools that extend beyond specific incidents to the broader media ecologies through which online aggression is reproduced and normalised (Buckingham, 2019; Livingstone, 2014). The findings are consistent with Zhong et al.'s (2021) reported association between digital citizenship and reduced cyberbullying involvement, while offering a qualitative account of how such critical awareness develops.

Second, participants consistently identified participatory media production as the most transformative component of their learning. This lends empirical weight to theoretical claims that the synthesis of critical analysis and creative action characteristic of media praxis generates embodied, affective, and ethically engaged understanding that is difficult to achieve through purely cognitive approaches (Dezuanni, 2015; Hobbs, 2017). On this basis, media educators may reasonably be advised to allocate substantial curricular space to creative production within cyberbullying prevention programmes, rather than relying on information transfer or analytical tasks alone.

Third, and tempering the first two findings, structural barriers substantially constrained behavioural change. Although participants reported heightened critical awareness and empathy, these gains did not reliably translate into altered everyday digital practice, a pattern consistent with the well-documented knowledge-behaviour gap in health and citizenship education (Ajzen, 1991). This finding supports Pangrazio and Sefton Green's (2021) contention that digital citizenship frameworks tend to underestimate the structural power of platforms and peer cultures. Educators should therefore maintain realistic expectations of individual-level interventions while simultaneously advocating structural countermeasures.

5.1 Implications for Media Practice and Education

Several practical implications follow. The findings suggest that media educators should treat cyberbullying prevention as integral to media literacy education rather than as a discrete safety unit. Such integration is likely to be both pedagogically more effective and more representative of the media practices students actually encounter. The praxis model employed here (critical analysis, creative production, and reflective inquiry) offers an approach that is transferable across institutional contexts and student populations.

For institutional policymakers, the findings indicate a need for interventions that extend beyond awareness campaigns to encompass accessible reporting mechanisms, victim support provision, and engagement with platform providers. The persistence of the knowledge–behaviour gap documented here suggests that even carefully designed educational interventions may achieve limited practical effect in the absence of supportive structural and institutional conditions.

More broadly, this article demonstrates the productive relationship between media education scholarship and online safety research, fields that have largely developed in relative isolation from one another. It illustrates how the methodological and epistemological commitments of media practice research can be mobilised to address pressing social problems in digital

environments.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single institution and a single module, which constrains transferability. Further research is needed to examine comparable interventions across varied institutional, cultural, and national settings.

Second, data were collected at the conclusion of the module and in the weeks immediately following, precluding conclusions about whether gains in critical awareness and behavioural intention are sustained over time. Longitudinal follow-up would be valuable.

Third, the study relies on self-reported data and is therefore subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic. Future research might address this limitation through observational designs or digital trace methods.

Fourth, participants were recruited from students who had completed the module, and the accounts reported here are predominantly those of students positioned as bystanders or as having experienced cyberbullying. Subsequent research should examine how praxis-based interventions affect students who have themselves engaged in cyberbullying, and how such interventions operate for groups who may be disproportionately targeted, including students marginalised by gender, caste, religion, race, or sexual orientation.

Finally, comparative research assessing the relative efficacy of praxis-based approaches against alternative pedagogical models of cyberbullying prevention would strengthen the evidence base for the approach advanced here.

6. Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a significant problem of the digital media environment, with substantial consequences for young people's wellbeing, social integration, and education. This study suggests that effective responses require a shift away from individualistic, behaviourist paradigms towards a media praxis approach encompassing critical analysis of digital environments, participatory creative production, and sustained reflective inquiry.

The findings indicate that providing university students with the pedagogical space and tools to analyse the media systems that sustain cyberbullying critically produces a more sophisticated and structurally informed understanding of the phenomenon. Collaborative media production about cyberbullying, moreover, cultivates forms of empathy, ethical awareness, and digital responsibility that analytical or didactic methods alone do not achieve. At the same time, the study cautions against educational solutionism: structural barriers arising from platform design, peer norms, and institutional inaction significantly limit the translation of critical insight into sustained behavioural change.

This article argues for closer integration between online safety research and media education scholarship, and for cyberbullying prevention to be treated as a central concern of media praxis and pedagogical research. Cyberbullying is not simply a behavioural problem; it is a media practice problem, and addressing it requires the creative, analytical, and advocacy capacities of the media education community.

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MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Beyond Algorithms: A Situated Review of AI-Mediated Verification in Media

Geographical Inequities, Ethical Dilemmas, and Imperatives of Sustainability in Global AI Fact-Checking

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Abstract

This review synthesises underexplored, situated perspectives from empirical case studies of AI use in media and communication contexts. Drawing on work from journalism, platform governance, and audience studies, it examines how AI-mediated verification is embedded in specific organisational routines, technological infrastructures, and political economies of news and information. Rather than treating verification as a purely technical task of detecting falsehoods, the review foregrounds how editorial values, labour conditions, professional norms, and power relations shape what counts as credible evidence and trustworthy AI tools in practice. It argues for a situated, pluralistic agenda that prioritises justice, accountability, and sustainability in the design and deployment of AI-assisted verification systems in media organisations and platforms, with particular attention to the impacts on frontline media workers, marginalised communities, and the broader information environment.

Keywords: AI-mediated verification; fact-checking; content moderation; platform governance; epistemic justice; sustainability; Global South; situated practice

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become a routine, if often invisible, component of how contemporary media organisations and digital platforms establish what is true. Fact-checking desks deploy automated claim-detection and claim-matching systems to triage the daily flood of online assertions; newsrooms use reverse-image search, geolocation, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) tooling to verify user-generated footage from conflict zones; and platforms operate large-scale classifiers that flag, downrank, or remove content judged to be false or synthetic. The rapid diffusion of generative models has sharpened this dependence: as synthetic images, cloned audio, and fabricated video become cheaper to produce and harder to distinguish, verification actors have turned to AI not only as a threat to be countered but as an instrument of countering it (Cazzamatta & Sarısakaloğlu, 2025). AI-mediated verification, in other words, is now embedded in the everyday routines through which journalism and platform governance discharge their epistemic responsibilities.

Yet the dominant framing of this development remains stubbornly technical. Verification tends to be construed as a detection problem — a matter of building better classifiers, larger training corpora, and more accurate benchmarks — such that gains in model performance are taken to translate directly into a healthier information environment. This is a form of what Broussard (2018) terms technological solutionism: the assumption that social problems have clean computational fixes. Treating verification as purely technical obscures the organisational routines, labour arrangements, professional cultures, and political economies within which these tools are actually built and used. It also naturalises a particular set of choices — about which languages, evidentiary conventions, and news values the tools encode — as if they were neutral properties of the technology rather than situated and contestable commitments.

A growing body of empirical work in journalism studies, platform-governance research, and audience studies has begun to document what verification looks like when observed in situ: in the newsroom, on the moderation queue, and in the communities that both produce and consume verified information. These studies reveal that the same tool can function very differently depending on the resources, languages, and editorial values of the organisation deploying it, and that the human judgement AI is meant to augment is frequently the decisive factor in whether verification succeeds. This situated evidence, however, remains scattered across disciplines and sectors, and it is rarely synthesised into a coherent account of how AI-mediated verification is shaped by — and reshapes — the media contexts it enters.

This review responds to that gap. It synthesises underexplored, situated perspectives from empirical case studies of AI use in media and communication contexts. Rather than asking how accurately AI detects falsehoods, it asks how AI-mediated verification is embedded in specific organisational routines, technological infrastructures, and political economies of news, and how editorial values, labour conditions, professional norms, and power relations shape what counts as credible evidence and trustworthy tooling in practice. On this basis it argues for a situated, pluralistic agenda that prioritises justice, accountability, and sustainability, with particular attention to the consequences for frontline media workers, marginalised communities, and the broader information environment. The remainder of the paper sets out the conceptual background for such an agenda (Section 2) and the scope and method of the review (Section 3); synthesises the empirical literature under five themes (Section 4); develops the pluralistic agenda and its design and governance principles (Section 5); considers implications for media practice and policy (Section 6); and concludes with priorities for research and practice (Section 7).

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Defining AI-mediated verification in media

AI-mediated verification in media refers to the range of sociotechnical practices in which machine-learning systems participate in judgements about the authenticity, accuracy, or provenance of information circulating in the public sphere. It is not a single technology but a family of them, operating at different points in the news and information cycle. In editorial fact-checking, natural-language systems perform claim extraction — isolating checkable assertions from speeches, posts, and articles — and claim matching, linking new claims to previously verified ones (Graves, 2016; Diakopoulos, 2019). In visual verification, tools such as InVID-WeVerify, reverse-image search, and geolocation aids help journalists establish whether an image or video is authentic and when and where it was captured. Deepfake and synthetic-media detectors attempt to identify AI-generated artefacts. On platforms,

content-moderation classifiers flag or action potentially false or manipulated material at scale, while recommendation and ranking systems shape which claims — verified or not — reach which audiences. These functions are frequently bundled together in practice, so that a single verification decision may pass through automated triage, human review, and algorithmic distribution in sequence.

2.2 Situating verification: journalism studies, media sociology, STS, and critical algorithm studies

Situating verification means recognising that none of these judgements is purely technical. Journalism studies have long shown that fact-checking is a professional and interpretive practice, governed by norms about sourcing, evidence, and the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, rather than a mechanical comparison against a fixed ground truth (Graves, 2016). Media sociology and science and technology studies (STS) extend this insight to the tools themselves, treating classifiers and detectors as artefacts that embed the assumptions, training data, and design priorities of their makers. Critical algorithm studies have documented how such systems can encode and amplify social bias — Noble's (2018) analysis of search engines being a paradigmatic case — and how platform content moderation operates as a form of governance whose rules are opaque, inconsistently applied, and consequential for public discourse (Gillespie, 2018). Read together, these traditions reframe verification: what counts as credible evidence, and which AI tools are treated as trustworthy, are outcomes of negotiation among editorial values, professional hierarchies, commercial pressures, and infrastructural constraints, not settled facts about the world.

2.3 Justice, accountability, and sustainability as media-specific concerns

Three normative concerns recur across this literature and organise the present review. The first is justice, understood in media terms as press freedom, fair representation, and the equitable distribution of verification capacity — a concern that becomes acute when tools optimised for a handful of powerful languages and Western news values are exported globally (Birhane, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2020). The second is accountability: the demand that verification decisions be transparent, explicable, and open to contestation by those they affect, whether journalists overruled by a classifier or users whose content is demoted (El Ali et al., 2024). The third is sustainability, in both its environmental and its social senses — the carbon and energy costs of training and operating large models (Strubell et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2021), and the often precarious, low-paid human labour that annotates data and reviews content behind ostensibly automated systems (Gray & Suri, 2019; Roberts, 2019). Together, justice, accountability, and sustainability provide the evaluative lens through which the empirical themes below are read.

3. Methods of the Review

This review is an interpretive, thematic synthesis rather than a systematic review in the PRISMA sense. Its aim is to bring situated empirical evidence into conversation across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries, and its method is chosen accordingly. The scope spans three overlapping media settings: professional newsrooms and established fact-checking desks (for example, Der Spiegel, Full Fact, Correctiv, DPA, and Reuters); independent and regionally embedded fact-checking initiatives (Lupa and AFP Checamos in Brazil, Maldita.es in the Spanish-speaking world, Faktisk Verifiserbar in Norway, Dubawa in West Africa, and Alt News in India); and platform content-governance systems, including automated flagging and human-review pipelines.

Geographically, the review deliberately juxtaposes Global North and Global South contexts in order to make infrastructural and epistemic asymmetries visible, rather than to treat Northern cases as the default. Temporally, it concentrates on scholarship and documented practice from roughly 2019 to 2025 — the period in which machine learning moved from the margins to the centre of verification work, and in which generative AI transformed both the threat and the tooling.

Inclusion prioritised empirical case studies — newsroom ethnographies, interview-based studies, comparative content analyses, and moderation research — that observe AI-mediated verification in use rather than proposing or benchmarking systems in the abstract. Conceptual and normative work in STS, critical algorithm studies, and decolonial computing was included where it framed or illuminated the empirical cases. Purely technical evaluations of detector accuracy, absent any account of organisational or social context, fell outside the review's remit, though they are acknowledged where practice depends on them.

Synthesis proceeded thematically. Reading across the cases, five recurring dimensions emerged: professional practice and newsroom routines; platform governance and moderation; labour, expertise, and power; audiences, trust, and participation; and global inequalities and infrastructural asymmetries. These are analytic rather than mutually exclusive categories — labour questions run through platform moderation, and inequality runs through all five — and they structure Section 4. The synthesis is necessarily partial: the evidence base is uneven, skewed towards English- and European-language scholarship, and thinner for the Global South precisely because of the asymmetries the review documents. This limitation is itself a finding.

4. Empirical Themes in AI-Mediated Verification in Media

4.1 Professional practice and newsroom routines

Close observation of verification work consistently shows AI operating as an assistant to, rather than a replacement for, professional judgement. Der Spiegel's beta-tested AI-assisted fact-checker illustrates the pattern: the system handles routine, high-volume tasks such as claim extraction and matching candidate claims against existing sources, freeing journalists for the interpretive work that machines handle poorly. In practice, journalists routinely override the system's outputs — recognising that a source is outdated, adjusting a confidence level in light of context, or catching a claim that is technically accurate but misleading. The pilot reportedly improves efficiency for low-stakes verification while preserving human expertise for ambiguous cases, although published accuracy metrics remain scarce and reports emphasise the model's persistent difficulty with nuance.

Norway's Faktisk Verifiserbar offers a complementary picture from OSINT-intensive verification. A close study of the unit's work on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza documents journalists combining AI tools with geolocation aids, internet archives, and reverse-image search to corroborate claims, while human fact-checkers adjudicated the inconsistencies the tools surfaced and assessed the motives behind contested material (Khan et al., 2025). The value of the arrangement lay precisely in the division of labour: AI extended the reach and speed of evidence-gathering, while humans supplied the interpretive depth to read irony, cultural cues, and strategic intent that models miss.

These cases crystallise a central tension between automation and editorial judgement. Hybrid arrangements can genuinely augment verification, but they also carry a risk that the direction of authority quietly inverts — that professionals are reduced to error-correctors ratifying the outputs of opaque systems rather than exercising independent judgement over them. Studies of newsroom practice add a further complication: AI literacy is often uneven within a single newsroom and ethical guidance informal, so that journalists lean on individual judgement rather than shared, explicit standards (Misri et al., 2025). Whether augmentation or subordination prevails therefore depends less on the model's accuracy than on organisational design — whether override is easy and encouraged, whether confidence scores are legible, and whether journalists retain the time, literacy, and standing to dissent. The evidence suggests that AI aligns with journalistic integrity only when these conditions hold.

4.2 Platform governance and moderation

Where newsroom verification is bounded and deliberative, platform verification is industrial. Automated classifiers — commercial services such as Hive Moderation among them — flag potentially false, manipulated, or synthetic content at a scale no human team could match, routing a subset to human reviewers and actioning the rest according to policy. The consequences of these judgements extend well beyond a true/false label: flagged content may be downranked, demonetised, labelled, or removed, and repeat offenders deplatformed. Verification on platforms is therefore inseparable from questions of visibility and livelihood, and errors are consequential in ways that a published fact-checker's verdict is not.

This scale creates distinctive governance problems. Moderation rules are frequently opaque and unevenly enforced across languages and regions (Gillespie, 2018), and the automated systems that apply them inherit the biases of their training data. The language dimension is visible even in consumer-facing tools: Correctiv's May 2024 tests of Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and ChatGPT ahead of the European Parliament elections found that the systems returned inaccurate voting information and fabricated sources, and that answer quality varied with the language of the query (Marinov, 2024; Simon et al., 2024). More broadly, journalists report persistent concern about algorithmic and data bias, model opacity, and the privacy implications of training data scraped from social platforms (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024). For affected creators and communities, the combination of opacity and consequence — decisions that are hard to understand and hard to appeal — is corrosive of trust, and it places a premium on the contestability mechanisms discussed in Section 5.

4.3 Labour, expertise, and power

Behind the ostensibly automated surfaces of both newsroom and platform verification lies a substantial and frequently invisible human workforce. Large models are trained on datasets labelled by annotators, and moderation pipelines depend on reviewers who make the judgements the classifiers cannot — often under conditions of precarity, time pressure, and psychological strain (Gray & Suri, 2019; Roberts, 2019). Much of this work is outsourced to the Global South at low wages. The efficiency gains attributed to AI verification are thus partly a relocation of labour rather than its elimination.

This raises the question of whose expertise shapes verification standards. When the priorities encoded in a system are set by engineers and product managers in a handful of firms, and the interpretive labour of annotators and moderators is treated as a commodity input rather than a source of expertise, the people closest to the material have the least say over the criteria applied to it. The changing roles of media workers — from author of a verdict to supervisor, corrector, or trainer of a model — redistribute authority in ways that are rarely made explicit. Recognising annotation and moderation as skilled, situated expertise, and building channels for that expertise to inform system design, is a precondition for both accountability and quality.

4.4 Audiences, trust, and participation

Verification does not end at publication; it lands with publics who must decide whether to trust it. Audience-facing research suggests that perceptions of AI-mediated verification are shaped as much by the perceived legitimacy and transparency of the process as by its accuracy, and that undisclosed automation can erode rather than build confidence (Chen, 2025). The limits of automated verification are sharpest outside high-resource languages and Western contexts. Alt News, one of India's most prominent fact-checkers, has long been sceptical of AI verification tools: its co-founder has argued that natural-language processing works mainly for English, because training data is abundant there but scarce for Indian regional languages, and that it copes poorly with the short, image- and video-centred misinformation that predominates in the country (Changoiwala, 2019). Such blind spots — around regional languages, irony, and cultural idiom — can turn an automated verdict into contested terrain in already polarised settings.

Against purely top-down models, participatory and community-based verification has emerged as a significant alternative. Maldita.es responded effectively to fraudulent WhatsApp deepfakes during elections by mobilising a regionally active, audience-connected model; Dubawa in West Africa and comparable tipline-based initiatives elsewhere draw directly on community knowledge to verify claims that leave few digital traces. These models treat audiences as participants in verification rather than passive recipients of verdicts, and they are often better equipped to handle the vernacular, oral, and locally situated claims that automated tools struggle with. Their strength lies in embedding verification within, rather than above, the communities whose information environment is at stake.

4.5 Global inequalities and infrastructural asymmetries

The most pronounced pattern across the literature is asymmetry. Proprietary AI verification tools are developed disproportionately in Europe and North America, producing marked regional differences in access, representation, and recourse. A comparative study of AI-generated misinformation across Brazil, Germany, and the United Kingdom analysed 136 fact-checks from 2023–2024 and found advanced AI detectors (such as InVID-WeVerify and Hive Moderation) in routine use in Europe, while resource-constrained Brazilian teams relied more heavily on manual verification and contended with linguistic barriers (Cazzamatta & Sarısakaloğlu, 2025). Brazilian fact-checkers documented dozens of AI-generated pieces targeting politicians in a highly polarised environment, working with less institutional and technical infrastructure than their better-resourced German counterparts operating within a more structured media system.

These disparities are not merely a matter of budgets; they are linguistic and epistemic. Verification and moderation tools

trained predominantly on English and other high-resource languages consistently underperform on low-resource languages and dialects, and on the irony and cultural idiom that carry meaning within them. In Nigeria — where Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Nigerian Pidgin are all computationally low-resource — fact-checkers report exactly this friction: Dubawa's own AI audio-transcription tool has struggled with clips mixing Hausa and English, requiring manual transcription, even as its WhatsApp chatbot has proved useful for rapid checks (McNally, 2024). Where much of what counts as evidence lives in oral tradition and communal knowledge that leaves little digital trace, tools calibrated on Western evidentiary conventions systematically undervalue it.

This produces what several scholars characterise as an emerging epistemic colonialism (Birhane, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2020). The predominantly Eurocentric development of verification technology, exported to the Global South under a banner of universal scalability, tends to extract Southern contextual data to refine Northern models while offering tools poorly matched to Southern realities. The result is a unidirectional flow of knowledge in which Global South fact-checkers become unwitting contributors to systems that do not serve them, and in which frontline workers and local communities are simultaneously mined for data and underserved by the products that data improves. Genuine epistemic justice, on this analysis, would require reversing that extractive paradigm — for example through federated learning architectures in which regional datasets train localised models under community governance.

5. Towards a Situated, Pluralistic Agenda for Media Verification

The cumulative implication of these themes is that one-size-fits-all verification models fail across media contexts. A classifier tuned to English-language political claims and Western evidentiary conventions does not travel neutrally to a Yoruba-language oral claim or a Portuguese-language deepfake; a moderation policy calibrated for a major market misfires on minority-language content; an efficiency gain in a well-resourced newsroom depends on annotation labour extracted elsewhere. Because verification is situated — bound up with particular languages, values, resources, and power relations — its tools and governance must be situated too. Pluralism here is not relativism about truth but recognition that the legitimate routes to establishing it are multiple.

A situated agenda begins with co-design. The people who do verification work — journalists, fact-checkers, moderators, annotators — and the communities most affected by it should shape the systems that increasingly structure their work, from the choice of languages and evidentiary criteria to the design of override and appeal mechanisms. Der Spiegel's inclusion of journalist feedback loops in its beta, and the participatory strength of Maldita.es and Dubawa, point in this direction. Co-design counters both the deskilling of media workers and the epistemic marginalisation of communities whose knowledge current tools discount.

A second principle is transparency and contestability. Verification systems should make their training data, operations, and limitations legible — through configurable disclosure that offers accessible summaries to the public and detailed audits to regulators — and they should provide genuine mechanisms for stakeholders to challenge decisions and designs (El Ali et al., 2024). Lupa's practice of publishing detailed explanations of its verification methodology exemplifies the standard, raising the bar above the commercial opacity that characterises much platform moderation. Contestability turns algorithms from unaccountable arbiters into accountable actors.

A third principle is attention to the environmental and social costs of AI infrastructures. Training and operating large models consumes substantial energy (Strubell et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2021), and real-time detection across global networks can strain vulnerable grids; the labour pipelines that sustain verification impose social costs that fall disproportionately on low-paid workers in the Global South. A sustainable agenda favours efficient, fit-for-purpose models over maximal scale — the lightweight OSINT hybrids of Faktisk over indiscriminate large-model deployment — and treats emissions and labour conditions as first-class evaluation metrics rather than externalities.

Underpinning all three is a commitment to epistemic justice. Federated and community-governed architectures, open-source and regionally inclusive models, and investment in local verification capacity would begin to reverse the extractive, unidirectional flow the evidence documents, allowing communities to train and govern models attuned to their own languages and evidentiary traditions. The aim is not to slow verification but to make it legitimate and durable across the full range of contexts in which media operate.

6. Implications for Media Practice and Policy

For news organisations and fact-checking initiatives, the evidence supports hybrid designs that keep human judgement authoritative: automation should be reserved for routine, high-volume triage, with easy override, legible confidence scores, and protected editorial time for ambiguous cases. Organisations should document their methods publicly, as Lupa does, and treat cultural and linguistic competence — the capacity to read satire, vernacular, and local context — as core verification skill rather than a residual human function.

For platforms, the priority is closing the gap between the consequence of moderation decisions and the accountability surrounding them. This means investing in minority-language and regional capacity rather than defaulting to majority-language performance; disclosing how automated flagging, downranking, and demonetisation work; and providing appeal mechanisms proportionate to the stakes of removal or deplatforming. Privacy-respecting approaches to training data are a related obligation, given the reliance on scraped social material (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024).

For regulators and standards bodies, accountable AI-mediated verification requires interdisciplinary oversight spanning legal, technological, and journalistic expertise. Emerging European frameworks such as the EU AI Act, read alongside instruments like the Framework Convention on AI, illustrate both the promise and the limits of such governance (Presno Linera & Meuwese, 2025): rules that treat AI as an augmentation of human verification, mandate transparency, fund media and information literacy, and hold across borders would do more than accuracy benchmarks to secure a trustworthy information environment. Civil-society input is essential to keep such governance rights-focused; the fate of Brazil's anti-misinformation bill — weakened amid opposition from large technology companies, despite drawing on fact-checkers' ethical expertise — is a cautionary case.

For the field as a whole, capacity-building matters as much as technology. Evidence from other sectors underscores that AI adoption succeeds only with leadership commitment,

adaptable governance, and alignment to existing workflows — not tool procurement alone (Gelashvili-Luik et al., 2025). Training media practitioners to work critically with AI tools — to interrogate confidence scores, recognise cultural blind spots, and know when to override — and investing in verification capacity in under-resourced regions are therefore preconditions for the pluralistic agenda to take hold. Without this, the tools will continue to serve the contexts that built them and underserve the rest.

7. Conclusion

AI-mediated verification stands at a crossroads between technological promise and the entrenched inequalities of the global information order. This review has argued that its most important questions are not, at root, technical. What counts as credible evidence, whose expertise shapes the tools, who bears their environmental and human costs, and whose information environment they ultimately serve are matters of editorial value, labour, power, and justice — and they are answered differently in different media contexts. Treating verification as a purely technical problem of detecting falsehood obscures all of this.

A situated, pluralistic agenda offers an alternative. By foregrounding justice, accountability, and sustainability, and by grounding design and governance in co-design, transparency and contestability, environmental and social responsibility, and epistemic justice, it reorients AI-mediated verification towards the communities and workers it currently marginalises. The priorities that follow are concrete: comparative and Global South–centred empirical research to correct the evidence base's own asymmetries; development and evaluation of federated, open-source, regionally inclusive models; sustained study of verification labour and its conditions; and audience-centred work on trust and participatory verification.

The future of fact-checking, on this account, belongs not to whoever determines truth the fastest but to those who make the process most democratic, accountable, and equitable. Realising that future will require more than incremental technical upgrades; it will require a reconstruction of the verification ecosystem around the plural contexts in which media and their publics actually live.

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MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

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MEDIA, SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Mental Health Influencers and Emerging Adults in India: Theoretical Tensions and Contextual Implications

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Abstract : India exemplifies a pronounced mental health paradox in the digital era. Despite an 84.5% treatment gap and only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population, over 880 million internet users increasingly seek psychological guidance via Instagram and YouTube. Within this context, a class of mental health influencers (MHIs) has emerged, comprising individuals who blend lived-experience disclosure wit psychoeducational content and reach millions of emerging adults (aged 18–29), often without clinical training, regulatory oversight, or cultural calibration. This paper contends that seven canonical theoretical frameworks—Parasocial Relationship Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Health Belief Model, Media Dependency Theory, the Mental Health Literacy Framework, and Uses and Gratifications Theory—are structurally inadequate for explaining MHI influence in India. Foundational assumptions regarding credibility, health belief formation, elaboration capacity, and audience agency are challenged by both the algorithmically mediated, credential-opaque MHI environment and by India-specific factors: collectivistic family structures, culturally specific idioms of distress, low baseline mental health literacy, and stigma that affects family reputation rather than individual identity alone. Three cross-cutting theoretical tensions are identified: the credibility paradox, the literacy ceiling effect, and the diagnostic closure problem, each of which is qualitatively intensified in the Indian context. The paper concludes with implications for counselling practitioners, public health communicators, and platform and policy actors.

***Keywords*:** mental health influencers, social media, India, emerging adults, parasocial relationships, self-diagnosis, health literacy, help-seeking, collectivism, treatment gap

Introduction

India is, at once, among the most underserved mental health environments in the world and among the most digitally connected. The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS, 2016) documented a treatment gap exceeding 80% for common mental disorders; a more recent narrative review put the figure at 84.5%, tracing it to health system constraints, uneven resource distribution, financing shortfalls, and entrenched stigma (Munikrishnappa et al., 2024). The country counts only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population, far short of the WHO-recommended 3 per 100,000, and mental health literacy remains critically low: nearly 80% of NMHS respondents could not identify diagnoses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (NIMHANS, 2016). Digital connectivity, meanwhile, has expanded fast. India now has over 880 million internet users (TRAI, 2023), and young adults are its most intensive social media consumers (Sharma & Vyas, 2023).

Mental health influencers (MHIs) have emerged as a significant yet under-theorised force within India's mental health communication landscape. On Instagram and YouTube—the primary short-form video platforms in active use following the national ban of TikTok in June 2020—MHIs, including licensed professionals, counsellors, and lay content creators, reach audiences numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Where TikTok-based research is referenced, it is used comparatively to illustrate platform-level dynamics of algorithmic amplification and misinformation that generalise across short-form video ecosystems, rather than as direct evidence of the Indian MHI environment. MHIs occupy a distinctive position in the digital ecosystem: they are relatable, algorithmically amplified, and capable of communicating psychological concepts in Hindi, Tamil, and other regional languages that formal mental health services often underrepresent (Abidin, 2016; Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI], 2024). This accessibility is particularly salient in India, where large treatment gaps, stigma, professional shortages, and low rates of formal help-seeking restrict access to care (Gururaj et al., 2016; National Mental Health Survey, 2015–16; Patel et al., 2016). By translating psychological concepts into familiar and accessible formats, MHIs may contribute to mental health awareness among emerging adults who increasingly rely on social media as a primary source of information and support. However, these actors operate in a largely unregulated space, where credentials, evidence standards, and ethical boundaries are not always transparent to audiences. Furthermore, limited knowledge exists regarding the extent to which influencer-generated material reflects Indian idioms of distress, family-centred decision-making, or the sociocultural barriers that determine whether awareness translates into help-seeking (Raguram et al., 2001; Kumar & Gupta, 2012; Mathias et al., 2015).

The theoretical challenge here is substantial. Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974), Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), the Mental Health Literacy Framework (Jorm et al., 1997), and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974) were all built in Western, individualistic, media-saturated contexts with functioning mental health service infrastructure behind them. Applied to India's MHI environment, they run up against the structural violations already documented in the global MHI literature, algorithmic amplification, credential opacity, interactive intimacy, plus an additional layer of cultural boundary violations their original formulations never anticipated.

This paper advances three primary claims. First, the Indian MHI context is theoretically generative, revealing construct-level limitations in each of the seven frameworks that are more pronounced than in the Western settings where most MHI research originates. Second, three cross-cutting tensions—the credibility paradox, the literacy ceiling effect, and the diagnostic closure problem—are not merely present in India; rather, the Indian context structurally amplifies them. Third, these intensified tensions have direct implications for counselling practitioners, public health communicators, and platform and policy actors.

Characterising the Indian MHI Landscape: A Theoretically Necessary Typology

MHIs in India do not form a single, homogMHIs in India constitute a heterogeneous category, comprising three analytically distinct profiles. Credentialed professional MHIs are licensed psychologists, psychiatric social workers, or counsellors who translate clinical knowledge for lay audiences, with authority grounded in expertise. This group has become increasingly visible in India's mental health content space, combining professional credentials with accessible, often bilingual communication. Experiential-advocate MHIs rely solely on lived experience of mental illness, without formal training; their authority is based on authenticity rather than expertise. Wellness-entrepreneur MHIs integrate mental health content into broader commercial personal brands, blending self-help, productivity, and spiritual content in ways characteristic of Indian digital culture. This typology is central to the theoretical argument: the type of credibility source differentially activates persuasion mechanisms, influences the formation of parasocial bonds, and determines the clinical accuracy ceiling of the information disseminated.HI communication from earlier broadcast models, and each is foundational to what follows. Algorithmic amplification selects for emotional engagement over clinical accuracy, producing content ecosystems that overrepresent dramatic recovery narratives and underrepresent treatment complexity (Chou et al., 2020; McCashin & Murphy, 2023). India compounds this: institutional mental health communication capable of counterbalancing algorithmically amplified content is relatively scarce. Credential opacity leaves audiences unable to readily assess an influencer's training, a particular problem where public awareness of professional psychology credentials, as distinct from general counselling, remains limited (Munikrishnappa et al., 2024). And interactive intimacy, built through comments, DMs, and live sessions, generates parasocial-social hybrid relationships that extend well past the broadcast parasocial dynamic Horton and Wohl (1956) originally theorised. For Indian emerging adults, many of whom report being unable to discuss psychological distress openly with family because of stigma (Weaver et al., 2023). This intimacy meets an unmet relational need, making MHI dependency qualitatively different from what Media Dependency Theory describes.

Theoretical Gaps: Where Existing Frameworks Fall Short

Each of the seven frameworks encounters specific, construct-level challenges within the Indian MHI context. The following analysis focuses on the most consequential gaps, with particular emphasis on areas where the Indian context produces violations that extend beyond those documented in global MHI research.

Parasocial Relationship Theory (PSR)

Horton and Wohl's (1956) account assumes parasocial relationships are unreciprocated, episodically bounded, and experientially distinct from real social interaction. All three assumptions break down in the MHI context. Selective comment responses create an illusion of parasocial reciprocity; algorithmic autoplay dissolves episodic boundaries; comment communities generate parasocial-social hybrids that PSR theory does not theorise. These violations carry heightened weight in India. Weaver et al. (2023) found that Indian women experiencing psychological distress were well aware of available psychiatric services and consistently declined them anyway, citing stigma and cultural mismatch, describing their distress in terms of social and structural suffering rather than biomedical illness. For someone in that position, an MHI speaking in culturally resonant, non-stigmatising, relatable language fills a communicative and relational gap that formal psychiatric services cannot, structurally, fill. The resulting parasocial bond is not incidental entertainment; it functions as a primary mechanism of interpretive support, which is precisely why its intensity and its dependency run deeper than PSR theory, developed in media-saturated Western contexts, would anticipate.

Ameen and Faye (2024) have already noted that for the Indian public, media constitutes a major source of both mental health information and misinformation, and have called for culturally calibrated professional participation in digital communication. That call implicitly concedes what PSR theory does not: for millions of Indian emerging adults, the parasocial relationship with an MHI may well be their primary ongoing relationship with mental health discourse at all.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

SCT (Bandura, 1986) predicts that vicarious reinforcement, watching someone else recover, drives help-seeking adoption. In the MHI context, recovery narratives arrive temporally compressed and narratively curated, inflating self-efficacy in ways that may not survive contact with the actual demands of treatment. Call this a self-efficacy cliff. In India, that cliff is steeper still. Treatment infrastructure is sparse and unevenly distributed (Munikrishnappa et al., 2024; Mahapatra and Seshadri, 2023). So the gap between inflated self-efficacy and what treatment is actually available widens accordingly. An Indian emerging adult whose help-seeking confidence has been inflated by MHI recovery narratives may discover that the services depicted private therapy, structured CBT programmes, psychiatric medication sit out of financial or geographic reach, producing a disillusionment that SCT does not model and that may entrench avoidance further.

The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) assumes that high motivation combined with adequate ability produces central-route processing, which in turn enables accurate evaluation of arguments. Most MHI viewers lack the clinical literacy such evaluation requires, so what looks like central-route processing is, in practice, pseudo-elaboration: effortful, yet epistemically constrained. This constraint bites harder in India. The National Mental Health Survey found that close to 80% of respondents had never heard of diagnoses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (NIMHANS, 2016). Emerging adults engaging heavily with MHI content are, in many cases, building their first framework for understanding psychological distress, one whose accuracy ceiling is set by influencer training rather than clinical evidence. Disclosure content adds a further complication: it elevates motivation and depletes ability simultaneously, through emotional activation, producing what might be called affective elaboration suppression, a paradoxical high-motivation, low-ability state the ELM was never built to anticipate.

Health Belief Model (HBM), Media Dependency Theory (MDT), and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The HBM (Rosenstock, 1974) assumes that perceived susceptibility tracks actual risk with reasonable calibration. MHI content distorts this through nosological normalisation, overestimating how common a disorder is, and through symptom salience inflation. In the Indian context, the HBM's barriers construct, usually conceived in practical or attitudinal terms, is structurally incomplete. Weaver et al. (2023) document Indian women in South India declining psychiatric care not for lack of access

or awareness but from a conviction that their distress had social and structural roots clinical psychiatry could not touch and from fear that a diagnosis would disrupt family and community relationships. That is a relational barrier category the HBM does not theorise: the anticipated damage to family reputation and household relationships that a psychiatric diagnosis can bring. MHI content produced mainly by urban, English-speaking credentialed professionals, or by Western-trained influencers, may reduce individualistic stigma barriers while leaving collectivistic relational barriers fully intact, an asymmetric barrier reduction that helps explain why help-seeking *intentions* among MHI-engaged emerging adults so often fail to translate into professional consultation (McDonald et al., 2022).

MDT (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) frames media dependency as a product of information scarcity. Contemporary Indian MHI dependency, however, reflects something closer to interpretive intimacy scarcity: the near-total unavailability of non-stigmatising, family-independent, identity-validating conversation about psychological experience. With only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population and entrenched family stigma, the MHI supplies what neither professional services nor family structures can, structurally, provide: confidential, non-judgmental psychological discourse. MDT's resource typology has no room for this relational-epistemic function. UGT (Katz et al., 1974), for its part, grounds media selection in pre-existing, stable audience needs; algorithmic systems instead constitute and amplify needs iteratively. For Indian emerging adults navigating distress in a context where open discussion is constrained, the algorithm is not responding to pre-formed help-seeking needs; it is manufacturing and amplifying them, and users then rationalise the result as freely chosen, which undercuts the audience-agency assumption UGT rests on.

Three Cross-Cutting Theoretical Tensions in the Indian Context

The gaps identified across all seven frameworks converge on three tensions that, within the Indian context, are not only present but are structurally amplified.

1. The Credibility Paradox. Experiential-advocate MHIs generate stronger parasocial trust and greater health-belief impact than credentialed professionals do. In India, authenticity credibility is amplified further still by the scarcity of accessible mental health professionals and by a cultural preference for relatable, non-stigmatising sources of distress narratives.

2. The Literacy Ceiling Effect. MHI-derived gains in recognition come bundled with self-efficacy inflation that overshoots what influencer training can actually support. In a population where mental health literacy started low, and where 80% of NMHS respondents could not name common diagnoses, MHI content produces confident but poorly calibrated disorder identification.

3. The Diagnostic Closure Problem. Self-labelling drawn from MHI content resolves the interpretive crisis that originally motivated help-seeking, and with it, the drive toward professional consultation disappears. In India, diagnostic closure is compounded by relational barriers: a diagnosis anchored in social media identity removes the motivation to seek formal care while simultaneously raising fears of family disruption.

The Credibility Paradox

All seven frameworks privilege expertise-based source credibility. And yet the evidence consistently shows experiential-advocate MHIs generating stronger parasocial bonds and greater health-belief impact than credentialed professionals manage (Budenz et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023; Adeane & Stasiak, 2024). Wellman (2024), extending source credibility theory to wellness influencers, argues that positionality and lived experience operate as a fourth credibility construct, independent of expertise and, often, more powerful than it. Han et al. (2024), in a meta-analysis spanning 250 effect sizes, found authenticity credibility especially strong in non-Western contexts, with high influencer receptivity; India is named explicitly as one such context.

Two additional factors amplify the paradox in India. First, the scarcity of accessible mental health professionals means experiential-advocate MHIs are not merely competing with professionals; outside major urban centres, they often constitute the *only* available source of psychological discourse for emerging adults. Second, the cultural preference for relatable, non-stigmatising communicators, documented across studies of Indian help-seeking behaviour, aligns structurally with the authenticity credibility mechanism itself (Weaver et al., 2023; Handa & Goswami, 2024). The credibility paradox, then, needs reconceiving as multidimensional: authenticity credibility works through identity-based identification and parasocial bond formation, expertise credibility through central-route argument evaluation, with authenticity dominating precisely under conditions of high distress, low mental health literacy, and constrained professional access, which describe the baseline reality for large segments of India's emerging adult population.

The Literacy Ceiling Effect

Social Cognitive Theory and the Mental Health Literacy Framework jointly predict that MHI exposure increases both help-seeking self-efficacy and disorder recognition capacity. While both effects are observable, their intersection reveals a structural paradox: as recognition and self-efficacy increase, so does confidence in self-diagnosis, which subsequently reduces the perceived need for professional consultation. This profile—characterised by high recognition, high self-efficacy, and limited accuracy, termed 'confident incompetence'—is particularly salient in India, where baseline mental health literacy is very low. With nearly 80% of NMHS respondents unfamiliar with major diagnostic categories (NIMHANS, 2016), even modest MHI-derived literacy gains appear transformative, leading to inflated self-efficacy. The literacy ceiling is determined by influencer training; comparative evidence from TikTok, cited for its platform-level relevance rather than direct applicability, indicates that most MHI-type creators across short-form video platforms are not clinically trained (Basch et al., 2022). There is little reason to expect a higher ceiling among Instagram- and YouTube-based Indian MHIs. Consequently, the gap between subjective literacy confidence and clinical accuracy is wider in India than is reflected in the predominantly Western MHI literature. Concept creep the progressive broadening of psychiatric categories to encompass normative experience, well documented in MHI content globally carries a specific weight in India (Starvaggi et al., 2024). Weaver et al. (2023) found Indian women framing their distress not in biomedical categories but through relational and social idioms. MHI content that imports Western nosology into this setting risks a particular kind of literacy ceiling: culturally grounded idioms of distress get replaced by decontextualised diagnostic labels that feel illuminating while remaining, clinically and culturally, poorly calibrated.

The Diagnostic Closure Problem

HBM and UGT jointly predict that elevated perceived susceptibility, paired with gratified self-understanding needs, should increase professional help-seeking. The emerging evidence points the other way: self-diagnosis from MHI content reduces professional consultation precisely because it resolves the interpretive crisis that motivated help-seeking in the first place (McDonald et al., 2022). Diagnostic closure the subjective resolution of interpretive uncertainty removes the principal driver of formal assessment. India compounds this with a second closure: relational closure. Once a diagnostic label drawn from MHI content becomes integrated into self-concept within an online community, it delivers not just interpretive satisfaction but social belonging, a peer group sharing the label, without the family disruption formal diagnosis would bring. For Indian emerging adults managing distress within collectivistic family structures where disclosure is constrained by stigma and reputational concern (Handa & Goswami, 2024), the MHI community offers identity validation and social support in a way professional consultation, structurally, cannot replicate. None of the seven frameworks anticipates this dual closure mechanism. HBM has no theory of the relational costs of formal diagnosis in collectivistic cultures. UGT has no theory of algorithmically manufactured belonging satisfying the very social needs that might otherwise drive someone toward professional help. The diagnostic closure problem in India, then, is not simply an individual cognitive phenomenon; it is sociologically mediated, shaped by the same structural conditions (stigma, family norms, treatment scarcity) that define the broader Indian mental health landscape.

Implications for the Indian Context

The three theoretical tensions carry direct, India-specific implications for counselling practitioners, public health communicators, and platform and policy actors.

Implications for Counselling Practitioners

Indian counsellors, clinical psychologists and psychiatric social workers are increasingly likely to meet emerging adult clients whose self-understanding has been shaped by MHI content, arriving with settled self-diagnoses that function as identity-anchoring labels, having processed their distress within social media communities rather than family networks. The diagnostic closure problem suggests that confronting MHI-derived labels head-on may trigger reactance; Adeane and Stasiak (2024) found that young people value lived-experience sources precisely because they feel non-stigmatising, a quality clinical communication needs to match rather than dismiss.

Indian practitioners, in particular, need to attend to the relational closure dimension. A client who has found, in an MHI community, the social belonging and identity validation their family system could not offer is not simply misinformed; they are meeting genuine psychosocial needs through a channel that cannot be withdrawn without something to replace it. Effective clinical engagement means acknowledging the function of both the label and the community before turning to clinical accuracy. The literacy ceiling effect further implies that apparent fluency with psychological terminology can mask real gaps in understanding diagnostic heterogeneity, treatment trajectories, and the distinction between Western nosological categories and the relational idioms through which Indian distress is so often actually experienced (Weaver et al., 2023).

Implications for Public Health Communication

The credibility paradox challenges a conventional assumption in public health communication: that professional source attribution is the primary driver of persuasion. Field experimental evidence from a TikTok mental health creator training programme shows that equipping experiential-advocate creators with evidence-based content rather than replacing them with professional voices measurably increased views of accurate content (Motta et al., 2024). This hybrid credibility design, pairing authenticity-based framing with clinical accuracy, is likely to matter even more in India, where the credibility paradox runs stronger, and the accessible professional base is thinner to begin with.

Indian public health messaging also needs to address the relational barrier gap that MHI content, mostly produced by urban professionals or translated from Western contexts, tends not to acknowledge at all. Communication strategies that recognise the family-reputation dimension of stigma, that offer help-seeking pathways not contingent on family disclosure, and that engage vernacular idioms of distress rather than imported nosology are likely to outperform stigma-reduction messaging built on individualistic assumptions. Ameen and Faye (2024) have already called for culturally calibrated professional participation in media-based mental health communication; the credibility paradox suggests that participation needs to combine professional accuracy with authentic, relatability-forward framing actually to land.

Implications for Platform Governance and Policy

The structural features of MHI communication algorithmic amplification, credential opacity, interactive intimacy are outcomes of platform design, not failures of individual creators, and this holds across platforms regardless of which one happens to be available in a given market. A 2025 UK study, for instance, found over half of the top 100 mental health TikToks contained misinformation (Hall & Keenan, 2025); TikTok is unavailable in India, but the finding is cited here as evidence of what engagement-optimisation architectures produce generically, a dynamic Instagram and YouTube's own algorithmic systems share. Figures like this reflect the measurable output of engagement-optimisation architectures that amplify emotionally activating content without any clinical quality control built in. Ameen and Faye (2024) have already called for debate on social media age restrictions, flagging the particular vulnerability of Indian adolescents given constrained digital literacy and limited institutional counterbalance.

At minimum, the credential opacity problem points to a governance-tractable intervention: transparent credentialing disclosure for mental health content creators on platforms with significant Indian user bases, letting audiences distinguish authenticity-based from expertise-based sources without needing clinical literacy themselves. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has introduced a Responsible Influencing Course for digital creators; extending a version of that initiative specifically to mental health content, with India-specific clinical oversight, is a feasible platform-policy lever. More broadly, Indian policymakers building out the expanding digital mental health infrastructure under Tele-MANAS and the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission need to account for the MHI communication environment that precedes and shapes how emerging adults arrive at formal services, informed, self-diagnosed, and, as the diagnostic closure problem predicts, potentially resistant to having an already-anchored identity

reframed clinically.

Conclusion

Mental health influencers have not merely introduced an additional channel to India's mental health communication system. For a generation of emerging adults lacking access to professional services, living under family stigma, and seeking interpretive intimacy unavailable through clinical infrastructure, MHIs have become a primary mental health communication environment. The credibility paradox, the literacy ceiling effect, and the diagnostic closure problem—already documented globally as inversions of standard theoretical predictions—are structurally amplified in India due to treatment scarcity, collectivistic family norms, low baseline mental health literacy, and the relational costs associated with psychiatric diagnosis.

These inversions are not anomalies but are theoretically productive indicators that the seven canonical frameworks require revision to generate accurate predictions regarding MHI influence in India. Authenticity credibility prevails because expertise is inaccessible and stigma elevates relatability as a primary selection criterion. Literacy ceilings result in confident-incompetence profiles due to low baseline literacy and pronounced self-efficacy inflation. Diagnostic closure is compounded by relational closure, as the MHI community provides belonging and non-stigmatising identity validation that neither family systems nor clinical services currently offer.

As India's Economic Survey 2024–25 recognised mental health as integral to the demographic dividend, and as Tele-MANAS and Ayushman Bharat's digital health infrastructure continues to expand, the theoretical task facing Indian counselling psychology, media psychology, and public health communication is to build frameworks adequate to the environment that actually exists, one in which the primary architects of emerging adult mental health understanding are not clinicians, but content creators, and in which the gap between digital psychological discourse and professional mental health care remains both the widest and the most consequential.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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About Presidency School of Media Studies

Established in 2021 as a specialized constituent school of Presidency University in Bengaluru, the Presidency School of Media Studies (PSOMS) was founded to train next-generation communicators for the modern digital era. Combining core journalistic principles with modern technological advancements including AI driven media, immersive storytelling (AR/VR), data journalism, and mobile reporting the institution focuses on hands-on, practical education.

Academic Programmes Offered

BAJMC (Bachelor of Arts in Journalism & Mass Communication): A comprehensive three-year undergraduate programme covering print, electronic, and digital media. It offers specialized training in areas such as public relations, corporate communication, digital marketing, advertising, immersive media (AR/VR), and filmmaking.

MAJMC (Master of Arts in Journalism & Mass Communication): An advanced postgraduate degree tailored for students seeking in-depth specialization in media strategy, convergence journalism, broadcast production, and digital media management.

Ph.D Media Studies: A rigorous doctoral track designed for scholars interested in advanced academic research, media theory, mass communication dynamics, and emerging technological trends within the communication sector.

Key Highlights

Industry Aligned Curriculum: Courses are routinely updated to incorporate emerging technologies, ethical content creation, fact-checking, and sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Practical & Experiential Learning: Students engage in educational photo-walks, production workshops, visits to media houses, and internships.

State-of-the-Art Infrastructure: Equipped with media studios, editing suites, and dedicated newsroom setups to replicate real-world media environments.

Global Exposure: Partnerships with international institutions offer study-abroad pathways and global perspectives on media ecosystems.

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Published By
Presidency School Of
MEDIA STUDIES