

Emotions, Engagement, And Trust: Rethinking News Credibility and Misinformation Sharing on Social Media in India.

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Abstract- The study offers a comprehensive analysis of how emotions, engagement, and trust influence news credibility and misinformation sharing among social media users in India. As digital platforms continue to dominate news consumption, social media users are increasingly exposed to emotionally driven and highly engaging content, making misinformation a growing concern in online communication. This research examines how factors such as emotional reactions, repeated exposure, social validation, and trust in online sources shape users' belief in and sharing of news content. A mixed method research design was employed for the study, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand user behaviour in greater depth. Data was collected through a structured survey questionnaire distributed using non probability sampling techniques, generating a total of 123 valid responses for analysis. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis were used to interpret the quantitative findings, while qualitative interpretation helped explain behavioural patterns and user perceptions. The findings reveal that emotions, viral engagement, and social influence significantly affect news credibility and increase the likelihood of misinformation sharing on social media platforms.

Keywords: Social Media, Misinformation, News Credibility, Digital Trust, Emotional Influence, User Engagement, Information Sharing

I. INTRODUCTION

News consumption in India has changed significantly over the last decade due to the rapid growth of the internet and smartphones. Earlier, traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio were the main sources of information for people. These platforms followed professional journalistic practices

like fact-checking, editorial review, and ethical reporting before publishing news. However, social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X have now become major sources of news and information, especially among young people. Social media allows users to access updates instantly, share opinions, and participate in discussions, making news consumption faster and more interactive. At the same time, this shift has also raised concerns regarding misinformation, emotional influence, engagement, and trust in digital news environments.

One of the key features of social media is that anyone can create and share content without professional verification. Unlike traditional journalism, where information passes through multiple stages of editing and checking, social media content spreads quickly without regulation. This has both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, social media encourages freedom of expression, public participation, and awareness on important issues.

Ordinary citizens can raise their voices and reach large audiences easily. However, the absence of proper verification also allows rumours, fake news, manipulated videos, and misleading narratives to spread rapidly. In a diverse country like India, where millions of people are becoming internet users every year, the impact of such misinformation can be extremely widespread.

Emotion plays an important role in how news is consumed and shared on social media. Content that creates strong emotional reactions such as fear, anger,

sadness, happiness, or outrage often receives more attention and engagement than balanced reporting. Emotional headlines, shocking visuals, and controversial claims are more likely to go viral because users tend to react emotionally before checking facts. During crises, political events, or socially sensitive situations, emotions become even more influential, increasing the spread of misinformation and panic.

Engagement also affects perceptions of credibility. Likes, comments, shares, and views create a sense of popularity, leading users to believe that highly engaged content is trustworthy. However, popularity does not guarantee accuracy. Social media algorithms further encourage this problem by promoting content that generates high interaction. As a result, users are often exposed to information that supports their existing beliefs, creating echo chambers where opposing views are rarely seen. This selective exposure can reduce critical thinking and strengthen misinformation.

India has experienced several incidents where misinformation spread through social media caused confusion, panic, communal tension, and violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, false information about treatments, vaccines, and remedies circulated widely on platforms like WhatsApp. Similarly, fake political claims and manipulated media during elections can influence public opinion and weaken democratic processes.

Trust has therefore become a major concern in digital news consumption. Many users trust information shared by friends, family members, influencers, or online communities more than official news organizations. Repeated exposure to false information can also create familiarity, making it appear credible. At the same time, constant misinformation reduces public trust even in genuine journalism.

In short, emotions, engagement, and trust strongly influence how people perceive and share news on social media in India. Understanding these factors is essential for addressing misinformation and promoting responsible media consumption.

This study aims to examine these relationships and contribute to the development of a more informed, trustworthy, and responsible digital media environment.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of how people interact with news and information in today's digital and social media environment. Social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X have become major sources of news, allowing users instant access to information and updates. The study highlights that users are not passive consumers but active participants who react, comment, and share content, contributing to the spread of both accurate information and misinformation. It also explains how emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and shock influence how people interpret and share news online. Emotionally charged content often gains more attention and is shared without proper verification.

Another important contribution of the study is its focus on trust and social influence. Users frequently judge credibility through likes, comments, shares, and information shared by familiar people. The study further emphasizes the need for digital literacy, critical thinking, and fact-checking habits to reduce misinformation and promote responsible media consumption in digital environments.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trust, Fake News, and Social Media: How Biased Reporting Influences Media Trust.

Angelina Radić in her study "Trust, Fake News, and Social Media: How Biased Reporting Influences Media Trust Among Serbian Youth" examines how fake news and biased reporting affect the trust young people place in media. The study explains that social media has become a major news source for youth because it provides fast and easy access to information. However, these platforms also spread misinformation, sensational content, and unverified news rapidly. The paper highlights that social media algorithms create echo chambers where users mostly consume information that supports their existing beliefs, increasing polarization and distrust toward mainstream media. Emotionally driven content also

influences users to react without verifying facts. The research shows that many young people struggle to distinguish between reliable and false information in the fast-paced digital environment.

The study concludes that media literacy, ethical journalism, and proper fact-checking are essential to rebuild public trust and reduce the harmful impact of misinformation. (Radić, 2025)

Social Media: Misinformation and Trustability

The research paper “Social Media: Misinformation and Trustability” by Nelia D. Estolatan Lama, Benjie E. Isolana, and Oliver R. Castañares Jr. discusses how misinformation on social media affects public trust in digital communication. The study explains that social media platforms have become important sources of information because they provide quick and easy access to news and updates.

However, the lack of proper verification allows fake news and misleading information to spread rapidly among users. The paper highlights that repeated exposure to misinformation influences how people perceive the credibility of online content and reduce trust in media institutions. Despite being aware of misinformation, users continue to rely on social media because of its convenience and high engagement. The study concludes that responsible media use, fact-checking, stronger policies, and improved media literacy are necessary to reduce misinformation and maintain trust and credibility in the digital media environment. (Estolatan-Lama, Isolana, & Castañares, 2025)

Social Media and the Spread of Misinformation

Emily Denniss and Rebecca Lindberg in their research paper “Social Media and the Spread of Misinformation: Infectious and a Threat to Public Health” examines how social media contributes to the rapid spread of misinformation and its harmful effects on public health and society.

The study explains that social media platforms have become major sources of information because of their speed, accessibility, and global reach. However, these same features also allow false and misleading information to spread quickly among users. The paper highlights that misinformation related to

vaccines, healthcare, and public safety can influence people’s behaviour and reduce trust in health experts and institutions.

The authors identify factors such as algorithms, bots, emotional content, and lack of expert verification as major reasons for misinformation spread. Repeated exposure to inaccurate information creates confusion and weakens trust in credible media sources.

The study emphasizes the importance of fact-checking, digital literacy, stronger regulations, and responsible platform policies to reduce misinformation and restore public trust. (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025)

“It’s All Fake News!”: How Perceptions of Misinformation Influence News Consumption
Muhammad Ehab Rasul, Christopher Calabrese, Yoo Jung Oh, Hee Jung Cho, MoonSun Jeon, and Mark Boukes in their research paper “It’s All Fake News! How Perceptions of Misinformation and Disinformation Influence News Consumption Across Traditional Media, social media, and AI” examine how perceptions of fake news influence audience trust and news consumption behaviour.

The study explains that increasing exposure to misinformation has reduced public trust in both traditional and digital media platforms. According to the research, people who believe that news contains misinformation are less likely to consume news from television, newspapers, social media, or AI-based platforms. The paper also highlights the role of social media algorithms, political ideology, and selective exposure in shaping perceptions of credibility.

Repeated exposure to misinformation creates “contagious cynicism,” where distrust in one media source gradually spreads to all forms of mediated communication. The study emphasizes the importance of media literacy, ethical journalism, and strong fact-checking systems to rebuild trust in news and information systems. (Rasul et al., 2025)

From Social Media to Mainstream Media: Rethinking News Verification in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Agustinus Rustanta and Ines Safdrawina Sari in their research paper “From Social Media to Mainstream Media: Rethinking News Verification in the Age of Artificial Intelligence” examine how news verification is changing in the digital era due to the growing influence of artificial intelligence and social media platforms. The study explains that platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become major sources of news and information, reducing the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media.

The authors highlight that AI-generated content, deepfakes, and manipulated media make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between authentic and false information. The paper also discusses how algorithm-driven systems promote sensational and emotionally charged content that spreads faster than verified news, weakening public trust in media.

The study concludes that traditional verification practices are no longer sufficient and emphasizes the need for AI-supported verification systems, blockchain verification, media literacy, and stronger cooperation between technology companies, journalists, and society to rebuild trust in digital communication. (Rustanta & Sari, 2025)

2.2. RESEARCH GAP

Most existing studies focus mainly on technological algorithms, political communication, and platform structures that contribute to the spread of misinformation. However, limited attention has been given to the psychological and emotional factors that influence why users engage with and share misleading content online.

Past research has acknowledged that emotions strongly influence online behaviour and user engagement, yet there is insufficient empirical research examining how emotions, trust, and perceived credibility work together in shaping misinformation sharing. Many studies examine these variables separately instead of analysing their interconnected impact. Similarly, while likes, comments, shares, and views are often treated as indicators of popularity and social approval, only a few studies have explored how these engagement

metrics affect users’ perceptions of credibility and acceptance of false information.

Another major gap exists in understanding trust within digital news environments. Previous studies mainly focus on trust in news institutions, whereas less attention has been paid to trust in peer-shared content, social media platforms, and online information sources. Moreover, much of the existing research is based on Western societies, making it difficult to directly apply the findings to India due to differences in culture, politics, digital literacy, and social media usage patterns.

Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive research that examines the combined influence of emotions, trust, engagement metrics, and perceived credibility on misinformation sharing among Indian social media users.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a mixed method research approach by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how emotions, engagement, and trust influence social media news perception and sharing behaviour in India. This approach was chosen to move beyond statistical findings and gain a deeper understanding of people’s experiences, attitudes, and decision-making processes while consuming and sharing news online.

The study focused on five major case studies that gained significant attention on social media platforms. These included the death rumour of Dharmendra (2025), the fake death publicity stunt by Poonam Pandey (2024), the Kerala bus incident and suicide case of U. Deepak (2026), the deepfake video controversy involving Rashmika Mandanna (2023), and the misinformation claim about a GPS chip in ₹2000 notes (2016). These cases represented different forms of misinformation such as celebrity rumours, emotional incidents, deepfakes, and politically driven false claims.

Quantitative data was collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via WhatsApp, Instagram, and email. A total of 123 respondents

from different educational and professional backgrounds participated in the study.

The questionnaire examined social media usage, emotional reactions to news, engagement behaviour, and trust in news sources. Participants were asked how emotions like anger, shock, sadness, or curiosity influenced their decisions to engage with or share content without verification.

Qualitative content analysis was also conducted to study captions, headlines, visuals, and audience reactions linked to each case study. The findings highlighted themes such as emotional influence, peer validation, lack of verification, and trust in familiar sources. Overall, the mixed method approach provided a comprehensive understanding of misinformation sharing behaviour in the Indian social media environment.

3.1. OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate how social media engagement cues affect news credibility
2. To understand how audiences verify the authenticity of news they see on social media
3. To analyse why people, share misinformation

3.2. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

It is crucial to define key concepts associated with misinformation, news credibility, and social media engagement in the digital communication environment in this study. For the purpose of clarity and consistency the following operational definitions are used for this research:

Social media: social media are electronic communications that allow people to form online communities to share information, ideas, content (such as videos), and personal messages (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Misinformation: Misinformation is false information that is spread, whether or not the spreader intended the information to be false (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Fake News: Fake news is defined as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

News Credibility: The perceived believability, accuracy, fairness, and trustworthiness of news content are what define news credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000).

Trust in Media: “Trust in media is the trust that audiences give to media institutions and journalists in providing accurate and reliable information” (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

Engagement Metrics: Engagement metrics are measurable metrics of audience interaction on social media including likes, shares, comments, reposts, and views (Luarn et al., 2014).

Emotional Engagement: Emotional engagement is ‘the emotional involvement and affective response that people feel when they interact with media content’ (Brodie et al., 2011).

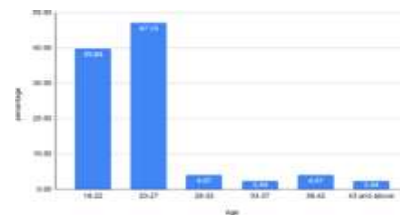
Social Media Users: Social Media Users are those who participate in social media in some capacity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1. DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Profile

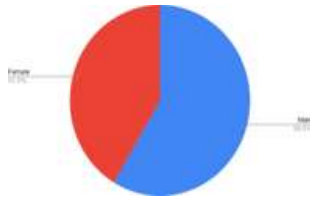
4.1.1. Age of the Respondents:



The age distribution of respondents shows that the majority belong to the 23–27 age group, accounting for 47.15% (n=58) of the sample. Respondents aged 18–22 make up 39.84% (n=49), indicating strong participation from young social media users. Smaller groups include respondents aged 28–32 and 38–42, each representing 4.07% (n=5). The least represented groups are 33–37 years and 43 years and above, both accounting for 2.44% (n=3). The findings suggest

that the study is largely dominated by younger adults who are highly active on digital platforms and regularly engage with online news and social media content.

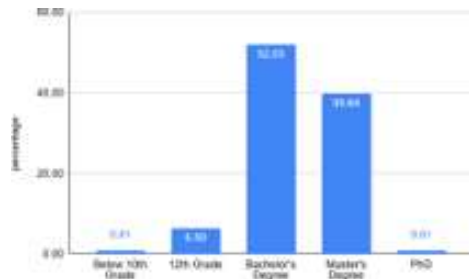
4.1.2. Gender:



The gender distribution of respondents includes 58.54% (n=72) males and 41.46% (n=51) females. Although male participants slightly outnumber females, both genders are significantly represented in the study.

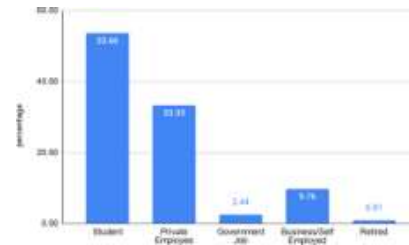
This balanced participation helps provide diverse perspectives on social media usage, news credibility, trust, and misinformation sharing behaviour, improving the reliability and inclusiveness of the findings.

4.1.2. Education Qualification:



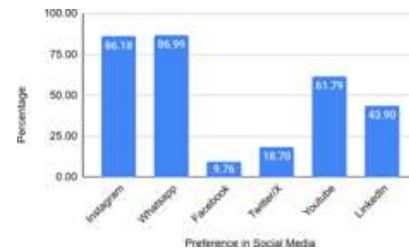
The educational profile of respondents shows that most participants are well educated, with 52.03% (n=64) holding a Bachelor's degree and 39.84% (n=49) holding a Master's degree. Smaller groups include respondents with 12th-grade education (6.50%, n=8), while Below 10th Grade and PhD holders each account for 0.81% (n=1). The dominance of higher educational qualifications suggests greater awareness of digital platforms, social media usage, and online news consumption, strengthening the reliability of the study findings.

4.1.3. Occupation:



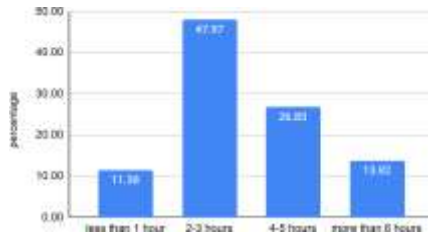
The occupation data shows that students form the largest group of respondents at 53.66% (n=66), followed by private employees at 33.33% (n=41). Business owners or self-employed individuals account for 9.76% (n=12), while government employees represent 2.44% (n=3). Retired respondents make up only 0.81% (n=1). The dominance of students and working professionals indicates that the study mainly reflects the views of digitally active individuals who regularly engage with social media, online communication, and news-sharing activities in their daily lives.

4.1.5. Preference in Social Media:



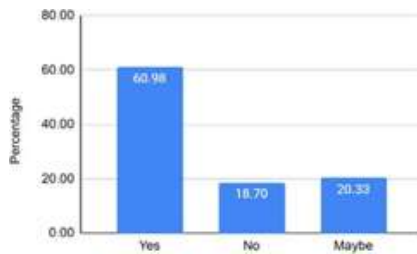
The questionnaire examined respondents' media and news consumption habits to understand platform influence and news-sharing behaviour. Instagram (86.18%, n=106) and WhatsApp (86.99%, n=107) were the most widely used platforms, followed by YouTube (61.79%, n=76) and LinkedIn (43.90%, n=54). Twitter/X (18.70%, n=23) and Facebook (9.76%, n=12) had lower usage. The findings suggest that highly interactive platforms play a major role in news circulation, virality, and information sharing among users.

4.1.6. Time spent on social media daily:



The survey examined respondents' media habits to understand patterns of social media and news consumption. Most respondents spend 2–3 hours daily on social media and news platforms (47.97%, n=59). A significant number use social media for 4–6 hours (26.83%, n=33) or more than 6 hours (13.82%, n=17). Only 11.38% (n=14) spend less than an hour. The findings indicate that respondents are regular and active digital media users across different usage levels.

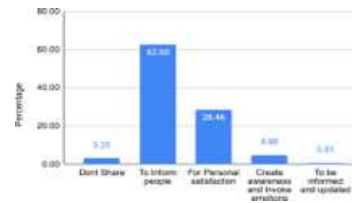
4.1.7. Forwarding News on Social Media:



The findings show that forwarding news on social media is a common practice among respondents. A majority, 60.98% (n=75), reported that they share or forward news online, highlighting the active role users play in spreading information. Meanwhile, 20.33% (n=25) selected “Maybe,” indicating occasional sharing depending on the content. Only 18.70% (n=23) stated that they do not forward news.

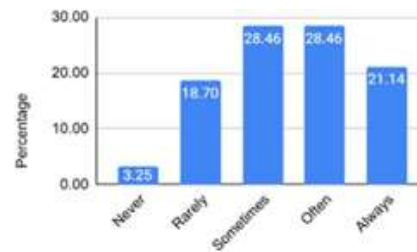
Overall, the results suggest that social media users significantly contribute to the circulation and amplification of both verified information and misinformation online.

4.1.8. Primary Reason for Sharing News on Social Media:



The survey findings show that the main reason respondents share news online is to keep others informed, with 62.6% (n=77) selecting this option. Many users also act as opinion leaders by sharing their views and thoughts along with news content. Personal satisfaction was another major reason, reported by 28.46% (n=35) of respondents. A smaller group, 5.69% (n=7), shared news to create awareness, express emotions, or stay updated through others. Meanwhile, 3.25% (n=4) stated that they do not share news on social media platforms.

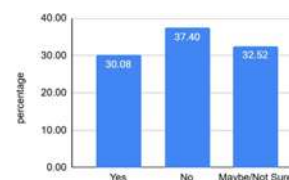
4.1.9. Verification of News Before Sharing:



The findings show mixed verification habits among respondents before sharing news on social media.

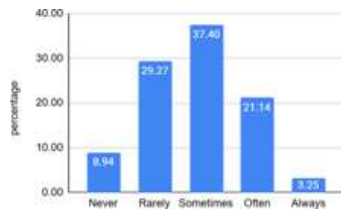
While 28.46% (n=35) stated that they “Sometimes” verify news and another 28.46% (n=35) “Often” do so, 21.14% (n=26) reported “Always” verifying information. However, 18.70% (n=23) rarely verify news, and 3.25% (n=4) never check credibility before sharing. The results indicate that inconsistent verification practices may contribute to the spread of misinformation online.

4.1.10. Sharing False News Unknowingly:



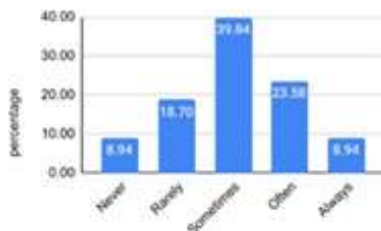
The findings show mixed experiences among respondents regarding the sharing of false news on social media. While 37.40% (n=46) stated that they had never shared false information, 30.08% (n=37) admitted to sharing misinformation at some point. Additionally, 32.52% (n=40) were unsure whether they had shared false news. The results highlight the difficulty users face in identifying misleading content online and emphasize the importance of fact-checking and digital literacy in reducing misinformation spread.

4.1.11. Emotional Influence on Belief in News:



The findings show that emotions like shock and sadness influence how respondents perceive news on social media. While 37.40% (n=46) stated that emotions “Sometimes” affect their belief in news, 21.14% (n=26) reported “Often,” and 3.25% (n=4) selected “Always.” Meanwhile, 29.27% (n=36) said emotions “Rarely” influence them, and 8.94% (n=11) chose “Never.” The results highlight the role of emotions in shaping online news perception and increasing susceptibility to misinformation.

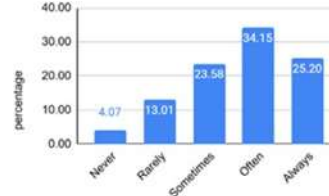
4.1.12. Impact of Repeated Exposure on Trust:



The findings show that repeated exposure to the same message influences respondents’ trust in social media information. A majority, 39.84% (n=49), stated that repeated exposure “Sometimes” increases their trust, while 23.58% (n=29) selected “Often” and 8.94% (n=11) chose “Always.” In contrast, 18.70% (n=23) reported “Rarely,” and 8.94% (n=11) stated “Never.”

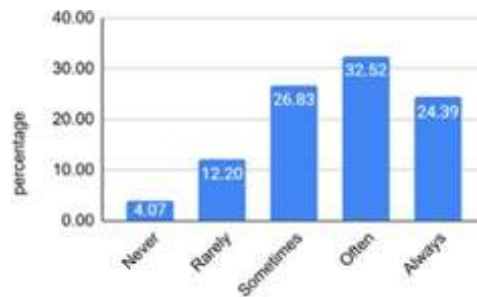
The results suggest that repeated messages can appear more credible over time, even without proper verification, increasing the risk of misinformation acceptance among users.

4.1.13. Checking Reliable Sources Before Believing News:



The findings show that many respondents verify news through reliable sources before believing it. A majority, 34.15% (n=42), stated that they “Often” check reliable sources, while 25.20% (n=31) reported that they “Always” verify information. Additionally, 23.58% (n=29) selected “Sometimes.” However, 13.01% (n=16) rarely verify news, and 4.07% (n=5) never do so. The results suggest that although awareness about fact-checking is increasing, inconsistent verification habits still contribute to the spread and acceptance of misinformation online.

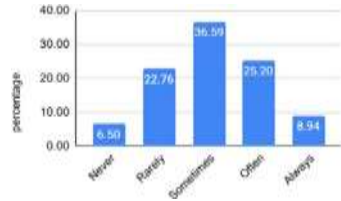
4.1.15. Verification of News Before Sharing It:



The findings show that many respondents verify news before sharing it on social media. A majority, 32.52% (n=40), stated that they “Often” verify information, while 24.39% (n=30) reported that they “Always” check authenticity before forwarding news.

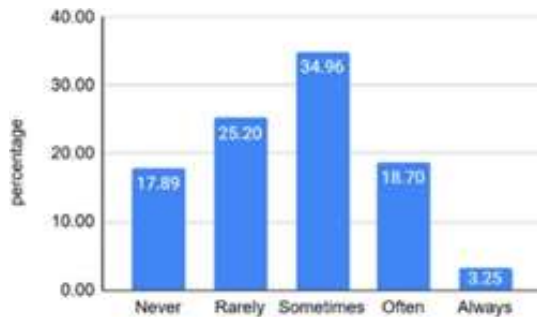
Additionally, 26.83% (n=33) selected “Sometimes.” However, 12.20% (n=15) rarely verify news, and 4.07% (n=5) never do so. The results indicate growing awareness about fact-checking, although inconsistent verification practices still contribute to the spread of misinformation online.

4.1.16. Impact of Shocking News on Doubt Reduction:



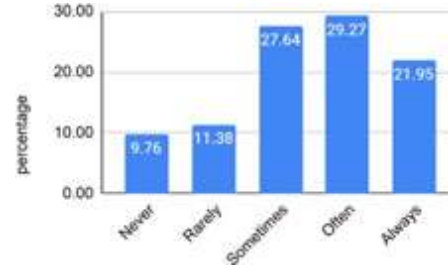
The findings show that shocking news can reduce respondents' doubt about information shared on social media. A majority, 36.59% (n=45), stated that shocking news "Sometimes" affects their skepticism, while 25.20% (n=31) selected "Often" and 8.94% (n=11) chose "Always." In contrast, 22.76% (n=28) reported "Rarely," and 6.50% (n=8) stated "Never." The results highlight how emotionally charged and sensational content can influence critical judgment and increase vulnerability to misinformation online.

4.1.17. Influence in Beliefs from Others Comments:



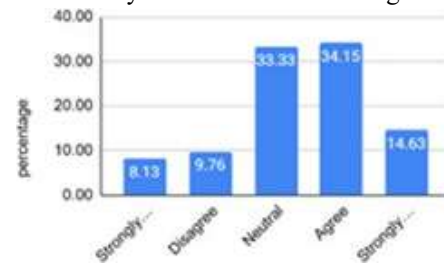
The findings show that comments on social media moderately influence respondents' belief in news content. A majority, 34.96% (n=43), stated that comments "Sometimes" affect their perception of news, while 18.70% (n=23) selected "Often" and 3.25% (n=4) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 25.20% (n=31) reported "Rarely," and 17.89% (n=22) stated "Never." The results highlight how online discussions and user reactions can shape trust in information and contribute to misinformation spread on social media.

4.1.18. Checking Multiple Platforms Before Acceptance:



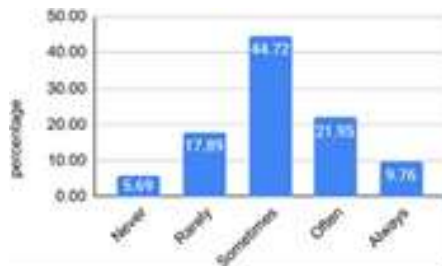
The findings show that many respondents check multiple platforms before believing news shared on social media. A majority, 29.27% (n=36), stated that they "Often" cross-check information, while 21.95% (n=27) reported that they "Always" verify news across different platforms. Additionally, 27.64% (n=34) selected "Sometimes." However, 11.38% (n=14) rarely verify news, and 9.76% (n=12) never do so. The results highlight increasing awareness about fact-checking, although inconsistent verification habits still remain among users.

4.1.19. Curiosity as a Reason for Sharing Content:



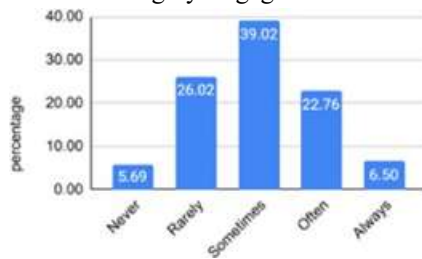
The findings suggest that curiosity is an important factor influencing respondents' sharing behaviour on social media. A majority, 34.15% (n=42), agreed that curiosity motivates them to share content, while 14.63% (n=18) strongly agreed. Additionally, 33.33% (n=41) remained neutral. In contrast, 9.76% (n=12) disagreed and 8.13% (n=10) strongly disagreed. The results highlight how curiosity can encourage the spread of engaging content, including unverified or misleading information, across social media platforms.

4.1.20. Influence of Sympathy on Judgement:



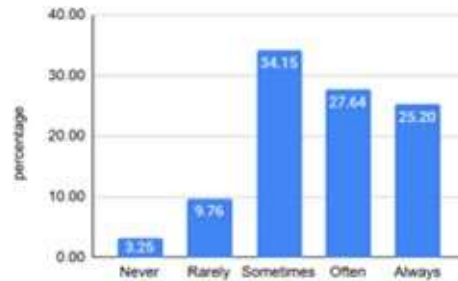
The findings show that sympathy influences respondents' judgment while engaging with news on social media. A majority, 44.72% (n=55), stated that sympathy "Sometimes" affects their perception of information, while 21.95% (n=27) selected "Often" and 9.76% (n=12) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 17.89% (n=22) reported "Rarely," and 5.69% (n=7) stated "Never." The results highlight the role of emotional connection in shaping responses to online content and increasing susceptibility to emotionally framed misinformation.

4.1.21. Belief in Highly Engaged Content:



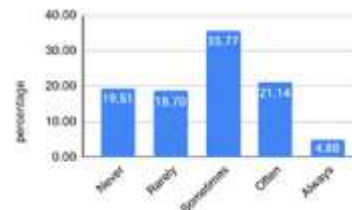
The findings show that high engagement on social media, such as likes, shares, and comments, influences respondents' belief in online content. A majority, 39.02% (n=48), stated that high engagement "Sometimes" affects their trust in content, while 22.76% (n=28) selected "Often" and 6.50% (n=8) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 26.02% (n=32) reported "Rarely," and 5.69% (n=7) stated "Never." The results highlight how social validation through engagement metrics can shape perceptions of credibility and contribute to misinformation spread online.

4.1.22. Waiting for Verified Information Before Opinion Formation:



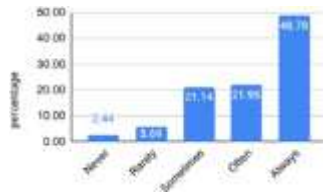
The findings show that many respondents prefer waiting for verified information before forming opinions about news on social media. A majority, 34.15% (n=42), stated that they "Sometimes" wait for verification, while 27.64% (n=34) selected "Often" and 25.20% (n=31) chose "Always." However, 9.76% (n=12) reported "Rarely," and 3.25% (n=4) stated "Never." The results indicate growing awareness about fact-checking and misinformation, although differences in patience and critical evaluation continue to exist among social media users.

4.1.23. Influence of Virality on Quick Sharing of the News:



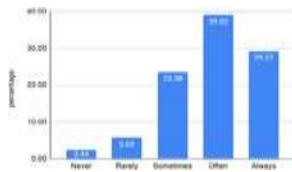
The findings show that virality influences respondents' tendency to share content quickly on social media. A majority, 35.77% (n=44), stated that viral content "Sometimes" encourages rapid sharing, while 21.14% (n=26) selected "Often" and 4.88% (n=6) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 18.70% (n=23) reported "Rarely," and 19.51% (n=24) stated "Never." The results highlight how viral trends and widespread engagement can accelerate information sharing and contribute to the rapid spread of misinformation online.

4.1.24. Concern About Misuse of Technology:



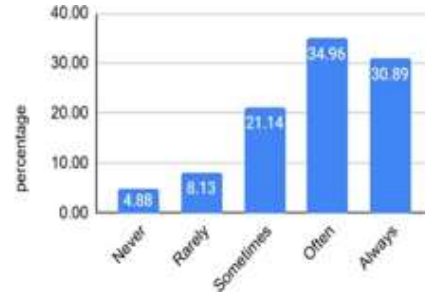
The findings reveal a high level of concern among respondents regarding the misuse of technology in spreading news on social media. A majority, 48.78% (n=60), stated that they “Always” feel concerned, while 21.95% (n=27) selected “Often” and 21.14% (n=26) chose “Sometimes.” Meanwhile, 5.69% (n=7) reported “Rarely,” and 2.44% (n=3) stated “Never.” The results highlight strong awareness among users about the role of technology in spreading misinformation and shaping public perception online.

4.1.25. Reduction of Trust in Social Media Information:



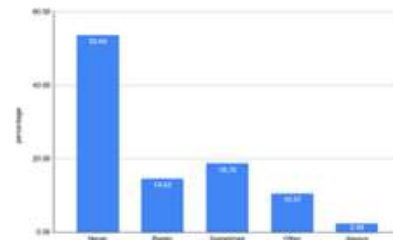
The findings show that misinformation-related incidents significantly reduce respondents’ trust in social media information. A majority, 39.02% (n=48), stated that such incidents “Often” affect their trust, while 29.27% (n=36) selected “Always.” Additionally, 23.58% (n=29) reported “Sometimes.” In contrast, 5.69% (n=7) stated “Rarely,” and 2.44% (n=3) chose “Never.” The results highlight how misinformation weakens confidence in social media as a reliable source of news and information.

4.1.26. Considering Full Video Context Before Opinion Formation:



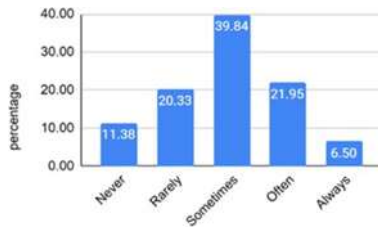
The findings show that many respondents consider the full context of videos before forming opinions on social media content. A majority, 34.96% (n=43), stated that they “Often” consider the full context, while 30.89% (n=38) selected “Always.” Additionally, 21.14% (n=26) reported “Sometimes.” However, 8.13% (n=10) stated “Rarely,” and 4.88% (n=6) chose “Never.” The results suggest that most users practice careful evaluation of video content, although some remain vulnerable to misleading or incomplete information online.

4.1.27. Sharing Content for Entertainment Purposes:



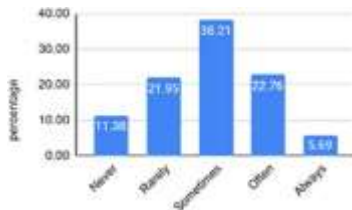
The findings show that entertainment is not a major reason for respondents to share news-related content on social media. A majority, 53.66% (n=66), stated that they “Never” share such content for entertainment, while 14.63% (n=18) selected “Rarely.” Additionally, 18.70% (n=23) reported “Sometimes,” 10.57% (n=13) chose “Often,” and only 2.44% (n=3) selected “Always.” The results suggest that most users share news content more cautiously and purposefully rather than for entertainment or recreational purposes.

4.1.28. Influence of Fear During Major Events:



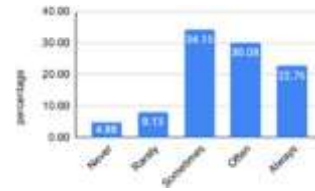
The findings show that fear during major events influences respondents' belief in claims shared on social media. A majority, 39.84% (n=49), stated that fear "Sometimes" affects their belief, while 21.95% (n=27) selected "Often" and 6.50% (n=8) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 20.33% (n=25) reported "Rarely," and 11.38% (n=14) stated "Never." The results highlight fear as an important emotional trigger that can shape information perception and increase vulnerability to misinformation during major events.

4.1.29. Trustworthiness of Messages from Known Contacts:



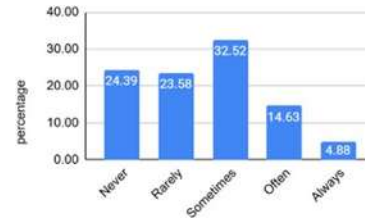
The findings show that messages received from known contacts are perceived as moderately trustworthy by respondents on social media. A majority, 38.21% (n=47), stated that such messages "Sometimes" appear trustworthy, while 22.76% (n=28) selected "Often" and 5.69% (n=7) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 21.95% (n=27) reported "Rarely," and 11.38% (n=14) stated "Never." The results suggest that familiarity and social trust influence credibility, although many users still remain cautious about information shared through personal networks.

4.1.30. Verification through Official or Reliable Sources:



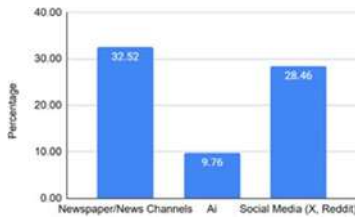
The findings show that many respondents verify claims through official or reliable sources before accepting them. A majority, 34.15% (n=42), stated that they "Sometimes" verify information, while 30.08% (n=37) selected "Often" and 22.76% (n=28) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 8.13% (n=10) reported "Rarely," and 4.88% (n=6) stated "Never." The results indicate that awareness about fact-checking is relatively high, although inconsistent verification practices still create opportunities for misinformation to spread on social media platforms.

4.1.31. Sharing Messages to Feel Involved in Current Events:



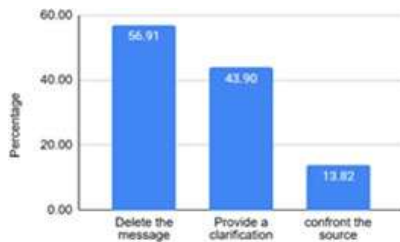
The findings show that sharing messages to feel involved in current events is a moderate motivation among respondents. A majority, 32.52% (n=40), stated that they "Sometimes" share content for this reason, while 14.63% (n=18) selected "Often" and 4.88% (n=6) chose "Always." Meanwhile, 23.58% (n=29) reported "Rarely," and 24.39% (n=30) stated "Never." The results suggest that although some users share content to stay connected with current events, other factors like emotions, credibility, and social influence play a stronger role in sharing behaviour.

4.1.32. Sources Used to Verify Suspected False News:



The questionnaire had open ended questions, one of which was specifically designed to determine where do most respondents verify their news from, and clearly most respondents prefer to wait for news from paper or channels they trust will report the news they await with 32.52%(n=40) of the respondents verifying this method. While another vast majority 28.46%(n=35) use social media and a significant yet minority number use AI 9.96%(n=12)

4.1.33. Actions Taken After Sharing False Information:



In order to understand how the respondents act when their shared post on news turns out to be untrue, most respondents 56.91%(n=70) attended by deleting the post, while a comparable majority 43.9%(n=54) said they inform them about the post being wrong and providing a clarification. While a responsible 13.82%(n=17) minority of the respondents further question the source and their credibility

4.2. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.2.1. Kerala Bus Incident and Suicide of U. Deepak (2026)

The Kerala bus incident and the suicide of U. Deepak became a major example of how misinformation, emotional outrage, and social media amplification can create serious real world consequences. A short video clip recorded on a public bus went viral online, but it showed only a limited part of the incident.

Many users accepted it as complete truth without verifying the full context. Emotional reactions such as anger and moral judgment encouraged rapid sharing across Instagram, WhatsApp, and X.

According to Agenda Setting Theory, repeated online visibility and algorithmic promotion made the issue nationally important. The Two-Step Flow Theory is reflected in how influencers and online communities shaped public opinion and spread interpretations of the event. Media Credibility Theory explains why users quickly trusted the video, as visual content is often considered authentic. The case demonstrates the importance of digital literacy, responsible journalism, fact-checking, and ethical social media behaviour in preventing misinformation and cyberbullying.

4.2.2. Dharmendra Death Rumour (2025)

The false rumour regarding the death of Dharmendra in 2025 demonstrated how quickly misinformation spreads through digital media. The rumour circulated widely on Facebook, WhatsApp, and X, causing panic and emotional distress among fans before official clarifications denied the claim. Agenda Setting Theory explains how repeated online visibility and user engagement made the rumour nationally important despite lacking factual accuracy.

Emotional topics such as celebrity deaths naturally attract high interaction, encouraging algorithms to amplify the content further. The Two-Step Flow Theory is reflected in the role of entertainment bloggers, influencers, and fan pages who acted as opinion leaders and shaped audience reactions. Media Credibility Theory explains why users trusted the rumour based on emotional tone, viral popularity, and repeated exposure. The incident highlights how emotions, social influence, and online engagement contribute to misinformation and reduce critical verification in digital communication environments.

4.2.3. Poonam Pandey Fake Death Case (2024)

The fake death announcement involving Poonam Pandey in 2024 became one of the most controversial misinformation incidents in India's digital media environment. Her official social media accounts announced that she had died due to cervical cancer, leading to widespread shock and condolence

messages online. Later, Pandey revealed that the announcement was part of a cervical cancer awareness campaign, which sparked criticism regarding ethics and emotional manipulation.

Agenda Setting Theory explains how the incident quickly became a major public discussion due to high emotional engagement and algorithmic amplification on platforms such as Instagram and X. The Two-Step Flow Theory is reflected in the role of influencers, entertainment journalists, and verified accounts who shaped audience reactions and spread the information widely.

Media Credibility Theory explains why audiences initially trusted the announcement because it came from verified sources and was repeated by mainstream media. The incident highlights the importance of ethical communication, fact checking, and responsible journalism in digital media.

4.2.4. Rashmika Mandanna Deepfake Controversy (2023)

The deepfake controversy involving Rashmika Mandanna in 2023 became a major example of the dangers created by artificial intelligence and digital misinformation. A manipulated video created using deepfake technology falsely showed the actress in a compromising situation and spread rapidly across platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and X.

Agenda Setting Theory explains how the sensational nature of the video generated strong engagement, causing algorithms and media coverage to amplify the issue nationally. Over time, public discussion shifted toward concerns about AI misuse, women's safety, privacy, and cybercrime. The Two Step Flow Theory is reflected in the role of influencers, entertainment commentators, and online personalities who shaped public understanding through their interpretations and reactions. Media Credibility Theory explains why many users initially believed the video was real, as realistic visual content is often considered trustworthy. The case highlights the urgent need for digital literacy, stronger cyber laws, responsible media behaviour, and awareness regarding AI-generated misinformation.

4.2.5. GPS Chip in ₹2000 Notes Claim (2016)

The rumour that newly introduced ₹2000 currency notes contained hidden GPS tracking chips became one of the most widely circulated misinformation cases during India's demonetisation period in 2016.

The false claim spread rapidly through WhatsApp, Facebook, and online blogs, creating confusion and panic among the public. Agenda Setting Theory explains how the rumour gained national attention during a period of economic uncertainty and fear.

Continuous discussions, social media engagement, and repeated sharing increased the visibility of the claim and made it appear important. The Two-Step Flow Theory highlights the role of WhatsApp group administrators, local influencers, and media commentators who forwarded the information as "exclusive" or "insider" news, increasing public trust in the rumour. Media Credibility Theory explains why many users believed the claim due to the use of scientific sounding terms such as "nano GPS chip" and "satellite tracking." Repeated exposure across platforms strengthened perceptions of authenticity.

Even after official clarification from the Reserve Bank of India, some people continued believing the misinformation due to confirmation bias and distrust toward official sources.

4.3. MAJOR FINDINGS

- About 62.6% of respondents said they shared news that later proved to be inaccurate, underscoring how sometimes people accidentally share false information because they didn't verify it.
- The study also found an influence between emotional factors and belief formation, with 58.54% of the respondents stating that shock or sadness affects their beliefs.
- A significant proportion i.e. 60% of the respondents verify news before sharing.
- Reduced critical evaluation under emotional influence is strongly linked to emotional intensity in content with 61.79% of the respondents stating that shocking news reduces doubt.
- Cross-verification across multiple platforms is relatively high, with 51.22% saying they cross-

verify across multiple platforms, suggesting an increasing awareness of misinformation threats.

- In terms of emotion, sympathy has a significant role in the formation of judgment, as 66.67% indicated that it affects their judgment, which shows the emotional bias in interpreting online news.
- Belief formation is also influenced by social validation, with 61.76% believing in highly engaged content and popularity.
- A significant proportion i.e. 59.35% of the respondents wait for verified information before making opinions.
- About 56.91% of respondents say they share when content is trending, indicating that virality has a positive impact on sharing behaviour.
- A significant proportion i.e. 48.78% of the respondents always worry about misuse of technology, reflecting a high level of awareness of misinformation in technological environments.
- A substantial number of users indicated a lack of trust in social media information: with 68.29% mentioning less trust because of misinformation incidents.
- Media literacy practices are relatively good, with 65.85% of them taking account of the entire context of video before making decisions about it.
- However, entertainment is not a very big motivator for sharing, meaning that 53.66% of respondents never share content for entertainment, which indicates that there is more purpose-driven sharing of news content.
- The degree of fear experienced during big events also has an impact on belief formation; 61.79% said it has an impact, suggesting that people are more susceptible to the impact of fear during a crisis.
- Messages from known contacts are not always trusted: 38.21% reported that they would trust the messages “Sometimes.” Familiarity does not imply credibility.
- There was a strong preference for corrective digital behaviour; over half of participants i.e. 52.85% would correct misinformation by informing the source.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how individuals interact with news content on social media platforms and how their beliefs, sharing behaviour, and credibility judgments are shaped in digital environments. Social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X have become major sources of information, exposing users to large amounts of news and opinions daily.

The study found that users are active participants who not only consume content but also react, interpret, and share information online. One major finding is the high level of daily social media engagement, which increases exposure to both credible and misleading information. Although many respondents claimed to verify information before sharing it, verification practices were often inconsistent, contributing to the spread of misinformation.

The research also revealed that emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, shock, and sympathy strongly influence news perception and sharing behaviour.

Emotionally charged content often gains greater engagement and reduces critical thinking. Repetition and social validation through likes, comments, and shares further increase perceived credibility, even when information is false. The study additionally highlights the role of peer influence and trusted social connections in shaping online opinions. Overall, the findings emphasise the importance of digital literacy, critical thinking, responsible fact-checking, and ethical social media use in reducing misinformation and promoting informed online behaviour.

5.2. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study is limited to the Indian context, so findings may not apply globally.
- It uses a general sample of social media users without detailed demographic comparison.
- The research relies mainly on quantitative questionnaire data, limiting deeper emotional and personal insights.
- The study reflects behaviour at one point in time and may not capture changing social media trends.

- Platform-specific behaviour (Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc.) was not analysed in detail.
- The study does not deeply examine the impact of algorithms, recommendation systems, or platform design.
- Psychological factors, education levels, and digital literacy differences were not explored in depth.

5.3. SCOPE FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study provides valuable insights into how social media users consume news, verify information, and are influenced by emotions, repetition, and social validation in digital environments. However, because digital media and user behaviour continue to evolve rapidly, there is considerable scope for future research. Future studies can expand the geographical scope by comparing rural and urban populations or examining user behaviour across different countries and cultures. Research can also focus on specific demographic groups such as students, professionals, elderly users, or homemakers to understand how factors like age, education, and digital literacy influence news verification and sharing behaviour.

Platform specific studies involving Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X may further explain differences in misinformation spread. Future research should also examine the role of artificial intelligence, algorithms, and recommendation systems in shaping information exposure and engagement. Additionally, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups can help explore emotional and psychological factors behind misinformation sharing. Overall, future studies can contribute to better digital literacy, responsible media use, and stronger strategies to reduce misinformation in online environments.

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