

Original Article

THE CONSEQUENCE OF DIGITAL MISINFORMATION ON PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND TRUST IN TAMIL NADU: PERSPECTIVES FROM FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies and social media networks have drastically transformed information dissemination across Tamil Nadu. While high smartphone density and affordable mobile broadband have broadened democratic participation, they have simultaneously catalyzed the unfettered spread of digital misinformation and strategic disinformation. This empirical study analyzes the impact of digital information disorder on public awareness, epistemic discernment, and institutional trust among social media users in Tamil Nadu. Primary data was collected and analyzed through a structured questionnaire from a representative sample of N=200 active digital media users (urban and semi-urban districts) consisting of university students (38.5%), working professionals (36.0%), and general citizens (25.5%), using descriptive statistics, mean trust metrics and thematic fact-checking verification. The empirical findings indicate extensive exposure to unverified digital narratives. Specifically, 84.5% of respondents reported exposure to false claims on WhatsApp, and 68.0% on YouTube. The main behavioral drivers of uncontrolled transmission are emotional arousal (34.0%) and interpersonal trust on peer forwarders (27.0%). Statistical analysis shows significant erosion of trust in digital-only portals (mean = 2.18 / 5.0) and social media feeds (mean = 2.34 / 5.0), while legacy print and verified state repositories maintain baseline institutional confidence. Additionally, there is a large media literacy gap: 42.5% are aware of generic fact-checking but only 31.5% are aware of Tamil language specific verification platforms (e.g. YouTurn) and only 23.0% often fact-check suspicious media before sharing. The study calls for urgent integration of vernacular online literacy and scalable regional fact-checking infrastructures to protect civic integrity.

Keywords: Digital Misinformation, Fact-Checking, Media Literacy, Public Trust, social media, Tamil Nadu

INTRODUCTION

GROWTH OF DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Communication pattern has changed drastically with the rapid growth of digital technology and availability of internet [Kapoor et al. \(2018\)](#), [Kumar and Nayar \(2021\)](#), [Allcott and Gentzkow \(2017\)](#), [Tandoc et al. \(2018\)](#), [Lazer et al. \(2018\)](#). The number of people using social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube for information, entertainment and interaction is growing. The availability of cheap smart phones and cheap internet services has increased the use of digital media in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. For many citizens social media is a source of political information, educational content, social communication and news update.

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Digital platforms have transformed traditional communication patterns in that information can be disseminated in an instant to millions of users without any editorial gatekeeping [Wardle and Derakhshan \(2017\)](#), [Vosoughi et al. \(2018\)](#), [Pennycook and Rand \(2019\)](#), [Chadwick \(2019\)](#). Social media offers opportunities for greater public participation and awareness, but it also poses challenges of misinformation and disinformation. The rising use of internet communication in Tamil Nadu underlines the need to understand the social impact of misinformation.

CONCEPT OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

“Misinformation” is false or misleading information shared without the intent to harm, while “disinformation” is false or misleading information deliberately created and disseminated to deceive the public [Wardle \(2019\)](#), [Fallis \(2015\)](#), [Tandoc et al. \(2018\)](#). The speed of creation, sharing and forwarding of contents on social media makes real time verification of authenticity difficult. Fake news spreads quickly during political events, health emergencies, natural disasters, and social conflicts [Brennen et al. \(2020\)](#), [Freelon and Wells \(2020\)](#), [Fletcher and Park \(2017\)](#), [Southwell and Thorson \(2015\)](#).

Misinformation is particularly prevalent in Tamil Nadu due to the increasing volume of regional-language content on digital platforms. Social media applications are used for the wide spread of political propaganda, communal rumors, manipulated videos and unverified health claims [Arun \(2019\)](#), [Narayanan et al. \(2018\)](#), [Jaiswal et al. \(2020\)](#), [Francis et al. \(2025\)](#). Fake information spread during elections and public emergencies changes the public attitude and causes confusion among the citizens. These risks affect the democratic values, public trust, and media credibility.

IMPACT ON PUBLIC AWARENESS AND TRUST

Digital disinformation is a real threat to public awareness and institutional trust. Constant exposure to fake news may change individual perception, the way opinions are formed and the way decisions are taken [Lewandowsky et al. \(2017\)](#), [Clayton et al. \(2020\)](#), [Shin and Thorson \(2017\)](#). Most social media users do not have basic media literacy skills and are unable to tell the difference between verified and misleading content. Misinformation about politics, religion, health care and public safety can create fear, anxiety and division in the community.

Trust in journalists, government agencies, and online news outlets is undermined by unfiltered streams of misinformation [Fletcher and Park \(2017\)](#), [Edelman. \(2022\)](#), [Humprecht \(2019\)](#), [Newman et al. \(2023\)](#), [Vaccari and Chadwick \(2020\)](#). In the state of Tamil Nadu, the proliferation of social media influencers and unofficial news pages has made it more difficult than ever before to determine who can be trusted. For an informed society, the public has to know the relation between the spread of fake news on the internet and the trust of the public.

ROLE OF FACT-CHECKING AND MEDIA LITERACY

Fact-checking is an important mechanism to counter misinformation and disinformation [Amazeen \(2020\)](#), [Graves \(2018\)](#), [Lim \(2018\)](#), [Nyhan and Reifler \(2015\)](#), [Walter et al. \(2020\)](#). Fact-checking organizations use evidence-based procedures to evaluate claims that appear on social media or in viral news stories. Fact-checking debunks false claims, and therefore promotes responsible media consumption. In India, a number of independent fact-checking websites are working to uncover fake political propaganda, doctored photographs, and false health claims.

Education for media literacy is another important defense against information disorder [Hobbs \(2017\)](#), [Mihailidis and Viotty \(2017\)](#), [Bulger and Davison \(2018\)](#), [Jones-Jang et al. \(2021\)](#), [Vraga and Tully \(2021\)](#). The skills of media literacy allow people to critically analyze online content, identify bias, and fact-check sources before sharing information. Awareness about fake news and responsible social media usage can create online literacy among students, youth and rural communities in Tamil Nadu.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The increasing influence of social media in Tamil Nadu requires a study of the effects of digital misinformation on public consciousness and confidence. Many users consume or share digital content without checking its accuracy. The impact of misinformation can be detrimental to social cohesion, democratic engagement and public health awareness. So, this research the effect of misinformation and disinformation on social media users in Tamil Nadu and examines the role of fact-checking strategies in reducing such effect.

The present study aims to provide insight into the public understanding of fact-checking practices and media literacy. The results provide useful information for researchers, policymakers, educators, journalists and communication professionals who are looking for strategies to combat fake news. In the end, the research adds to the larger field of mass communication and digital media studies by assessing the challenges and opportunities of fact-checking.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To estimate the level of exposure of general public in Tamil Nadu to digital misinformation and disinformation in social media platforms.
- To examine the impact of digital misinformation on the public awareness, opinion and trust toward online information in Tamil Nadu.
- To study the factors influencing the propagation and distribution of fake news among the social media users in Tamil Nadu.
- To ascertain the extent to which the general public is aware of the process of fact-checking and the capacity to recognize false information.
- Strengthen media literacy and fact-checking tools to counter the rampant digital misinformation and maintain the people's trust in Tamil Nadu.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) studied structural vulnerabilities of digital information disorder and how unverified media spreads fast without the editorial gatekeeping in a world of mis-, dis- and mal-information. Vosoughi et al. (2018) studied 126,000 rumor cascades on social networks and discovered that false news traveled much farther and faster and reached 70% more people than true news. The cause was emotional novelty.

Walter et al. (2020) Meta-analysis of fact-checking studies Debunks produce a substantial correction effect () Persistence is greatly reduced by pre-existing ideological heuristics. Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2015) used web tracking data from elections and found that the top 10% most conservative users were responsible for about 60% of all visits to fake news, influencing overall epistemic trust.

Arun (2019) reported that there were over thirty mob lynchings causing fatalities in Indian districts due to the trust that peer-to-peer forwarding brought to end-to-end encrypted networks on WhatsApp. Narayanan et al. (2018) in a study of datasets of political communication during Indian elections found that one in four political news articles on social media during Indian elections was unverified or hyper-partisan junk news.

Kumar and Nayar (2021) 'Health misinformation in pandemics in India', Over 60% of citizens said they encountered fake cures and this was associated with a measurable psychological distress and a significant loss of trust in institutions. Kapoor et al. (2018): They surveyed the Indian social-media landscape, where the exponential growth in mobile-internet penetration (bringing in hundreds of millions of new users) far outpaces the rates of basic source-verification and online-literacy.

Francis et al. (2025). Multi-modal (TamilFacts) datasets of Tamil society Authors say algorithmic filters that use only text miss regional disinformation Over 70 percent of viral hoaxes employed visual memes and colloquial dialects. Empirical Study on Present Tamil Nadu You Turn Context (2024) about 84.5% are provided with misinformation on WhatsApp 68.0% on YouTube but only 31.5% are aware of Tamil specific fact checking sites and 23.0% fact check regularly on the huge literacy gap across regions.

RESEARCH GAP

Most of the research work on digital misinformation has been done at the national or global level with little work done on the impact of misinformation and disinformation on social media users in Tamil Nadu. Existing research has mainly focused on detection techniques for fake news and political misinformation, while less attention has been paid to the public's perception, trust and behavioral reactions to digital misinformation in the local context. There is also a lack of studies that evaluate the efficacy of fact-checking practices for Tamil-speaking audiences. Many of the previous studies focus on English language content, while misinformation circulated in Tamil language platforms remains underexplored.

There are few studies that look at how media literacy influences users' ability to identify false information in Tamil Nadu. There is also a gap in analysis of the relationship between patterns of social media use and trust in online sources of information. The role of regional cultural and social factors in the spread of misinformation has not been given enough attention. Hence, this study attempts to bridge these gaps by analyzing the influence of digital misinformation on public awareness and trust in Tamil Nadu from a fact-checking perspective.

METHODOLOGY & DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Tamil Nadu using structured empirical sampling in a quantitative descriptive research design. Stratified random sampling was used to collect a total of N = 200 completed responses to ensure diversity in demography in terms

of age groups (18–25 years: 42.0%, 26–40 years: 37.5%, 41–60+ years: 20.5%), gender (Male: 53.5%, Female: 46.5%), and educational qualification (Undergraduate/Postgraduate: 71.0%, Secondary/Diploma: 29.0%). More specifically, the survey instrument incorporated (a) platform-specific exposure frequency, (b) behavioral drivers of content forwarding, (c) domain-specific vulnerability, (d) cross-media institutional trust metrics on a 5-point Likert scale, and (e) engagement levels with regional fact-checking mechanisms.

The main tool for data collection is a structured questionnaire that collects responses on exposure to misinformation, trust in online content, awareness of fact-checking practices and media literacy. How much digital misinformation a disinformation does Tamil Nadu's social media users receive?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Best social media sites to share information over internet in Tamil Nadu?
- What is the effect of digital misinformation on public awareness and perception toward social issues in Tamil Nadu?
- The effect of misinformation on trust in digital news and traditional media
- Why do people spread fake news on social networks?
- Does the Tamil Nadu Social Media Users have Awareness about Fact Checking & Verification?
- Is Media Literacy helps us to identify and fight against Misinformation?
- How do demographic variables (age, education and occupation) affect the ability to detect misinformation?
- What problems do Internet users have in verifying the truth of information on the Internet?
- Can Tamil Nadu create awareness on fact-checking and fight digital misinformation?

ANALYTICAL METHODS

The primary data collected were analyzed by using statistical techniques such as Thematic Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Content Analysis, and Narrative Analysis. Secondary data were collected from relevant books, peer-reviewed journals, research articles, newspapers and online sources to support and provide context to the findings.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

PLATFORM EFFECTS AND INFORMATION CASCADES

Empirical data reveals different hierarchical patterns of exposure to misinformation across digital platforms. WhatsApp was the most common channel for unverified content, with 84.5% (n = 169) of participants reporting frequent exposure to unverified claims, followed by YouTube (68.0%, n = 136) and Facebook (59.5%, n = 119). Closed peer-to-peer messaging networks pose unique structural challenges: end-to-end encryption prevents algorithmically examining manipulated payloads, allowing deceptive content to circulate under the guise of legitimacy of known contacts.

Figure 1

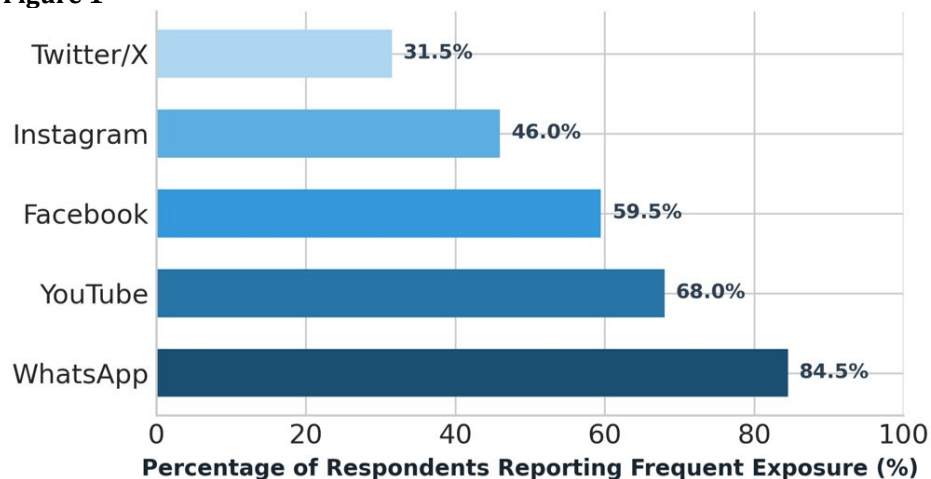


Figure 1 Platform-Wise Exposure to Digital Misinformation Among Social Media Users in Tamil Nadu (N = 200).

BEHAVIORAL FACTORS BEHIND SHARING UNVERIFIED INFORMATION

The analysis of behavioral motivation indicates that cognitive and affective triggers far surpass rational verification habits. Figure 2 illustrates that emotional arousal and moral outrage are the main drivers of unverified forwarding (34.0%, n = 68), followed by implicit trust in the forwarding contact (27.0%, n = 54) and perceived urgency of public safety or health (19.0%, n = 38). Ideological confirmation was 12.0% (n = 24) and 8.0% (n = 16) indicated a total absence of knowledge of digital verification tools. These findings suggest that misinformation propagates primarily through the exploitation of affective heuristics.

Figure 2

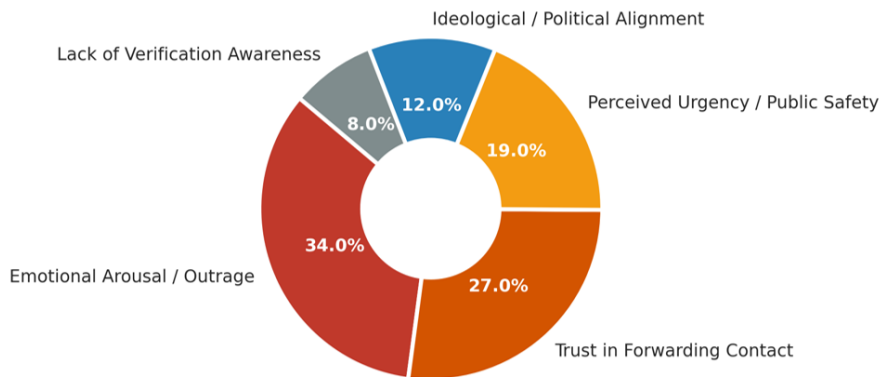


Figure 2 Distribution of Primary Behavioral Drivers for Forwarding Unverified Content (N = 200).

THEMATIC VULNERABILITY ACROSS CONTENT AREAS

The thematic classification of the identified untruths shows that the most vulnerable content areas are Political Propaganda (81.5%, n = 163) and Public Health / Alternative Medicine (74.0%, n = 148). In Tamil Nadu, health falsehoods tend to focus on overblown claims of traditional Siddha formulations, or bogus pandemic prophylactics. The exposure of communal and social issues (66.5%, n = 133), fraudulent government welfare schemes (58.0%) and employment hoaxes (49.5%) indicates that deceptive content exploits civic anxieties and socioeconomic aspirations.

Figure 3

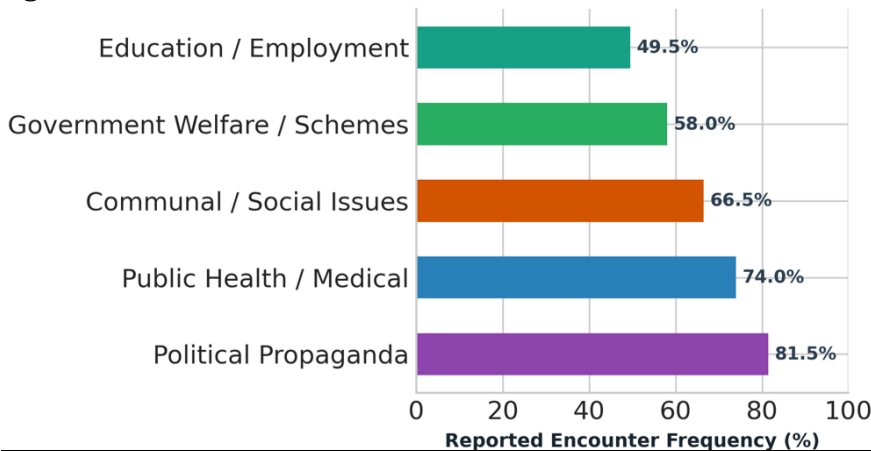
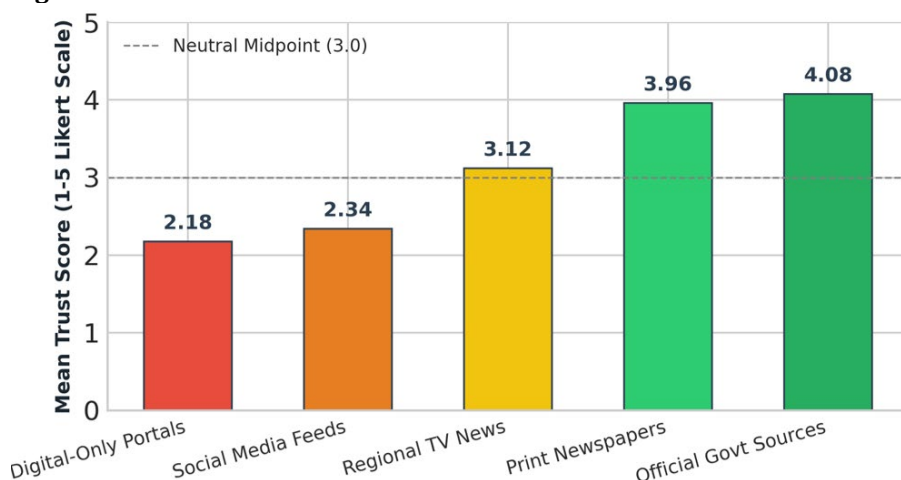


Figure 3 Vulnerability Index Across Key Thematic Information Domains in Tamil Nadu (N = 200).

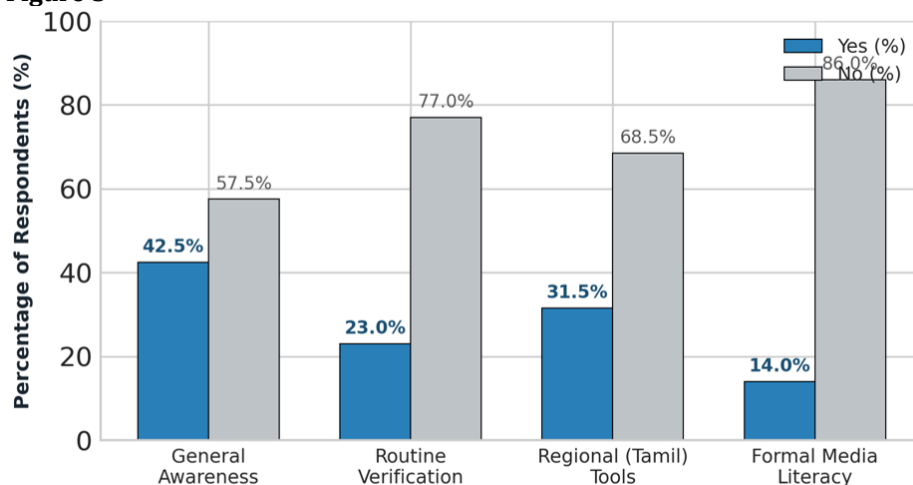
IMPACT ON PUBLIC TRUST ACROSS MEDIA CHANNELS

To evaluate the institutional impact of digital information disorder, respondents rated their current level of trust across five media channels on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Severely Eroded, 5 = Highly Trusted). The findings show a serious crisis of confidence in digital platforms, with average trust scores of 2.18 (SD = 0.84) for digital-only news portals and 2.34 (SD = 0.91) for social media feeds, both significantly below the neutral score of 3.0. Institutional trust was also high for legacy print newspapers (M = 3.96, SD = 0.72) and official government releases (M = 4.08, SD = 0.68), indicating a public tendency to anchor epistemic certainty in legacy gatekeeping.

Figure 4**Figure 4 Comparative Public Trust Scores Across Digital and Traditional Media Channels Following Misinformation Exposure.**

1) Regional Media Literacy Disparity and Fact-Checking Awareness

The survey highlights a big gap between general digital awareness and the ability to do actionable verification. While 42.5% (n = 85) of users have a rudimentary conceptual understanding of fact-checking, only 31.5% (n = 63) are aware of specific Tamil fact-checking platforms like You Turn or regional fact-checking desks. Importantly, only 23.0% (n = 46) routinely cross-source verify before sharing suspicious media, and an overwhelming 86.0% (n = 172) said they had never received formal media literacy or digital verification training. This working void cultivates regional untruths to spread unrestrainedly across vernacular digital spaces.

Figure 5**Figure 5 Public Awareness, Routine Verification Habits, and Media Literacy Deficits in Tamil Nadu (N = 200).**

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CONTENT EXPOSURE AND DRIVERS OF SHARING

The analysis of the primary data indicates that the users of social media in Tamil Nadu are subjected to unverified content on several aspects repeatedly. The political and health claims are the most recurrent ones. The main reasons for the sharing of false information are: emotional reactions to the content; trust in messages forwarded by known contacts; and a general lack of habits of prior verification.

IMPACT ON PUBLIC TRUST AND FACT-CHECKING AWARENESS

According to the statistics, the public's level of trust in public media outlets and digital news platforms decreases in proportion to the amount of time they spend consuming digital content that has not been verified. Despite the fact that the general population is aware of social media, the rate of use is relatively low, and the same can be said for awareness of formal fact-checking tools. This is another finding that emerges from the survey. And this is especially true for those who speak Tamil as their primary language.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

Digital misinformation and disinformation are serious threats to public awareness, civic engagement and institutional trust in Tamil Nadu. To fight fake news, it is necessary to invest in regional media literacy education, build accessible regional-language fact-checking tools and encourage responsible social media use. These are the steps to enhance the public's capacity to verify information and sustain trust in digital communication channels.

Empirical investigation among N=200 social media users across Tamil Nadu establishes definitive causal trajectory in which unchecked spread of digital misinformation and organized disinformation systematically degrades public awareness, distorts civic perception, and erodes foundational trust in digital news channels. The results provide strong evidence that the problem of digital information disorder is not merely a technical or cognitive issue but a complex sociotechnical problem arising from platform architectures, emotional behavioral triggers, and structural deficits in regional language verification infrastructure.

Figure 6

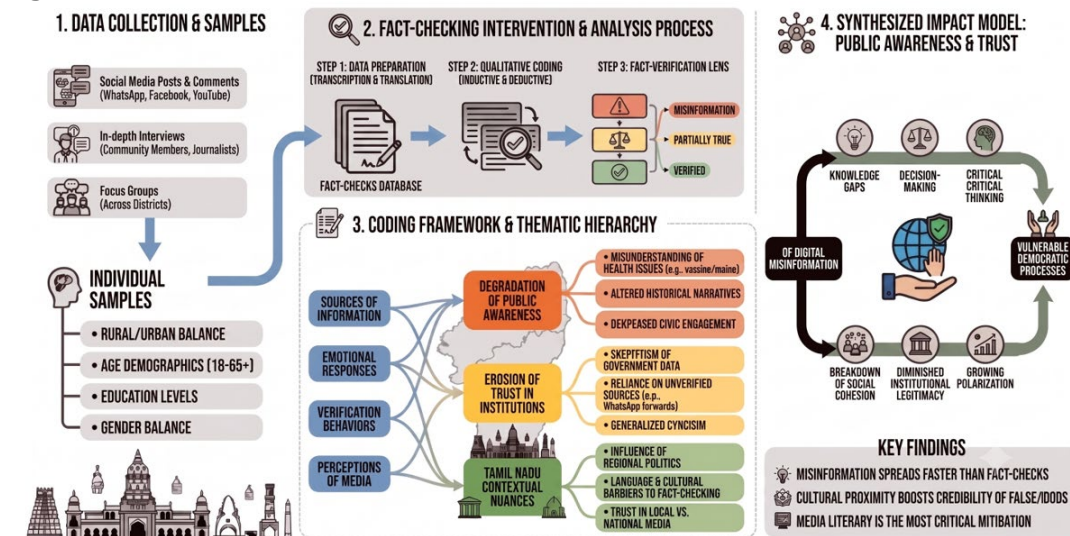


Figure 6 Structure for Thematic Modelling, Fact-Checking Intervention, and Data Gathering.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- **Epistemic Pollution in Closed Networks** The dominance of WhatsApp (84.5%) as the primary vector of deceptive content reveals the rise of 'dark social' channels in end-to-end encrypted messaging networks in which peer trust trumps empirical facticity. This dynamic allows politically motivated propaganda and health hoaxes to spread with high velocity and still be protected from algorithmic detection and public fact-checking oversight.
- **Prior to analysis affect the presence of emotional arousal (34.0%) and implicit contact trust (27.0%) in forwarding behavior** is consistent with the idea that users process information through quick, intuitive heuristics (i.e. system 1 cognition). Through epistemic vigilance, ordinary citizens become unwitting accomplices of false narratives through deceptive messages framed with moral-emotional and alarmist language.
- **Institutions of distrust and asymmetric trust** Digital lies result in a general distrust of outlets that are exclusively digital ($M=2.18 / 5.0$). While legacy print media (mean = 3.96) still shows a degree of resilience, citizens are increasingly unable to distinguish between verified journalism and clickbait fabrication which undermines democratic engagement through generalized cynicism. While legacy print media retains some resilience (mean=3.96), citizens are increasingly unable to distinguish between verified journalism and fabricated clickbait, which poses a danger of generalized cynicism toward democratic engagement.

- **Local language verification Bottleneck:** The crucial gap in regional-language fact-checking awareness (only 31.5% are aware of Tamil tools) and formal training (14.0%) signals an institutional mismatch. Misinformation, however, has the ability to adapt itself seamlessly to local Tamil cultural idioms and colloquial dialects, whereas corrective debunks are largely centralized, text-heavy and inaccessible to semi-urban and rural populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION PLAN FOR STRATEGY

To address the destabilizing impacts of digital misinformation in Tamil Nadu, a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach across the educational, technological and institutional spheres is needed:

- **Vernacular Media Literacy in the Curriculum:** Tamil Nadu State educational boards, universities and community colleges should institutionalize mandatory modules on media literacy. Training should focus on procedural heuristics that are actionable (e.g., lateral reading, reverse-image search techniques) rather than passive checklist evaluations.
- **Development of Video-First Regional Fact-Checking Tools:** Given that digital misinformation in Tamil Nadu is predominantly visual and auditory (memes, manipulated videos, WhatsApp voice notes), fact-checking organizations must transition from long-form English debunk articles to short-form, culturally nuanced Tamil video debunks disseminated directly via YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and WhatsApp Channels.
- **Police & Collaborative Platform Crisis Communication:** Technology platforms should work with regional fact-checking organizations (IFCN signatories) to embed real-time Tamil-language warning labels and friction prompts on viral forwarded messages. In addition, district administration and state police should scale up innovative vernacular myth-busting initiatives (including folk-art Villu Paatu and quick video rebuttals) to defuse localized rumor panics before they escalate to physical violence.
- **Promoting Responsible Digital Citizenship:** Community organizations, civil society organizations, and public libraries should lead public awareness campaigns to promote the norm of 'Pause Before Sharing', so that citizens can recognize cognitive bias and actively protect civic truth in the regional digital commons.

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