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DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION  
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT  
KERALA, INDIA



# COMMUNICATION & JOURNALISM RESEARCH

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 2  
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PEER REVIEWED RESEARCH JOURNAL

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UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT  
KERALA, INDIA

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## Editor's Note

Topics in communication and media studies are continuously evolving, contributing to the richness of the discipline. This journal issue celebrates this dynamism by meticulously exploring a broad spectrum of subjects, with a particular emphasis on issues related to the internet and the digital landscape. Within this edition, articles delve into a diverse range of themes, including social media users' engagement with misinformation content, the dynamics of digital labour in the gig economy, the interplay of rituals, performance, and cultural communication in the context of human interaction with the natural world, the portrayal of taboo subjects in web series, the representation of gender roles in financial advertisements, digital media literacy in rural settings, scrutiny of 'feminist ideals' in social media, and the intriguing connection between controversial advertisements and public perception.

In the contemporary era marked by digital interconnectedness, the widespread dissemination of misinformation has emerged as a formidable challenge, casting a shadow over the reliability of information. In the context of Kerala, a region celebrated for its political literacy and digital proficiency, Habeeb Rahman YP and Muhammadali Nelliullathil explore user interactions with misinformation content, focusing on the Malayalam-speaking community on Facebook. The study rigorously evaluates the efficacy of third-party fact-checking in curbing misinformation, and the findings underscore an urgent need to implement effective strategies for countering misinformation, advocating for the widespread promotion of media information literacy initiatives in the region.

AI and algorithms have become ubiquitous in various facets of life, offering researchers unique opportunities to explore their multifaceted dimensions. In the ever-evolving landscape of the gig economy, Sreehari T M delves into the dynamics of algorithmic management, examining both the challenges and opportunities presented by algorithmic decision-making within app-based platforms for workers. With a focus on Uber drivers in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, the article highlights the complex relationship between information transparency, driver autonomy, and the broader dynamics of labour in the gig economy. It sheds light on critical issues, including information asymmetry, communication challenges, and instances of subtle resistance among Uber drivers.

The article by Medha Sundar P D and Ujjal Kumar Sarma, uniquely positioned within the journal's landscape, departs from the conventional focus on media practices and new media technologies. Instead, it intertwines the realms of rituals, performances, and cultural communication, employing the traditional art form of Theyyam in Kerala as a focal point. At its core, the paper seeks to unravel the symbolic and artistic elements present in Theyyam, portraying the profound relationship between humans and the natural world. By scrutinising rituals, costumes, narratives, and folklore, the study uncovers the layers of communication within this traditional art, revealing how communities have historically perceived, respected, and coexisted with wildlife. The article bridges the gap between cultural communication,

rituals, and performances, offering insights into how traditional art conveys messages in the broader context of human existence and interaction with the natural world.

Sruthy C R and P P Shaju examine the portrayal of menstruation and womanhood in the Tamil web series 'Ayali', which focuses on the patriarchal characteristics of Tamil and Indian society. The series centers on a teenage girl rebelling against oppressive traditions to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. In the context of feminist media theory and cultivation theory, the paper delves into the portrayal of menstruation and its societal implications, analyses the depiction of gender roles, and examines the socio-economic positioning of female characters in the 'Ayali' series. By scrutinising these aspects, the study seeks to illuminate prevailing societal attitudes and make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discourse on gender issues in Indian society.

The discussion of equality and gender representation consistently remains a significant and perpetual topic in academic discourse. In response to the growing awareness of gender sensitivity, Nandana U S and Sanjeev S R explore the evolving portrayal of women in advertisements, particularly within the financial product segment, where persistent gender norms continue to exist. Focusing on mutual fund-related advertisements in India, the article examines whether these advertisements perpetuate conventional gender roles in families and how the representation of women influences notions of gender bias and reinforces existing norms in financial decision-making within households. Despite efforts to move away from objectification and stereotyping, the study reveals a persistent male dominance in this advertising niche, extensively targeting men.

In the present era, places there is a critical emphasis on understanding the nuances of digital media engagement and its associated issues. M S Harikumar addresses the growing importance of digital media literacy in the face of increased digital engagement. Against the backdrop of the 2021 'Satyameva Jayate' initiative by the Government of Kerala, dedicated to combatting fake news, this micro-level investigation aims to offer insights into the current state of digital media literacy among adults in rural areas. As we witness a surge in the use of digital platforms for information consumption, the study sheds light on the gaps in awareness and understanding among adults in rural settings.

Neeraja S S directs focus to the distortion of 'feminist ideals' in the digital sphere, examining the prevalence and impact of 'pseudo-feminist' content on social media, contrasting it with 'genuine' feminist principles advocating for authentic gender equality. Through in-depth interviews with selected women participants, the article explores how these women participants interact with 'pseudo-feminist' content on social media. The study concludes that the rise of pseudo-feminism on social media makes it challenging to distinguish from genuine feminism, negatively impacting the foundational principles of the feminist ideology.

In the dynamic world of advertising, where creating a favorable public image is paramount for product success, the occurrence of controversies surrounding

advertisements has become increasingly common. Nayana Josh and Abhinav M Murali focus on advertisements in India that have stirred controversy due to their perceived 'unconventional' content. By employing the Reasoned Action Approach, the study aims to measure the efficiency of these controversial advertisements against qualitative variables of communication outcomes. This approach involves assessing the factors that influence and trigger specific responses at both the public and individual levels towards persuasive media messages, specifically focusing on the content of controversial advertisements.

This particular issue of CJR discusses the complex dimensions of present-day issues, shedding light on their profound impact. Such engagement serves to enhance our understanding of the constantly evolving landscape of communication and media studies.

**Issue Editor**

Dr. Anupama K P

# Spread of Misinformation in Malayalam: A Case Study on the User Engagement and Impact of Third-party Fact-checking on Facebook

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## Abstract

In today's ever-evolving digital landscape, where information dissemination shapes our perception of reality, the study of user engagement and the pivotal role played by fact-checking come to the forefront. This research focuses on the Malayalam-speaking community on Facebook to explore how users navigate and interact with misinformation, as well as the pivotal impact of third-party fact-checking within this specific linguistic and regional context.

The prevalence of misinformation, particularly in socio-political contexts, serves as a catalyst for this investigation. Kerala's distinguished political literacy and varying levels of digital proficiency add complexity to the misinformation landscape. Facebook's prominence in spreading misinformation emphasises the necessity for a thorough examination in the Malayalam speaking community.

By delving into the ways individuals in Kerala engage with misinformation on Facebook, this study casts light on their encounters with deceptive content. Additionally, it underscores the indispensable role played by third-party independent fact-checking initiatives in countering misinformation. The findings from this research would transcend academic boundaries, offering valuable insights for formulating effective strategies and policies aimed at upholding the integrity of public discourse and information accuracy within the digital realm.

**Keywords:** *Misinformation, Facebook, User engagement, Third-party fact-checking*

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## **Introduction**

In the digital era, misinformation has emerged as a critical social concern, exerting its influence through the vast and interconnected network of social media platforms. Among these platforms, Facebook holds a prominent place, serving as a magnifier of misinformation. The widespread reach and user engagement facilitated by Facebook amplify the impact of false information disseminated through this medium.

Within this digital landscape, it is imperative to examine the specific context of misinformation in the Malayalam language, as it holds cultural and linguistic significance, primarily in the Indian state of Kerala and among the global Malayali diaspora. Understanding the characteristics of misinformation within this linguistic framework is essential for formulating targeted strategies to combat its adverse effects. Misinformation manifests in diverse categories, each with its distinct consequences. These categories encompass political misinformation, communal discord, public health-related falsehoods, and more. Categorising misinformation aids in devising effective countermeasures.

The repercussions of misinformation are far-reaching, affecting public opinion, social cohesion, and even public health. The dissemination of false information can lead to confusion, polarise communities, and in some cases, pose a direct threat to individuals' well-being. Recognizing the gravity of these consequences underscores the urgency of addressing misinformation. The response of users to misinformation on social media is a pivotal aspect of this dynamic. User engagement with false information, as expressed through interactions such as likes, shares, and comments, plays a pivotal role in amplifying or mitigating the impact of misinformation. User responses, therefore, hold significant potential for shaping the narrative.

In combating misinformation, fact-checking serves as a crucial line of defense. Fact-checking organisations and initiatives scrutinise the veracity of claims and debunk false information. Their role in verifying and rectifying inaccuracies contributes to the credibility of information in the digital space. Third-party fact-checking initiatives operating on Facebook have gained prominence in recent years. These initiatives collaborate with the platform to assess and label potentially false information. Understanding the scope and effectiveness of third-party fact-checking on Facebook is vital for evaluating the platform's efforts to curtail the spread of misinformation.

As these platforms continue to serve as primary sources of information for a global user base, the need to address misinformation at its source becomes increasingly critical. Mitigating misinformation is not only a matter of digital literacy but a fundamental pillar of preserving the integrity of public discourse in the digital age.

## **Significance of the Study**

The research carries substantial significance in several key aspects. Firstly, it provides invaluable insights into the extent and nature of misinformation propagation on Facebook within the specific context of Kerala, illuminating the platform's role in disseminating different categories of false information. Additionally, the study facilitates a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of third-party fact-checking systems within this linguistic community, shedding light on the mechanics and impact of these initiatives.

In a broader context, this study extends its importance by highlighting the importance for media literacy efforts beyond fact-checking. It underscores the need for a sophisticated approach to tackle misinformation, emphasising the significance of educating users to critically assess information and fostering a discerning audience.

## **Review of Literature**

In the landscape of combating misinformation on social media, Buchanan (2020) explored factors influencing the spread of disinformation, revealing that the authoritativeness of the source and consensus indicators had limited impact. Digital literacy showed little influence, highlighting the significance of pre-existing attitudes and familiarity with materials in predicting the likelihood of sharing disinformation. This emphasises the need for nuanced strategies to counter disinformation effectively.

According to Epstein et al. (2022), social cues influence users' engagement with social media posts. The presence of social cues, indicating a larger audience engagement, not only increased content sharing but also enhanced truth discernment. This unexpected finding suggests the complex dynamics of social cues and their impact on the dissemination of misinformation, urging platforms to carefully consider their design decisions.

Glenski et al. (2020) shifted the focus to understanding audience engagement with digital deception. By addressing key research questions about who engages with misinformation, how quickly they engage, and what feedback they provide, the study contributes valuable insights. Recognizing patterns and behaviours can inform strategies to enhance media literacy and encourage informed engagement with crowd-sourced information on social news platforms.

There is a decline in interactions with false content on Facebook while an increase persisted on Twitter. This shift in engagement patterns underscores the evolving

nature of the misinformation problem on different social media platforms, urging a nuanced approach to address platform-specific challenges (Allcott et al., 2019).

Perceived information characteristics, self-expression, and socialising motivations as significant factors prompting regular social media users to share misinformation. Considering gender differences, women report a higher prevalence of misinformation sharing. It highlights the multifaceted nature of motivations behind misinformation sharing (Chen et al., 2015).

Pal and Loke (2019) examined the features of fact-checking websites, contributing to the development of a framework for understanding their information work dimensions. This research provides practical implications for designing effective fact-checking websites and emphasises the role of these platforms in countering misinformation.

According to McDougall's (2019) media literacy education is a proactive approach to build resilience against 'information disorder' which aligns with the evolving challenges in the media landscape. Critical media literacy, when integrated into education, outperforms reactive resources, emphasising the need for comprehensive educational strategies to equip individuals with the skills to navigate an information-rich environment.

While acknowledging positive outcomes of media literacy initiatives, there are challenges such as a lack of comprehensive evaluation data, potential ineffectiveness for specific materials, and the risk of fostering overconfidence. The recommendations put forward by Bulger and Davison (2018) underscore the perpetual struggle in assessing and updating media literacy programs.

## **Operational Definitions**

### ***Misinformation***

Misinformation, in the context of this study, pertains to the dissemination of incorrect or false information, whether intentional or unintentional, with a focus on information that has the potential to mislead or compromise its accuracy. It encompasses a broad spectrum of inaccuracies, including but not limited to disinformation (intentionally false information) and mal-information (information shared with a negative intent). In this paper, the term "misinformation" encompasses all forms of compromised or erroneous information, acknowledging the diverse ways in which false information can be conveyed without making a specific distinction between various categories.



***Political misinformation:***

In the context of this study, "Political misinformation" refers to a specific category of misinformation characterised by content related to political matters. This category encompasses information, whether intentionally false or not, that is primarily designed to influence, promote, or defame a political party, personality, or ideology. Political misinformation often takes the form of political propaganda, where the dissemination of compromised information is used as a means to advance particular political agendas, shape public opinion, or discredit political entities. This operational definition emphasises the significant role of political content in the context of misinformation within the study's specified region.

***Health misinformation:***

In the context of this study, "Health misinformation" pertains to a distinct category of misinformation characterised by the dissemination of misleading information that contains claims related to health and wellness. This type of misinformation has the potential to mislead individuals regarding their health decisions, such as whether to seek treatment, take specific medications, or receive vaccinations. Health misinformation often poses a direct risk to human well-being by potentially causing harm or influencing individuals in ways that could be detrimental to their health and safety. The focus of this operational definition underscores the critical nature of health-related misinformation, particularly in terms of its potential to impact individuals' decisions and well-being within the context of health concerns.

***Third-party independent fact-checking:***

In the context of this study, "Third-party independent fact-checking" pertains to a process wherein fact-checkers, external to the platform, assess the accuracy of information disseminated on Meta platforms, including Facebook. Fact-checkers utilise their own investigative and reporting methods, which may involve interviewing primary sources, consulting publicly available data, and conducting thorough analyses of media content, such as photos and videos. This assessment is independent of content removal decisions, which are based on Facebook's community standards. When a piece of content is deemed false by a fact-checker, its distribution on the platform is notably reduced. Those who have previously shared or intend to share such content are notified that the information is false. A warning label, linking to the fact-checker's article disproving the claim with original reporting, is applied to the content.

## **Research Objectives**

This research is dedicated to understanding how users engage with and how third-party fact-checking impacts the spread of misinformation on Facebook, focusing on the Malayalam language. To achieve this, the study outlines a set of specific objectives designed to investigate these aspects within the Malayalam-speaking Facebook community.

- To analyse the misinformation ecosystem on Facebook in the context of Kerala
- To investigate user engagement with misinformation shared on Facebook
- To examine the impact of third-party fact-checking on Facebook

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this study primarily relies on qualitative content analysis. This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating the complex dynamics of misinformation, user engagement, and the influence of third-party fact-checking on Facebook within the Malayalam language context. Qualitative content analysis involves a systematic examination of the content available on the platform, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the themes, nuances, and patterns present in posts, comments, and fact-checking efforts.

The sample selection process is designed to capture a representative cross-section of fact-checks and their associated claims. To achieve this, a specific number of fact-checks and their corresponding claims were selected from a list of published fact-checks sourced from IFCN signatory fact-checking portals in Malayalam. The selected time frame for this sample spans from August 2023 to October 2023. This systematic approach to sample selection ensures a focused and comprehensive analysis of the information landscape during the specified period, providing insights into the prevailing misinformation and the fact-checking initiatives specific to the Malayalam-speaking Facebook community.

Due to the inherent constraints imposed by the qualitative nature of this study and the imperative to manage time and resource limitations, a select number of samples have been chosen for analysis. Specifically, the study focuses on fact-check articles produced by four IFCN-recognised Malayalam fact-checking portals, namely NewsMeter, India Today, News Checker, and Fact Crescendo, all of which serve as

independent third-party fact-checkers collaborating with Meta. Articles were selected through a purposive sampling approach, with each organisation contributing articles that were aligned with the study period, based on the findings of the previous research.

## Analysis

This chapter analyses the data collected from the digital realm, specifically Facebook. This comprehensive analysis examines various aspects, commencing with the content analysis of user engagement. We also evaluate the fact-checking process and its influence within the context of misinformation in the Malayalam language on Facebook. The analysis aims to explore the complex dynamics of misinformation, the role of third-party fact-checkers, and the resulting impact on the information landscape. This chapter provides valuable insights into how users, misinformation, and fact-checking efforts interact in the digital environment, offering a clearer understanding of this dynamic relationship.

### Primary analysis & categorization of sample data

Sl No	Claim	Posted by (As per FC article reference)	Posted Date	Fact- checked by/ on	Rating	Genre
1	Visuals of spacecraft landing on Mars	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a>	26 June 2023	<a href="#">NewsMeter / 25 Aug 2023</a>	False	Uncategorized
2	Old photo during the election campaign of Oommen Chandy in Puthuppally constituency	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook Page</a>	21 Aug 2023	<a href="#">News Checker/ 24 Aug 2023</a>	False	Political

3	ISRO chairman visits RSS office	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook Page (Reel)</a>	27 Aug 2023	<a href="#">India Today/ 28 Aug 2023</a>	Missing Context	Political
4	Sangh Parivar attack on boy entered temple to drink water	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a>	30 July 2023	<a href="#">Fact Crescendo/ 1 Aug 2023</a>	False	Communal
5	Islamic terrorists attacked army personnel in Kollam and wrote PFI on his back	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook Page</a>	25 Sep 2023	<a href="#">NewsMeter/ 27 Sep 2023</a>	False	Communal
6	Photoshoot by PM Narendra Modi at Ramoji Film City	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a> <a href="#">(Archive Link)</a>	22 Sep 2023	<a href="#">News Checker/23 Sep 2023</a>	False	Political
7	Muslim boys and Hindu girls were caught from a cafe in MP during Police raid	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a>	16 Sep 2023	<a href="#">India Today/22 Sep 2023</a>	Missing Context	Communal

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8	The source of Nipah virus has been identified as Arecanut	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a>	17 Sep 2023	<a href="#">Fact Crescendo/ 22 Sep 2023</a>	False	Health
9	Photo of father and daughters with a smile in a collapsed building at Palestine	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook User</a>	26 Oct 2023	<a href="#">NewsMeter / 26 Oct 2023</a>	False (AI Generated)	Political / Communal
10	Samsung offers mobile phones as gift for lucky draw through social media	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook Page</a>	8 Oct 2023	<a href="#">News Checker / 11 Oct 2023</a>	False	Scam
11	Union government announces maternity benefits for MGNREGA workers	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook page</a>	15 Oct 2023	<a href="#">India Today / 18 Oct 2023</a>	False	Political
12	Woman without Burqa was not allowed to travel in bus in Kasaragod, Kerala	<a href="#">Unverified Facebook Page</a>	27 Oct 2023	<a href="#">Fact Crescendo/ 27 Oct 2023</a>	False	Communal

Table 1.1 Sample data set

## **Misinformation ecosystem on Facebook**

An analysis of the sample data clearly shows that the majority of misinformation during the study period falls into the categories of politics and communal affairs. Kerala is well-known for its political awareness and harmonious coexistence of different religious and communal groups. Given this context, it becomes evident that a significant amount of misinformation, particularly within these two categories, reflects deliberate attempts to influence people politically or incite communal tensions through social media.

These initial observations are evident from the primary analysis of the collected data. The prevalence of misinformation in politics and communal matters raises questions about potential motives behind these misleading narratives. It suggests that misinformation campaigns might be carefully coordinated to politically manipulate individuals or sow discord within communities. The juxtaposition of political awareness and communal harmony with the prevalence of misinformation underscores the critical need to investigate the origins and motivations behind these deceptive narratives, which have the potential to disrupt the social and political fabric of the region.

While health misinformation is relatively less prevalent, it is contextually significant, especially during health crises. For instance, the data includes examples shared during the Nipah virus outbreak in the state. It highlights the contextual and potentially harmful nature of health misinformation. They emphasise the vital importance of promoting health literacy and implementing effective strategies to combat health-related misinformation.

Another noteworthy discovery from the initial data analysis is the prevalence of AI-generated content and scams, which pose significant threats. These types of misinformation can be particularly challenging for the general population to identify, potentially leading to more severe consequences. Scams, in particular, exploit individuals who may not possess strong digital literacy, making them vulnerable to financial fraud and similar risks. These findings underscore the need for heightened awareness and concern regarding these emerging issues.

In the evaluation of misinformation, a spectrum of ratings is observed. The majority of the selected samples consists of completely false claims lacking factual accuracy. Following closely are contents presented out of context, where the information itself is true but framed out of context. Partly false information is also present but in relatively fewer instances. Notably, there is the presence of edited or altered media contents, particularly in images and videos, including those generated by AI. This

primary analysis underscores a prevalent pattern that is the predominant circulation of entirely false information across the internet, indicating the potential for significant harm and consequences.

Identifying the origins of this misinformation is often a complex task, primarily due to technical constraints. However, it is important to note that the initial sharing of political and communal misinformation predominantly occurs through various Facebook pages, while other categories are often associated with individual user accounts. Also, a considerable portion of these accounts appears to be inauthentic, possibly representing fake profiles.

### **User engagement**

In exploring how users engage with misinformation on Facebook in the Malayalam-speaking community, the analysis uncovers diverse patterns. Initial scrutiny of cumulative comments on misinformation reveals a prevalent lack of awareness among users about the claims' accuracy. Many users respond with unwavering belief, contributing to the challenge of misinformation spread. The investigation extends to specific misinformation categories, highlighting variations in user responses. Wrong claims related to science and technology often receive more support from users, suggesting an increased vulnerability to misinformation. Political claims, in contrast, attract a discerning audience with commendable political literacy, although claims disseminated through political entities' pages present a paradox due to algorithmic effects and echo chambers. Communal claims, influenced by mainstream media, often see greater user recognition as misinformation. This section unravels the complexities of user engagement, revealing varying degrees of susceptibility and resilience across different thematic categories.

SI No	Claim	No, of Comments	Recognizing	Not Recognizing	Neutral	%
		(Cumulative numbers from select posts)				
1	Visuals of spacecraft landing on Mars	358	22	272	64	75.9%

2	Old photo during the election campaign of Oommen Chandy in Puthuppally constituency	424	29	328	67	77.3%
3	ISRO chairman visits RSS office	189	17	149	23	78.8%
4	Sangh Parivar attack on boy entered temple to drink water	214	17	168	29	78.5%
5	Islamic terrorists attacked army personnel in Kollam and wrote wrote PFI on his back	623	265	313	45	50.2%
6	Photoshoot by PM Narendra Modi at Ramoji Film City	214	12	178	24	83.2%
7	Muslim boys and Hindu girls were caught from a cafe in MP during Police raid	186	28	132	26	70.9%



8	The source of Nipah virus has been identified as Arecanut	236	45	152	39	64.4%
9	Photo of father and daughters with a smile in a collapsed building at Palestine	64	8	39	17	60.9%
10	Samsung offers mobile phones as gift for lucky draw through social media	443	12	409	22	92.3%
11	Union government announces maternity benefits for MGNREGA workers	89	21	56	12	62.9%
12	Woman without Burqa was not allowed to travel in bus in Kasaragod, Kerala	378	207	149	20	39.4%

*Table 1.2 User engagement analysis*

Upon scrutinising the collective comments on selected posts for each claim, a prevailing lack of awareness among users regarding the veracity of the claims becomes apparent. The majority of users exhibit a tendency to unquestioningly believe in the truthfulness of the claim, evident in their comments. Notably, the number of users who take the time to comment represents a subset of those who

engage more extensively with the post, while a larger segment merely reacts to the content. This suggests a potentially higher number of individuals who may endorse the claim as true, surpassing the representation indicated by comment analysis alone. Across all categories of misinformation examined in this study, approximately 60% of the comments fail to recognize the factual inaccuracy of the shared content. Within the remaining 40%, half of the responses adopt a neutral stance, abstaining from taking a definitive position on the accuracy of the information.

Another observation pertains to claims related to science and technology, where a lack of awareness among users is even more pronounced compared to claims of a communal nature. This indicates that misinformation within the domain of science and technology may have a more significant potential to mislead individuals in the specific context. Over 75 percent of comments within this category exhibit an inability to identify the shared content as inaccurate or misleading.

Analysing the comments associated with the most shared political claims, a higher proportion of individuals demonstrate an ability to recognise these claims as misinformation compared to other categories, underscoring the commendable political literacy within Kerala. However, a notable pattern emerges when examining claims disseminated through Facebook pages of political parties, politicians, or users with a substantial follower base affiliated with a specific political party. In such instances, comments in support of the claims outweigh dissenting opinions. This phenomenon can be attributed to the algorithmic features and echo chamber effect inherent in social media platforms. Users aligned with a particular political party tend to support claims against opposing parties, even when aware of their inaccuracies. This phenomenon does not necessarily imply an inability to recognise misinformation; rather, it highlights a tendency to actively propagate disinformation. The distinction between misinformation recognition and deliberate disinformation dissemination warrants further investigation into the complexities of political discourse on social media platforms.

Analysing comments on claims categorised as communal reveals a notable trend wherein a larger number of individuals demonstrate an ability to recognise these claims as misinformation. This discernment is notably influenced by the significant role played by mainstream media, as evidenced in one of the communal claims chosen for this study. The claim, later debunked by mainstream media, saw the widespread sharing of news clippings and links by numerous users under the post, aiding in disseminating the truth. This suggests that, despite instances of political polarisation, a substantial majority of users actively challenge communal claims, transcending their political affiliations. This finding also underscores the harmonious coexistence

and fraternity within the state across religions, distinguishing it from trends observed in other regions. However, it is acknowledged that instances of communal intolerance persist on social media, primarily confined within echo chambers, as the majority often publicly refutes them, leveraging mainstream media support. This complex interplay highlights the dual dynamics of communal discourse on social media – internalised polarisation and the broader, public defence of communal harmony, often mediated by mainstream media interventions.

### **Impact of third-party independent fact-checking**

In combating the spread of misinformation on Facebook, a critical component of the platform's strategy involves collaboration with third-party organisations dedicated to fact-checking. These organisations operate jointly with Meta to scrutinise the accuracy of information circulating on the platform. The fact-checking process involves these organisations preparing and publishing detailed fact-check articles on their respective websites. Fact-checkers then utilise these articles' links to assess and rate the accuracy of posts flagged as potentially false or misleading.

Once a post is rated as false or lacking context, the post owner receives a notification, alerting them that the shared information is not deemed factually accurate. Simultaneously, individuals who shared the information also receive notifications about the fact-check. An interesting aspect of this process is the option given to the post owner to appeal the fact-check decision. This involves presenting evidence in support of the initially shared claims. The appeal undergoes further scrutiny by the fact-checker, who may choose to withdraw the rating or reject the appeal based on the provided evidence.

Importantly, the application of a fact-check rating has tangible consequences for the post's reach and visibility. Once a post receives a fact-check rating, its reach declines, and visibility across platforms is significantly reduced.

This section delves into an in-depth analysis of the impact of third-party independent fact-checking on Facebook.

<b>Sl No</b>	<b>Claim</b>	<b>Claim Date</b>	<b>FC on</b>	<b>Total Comments (Multiple posts)</b>	<b>Before FC</b>	<b>After FC</b>
1	Visuals of spacecraft landing on Mars	26 June 2023	25 Aug 2023	358	337	21
2	Old photo during the election campaign of Oommen Chandy in Puthuppally constituency	21 Aug 2023	24 Aug 2023	424	368	56
3	ISRO chairman visits RSS office	27 Aug 2023	28 Aug 2023	189	171	18
4	Sangh Parivar attack on boy entered temple to drink water	30 July 2023	1 Aug 2023	214	Post deleted by the user(s) after fact-check rating	
5	Islamic terrorists attacked army personnel in Kollam and wrote wrote PFI on his back	25 Sep 2023	27 Sep 2023	623	374	249

6	Photoshoot by PM Narendra Modi at Ramoji Film City	22 Sep 2023	23 Sep 2023	214	Post deleted by the user(s) after fact-check rating	
7	Muslim boys and Hindu girls were caught from a cafe in MP during Police raid	16 Sep 2023	22 Sep 2023	186	168	18
8	The source of Nipah virus has been identified as Arecanut	17 Sep 2023	22 Sep 2023	236	Post deleted by the user(s) after fact-check rating	
9	Photo of father and daughters with a smile in a collapsed building at Palestine	26 Oct 2023	26 Oct 2023	64	57	7
10	Samsung offers mobile phones as gift for lucky draw through social media	8 Oct 2023	11 Oct 2023	443	Post deleted by the user(s) after fact-check rating	

11	Union government announces maternity benefits for MGNREGA workers	15 Oct 2023	18 Oct 2023	89	64	25
12	Woman without Burqa was not allowed to travel in bus in Kasaragod, Kerala	27 Oct 2023	27 Oct 2023	378	236	142

*Table 1.3 Analysis of the impact of third-party fact-check*

In the majority of instances, fact-check stories are promptly published within two to three days of the initial posting of the content. The immediacy of this process contributes to an almost instantaneous decline in the post's circulation. The speed and thoroughness of this decline, however, depend on the efficiency of the fact-checking organisations and the number of organisations involved in scrutinising the content. It is evident from our analysis that most fact-checking organisations exert considerable effort to expedite the publication of fact-check articles. Notably, there are instances within the sample set where a fact-check is published on the very same day as the content's initial posting. Additionally, a comprehensive examination of the fact-check sample set reveals a concerted effort by fact-check organisations to maintain diversity in their fact-checks, fostering independence in their evaluations. This commitment to diverse and timely fact-checking practices forms a crucial aspect of the overall impact and efficacy of fact-checking initiatives on Facebook.

The decline in the number of comments post the publication of fact-check stories and the subsequent rating of content by fact-checkers is a notable trend. However, it is crucial to interpret this reduction as a technical consequence of the Facebook platform's back-end processes. When a content piece undergoes fact-checking and receives a rating, its reach diminishes, naturally leading to a decrease in the number of comments.

Despite this general pattern, specific instances arise where the comments persist even after fact-checking. This phenomenon is particularly observable in posts where users

actively identify misinformation, presenting evidence within their comments. Such instances often coincide with media reports from mainstream regional outlets. This nuanced observation suggests that users tend to rely more on regional news media platforms than formal fact-check articles, especially when misinformation gains coverage in local news. In contrast, for the majority of cases, comments appearing after the publication of fact-check stories constitute approximately 10 percent of the total number of comments.

In certain instances, users opted to delete their content following the publication of fact-checks and rating of the posts. This action can be attributed to two potential motivations. Firstly, it might indicate users' awareness of the consequences associated with sharing false information, reflecting a positive inclination towards rectifying their online contributions. Alternatively, users might delete content strategically to enhance the visibility of their profiles or pages as keeping rated content could diminish reach and impact monetisation. Despite these instances, it is crucial to highlight that over 70 percent of the sampled claims persist on Facebook. This suggests that a substantial proportion of users are unwilling to retract or rectify their content, portraying a concerning indifference to the consequences even after being notified by the fact-check.

An additional aspect to consider is the language barrier that could impede users' comprehension of the fact-checking process. Notifications and labels associated with fact-checking are provided in English, which might pose a challenge for local users who may not fully grasp the details of the fact-checking procedure. While the fact-check articles themselves are presented in Malayalam, crucial instructions, warnings, and labels are not available in the regional language. This linguistic gap presents a potential hindrance, preventing users from fully understanding the truth unveiled by fact-checking efforts. Addressing this language disparity is pivotal in ensuring that users can access and comprehend the corrective information provided through fact-checks, enhancing the efficacy of these interventions in combating misinformation.

Upon analysing the user engagement and impact of third-party fact-checking, it is found that the decline in comments post fact-checking is largely technical, driven by the platform's back-end processes reducing post visibility. Notably, posts with user-identified misinformation sustain discussion, emphasising reliance on regional news media. The fact-checking process, initiated promptly within two to three days in most cases, impacts post circulation, showcasing the dedication of fact-check organisations. However, users' reluctance to withdraw or correct content, despite notifications, signals a concerning indifference to misinformation consequences. Moreover, the language barrier in fact-check notifications poses a challenge,

potentially hindering comprehension among local users. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance user awareness, improve comprehension, and foster a collective commitment to combating misinformation within this unique socio-linguistic landscape.

## **Findings**

Navigating the complexities of user engagement and third-party fact-checking on Facebook within the Malayalam-speaking community, the analysis reveals various insights. As the study explores a number of findings, we uncover essential patterns in how users respond to fact-checking and how misinformation spreads. The following points distil these insights, covering aspects such as the technicalities of post visibility, user reactions to fact-check notifications, and the vital role of language comprehension in the effectiveness of fact-checking efforts.

- The visibility of posts experiences an immediate decline following fact-checking, primarily due to Facebook's back-end processes.
- A significant number of users exhibit difficulty in identifying misinformation, as evident from the analysis of comments.
- Posts containing user-identified misinformation tend to sustain discussion, indicating a reliance on regional news media for validation.
- Fact-checks are typically published within two to three days of the content posting, underscoring the dedication and efficiency of fact-checking organisations.
- Users exhibit a reluctance to withdraw or correct content even after receiving fact-check notifications, reflecting a concerning indifference to the consequences of misinformation.
- The language barrier in fact-check notifications, with crucial instructions, warnings, and labels in English, presents a challenge for local users, potentially hindering full comprehension.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The effectiveness of third-party fact-checking, introduced by Meta to curtail the spread of false information on its social media platforms, is evident. This strategic approach adeptly achieves its technical objective of diminishing the reach and circulation of misleading content. However, challenges arise in effective communication and user education due to language barriers, necessitating adaptations



to enhance accessibility. To address this, it is crucial to make fact-checking processes more regional language-friendly, fostering better understanding among users. Moreover, platforms like Facebook should lead the development of user-friendly tools and techniques empowering individuals to verify information before posting. Urgent advancements in these areas are important, considering the complex nature of online misinformation. This proactive approach is essential for cultivating a more informed and vigilant digital community.

Analysing user comments reveals a prevalent inability among a substantial portion to recognise misinformation, evident from their comments devoid of factual understanding. This underscores the imperative to educate users on identifying misinformation through media literacy. While a majority remains unaware, it's crucial to acknowledge that some users actively support false claims for political reasons. This highlights the need to impart knowledge about the social responsibility of combating misinformation. Initiatives focused on media and information literacy can significantly contribute to enhancing users' abilities to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.

The role of regional media emerges prominently in addressing false information spread on social media platforms. When regional media outlets pick up misinformation issues, amplify them through news coverage, and share on their social media handles, the wider visibility lends credibility to the fact that the information is false. Consequently, a majority of users who inadvertently shared the misinformation often correct themselves, referencing the credible media posts. Interestingly, this corrective mechanism is less pronounced with fact-check stories, as users seldom engage by commenting with links to fact-checks. This underscores the substantial impact and responsibility that legacy media platforms hold in the battle against misinformation. Their vigilance in fact-checking, particularly through social media channels, can significantly contribute to cultivating a more accurate and informed digital discourse.

While fact-check organisations demonstrate commendable effectiveness in promptly publishing fact-check stories as soon as misinformation starts circulating, they encounter the challenge of limited readership. To maximise their impact, fact-checks should be disseminated through more innovative and interactive media platforms, reaching a broader audience. These organisations must strategically enhance their visibility and actively educate social media users about the essence and utility of fact-checking. Despite their substantial potential, the key lies in reaching out to a more extensive user base, ensuring that the valuable service they provide becomes an integral part of the broader digital discourse. Proactive outreach efforts can harness

the full potential of fact-check organisations in the ongoing battle against misinformation.

The reluctance of users to withdraw their posts even after fact-checking often stems from a lack of understanding about the notifications and their implications. This can be attributed to a combination of factors, including ignorance and a general unawareness of the potential consequences of sharing misinformation. Educating users on the nuances of misinformation, its repercussions, and fostering media literacy are crucial steps to empower individuals in navigating social media responsibly. Encouraging a mindset for correction, where users promptly rectify misinformation upon realisation, is essential. Language barriers can significantly contribute to this reluctance, emphasising the need for platforms like Meta to take proactive measures. Introducing notifications and instructions in regional languages would enhance accessibility and understanding, catering to the diverse linguistic landscape of users. Also, there is a greater possibility of pre-bunking to be carried out by various media organisations to make users aware about instances of misinformation even before they encounter them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is subject to certain technical limitations. The sample set, derived through purposive sampling from all IFCN fact-check portals in Malayalam, may not comprehensively represent the entire misinformation ecosystem. The small sample size, a consequence of time constraints inherent in qualitative studies, potentially affects the generalisability of the identified misinformation landscape.

Moreover, some posts were deleted after fact-checks were published, introducing accessibility limitations for analysing comments and user engagement both pre and post fact-check. Additionally, as users have the autonomy to delete their content on Facebook and archiving is not feasible, referencing the study may encounter challenges, and figures may undergo changes after the research paper's publication.

Also, technical constraints impeded the retrieval of readership data for fact-check articles. Consequently, an accurate analysis of the reach of fact-check articles was not feasible, underscoring an additional limitation in assessing the broader impact of third-party fact-checking efforts.

Despite these limitations, it is essential to note that concerted efforts were made to provide accurate information, resulting in meaningful findings that contribute to our understanding of misinformation dynamics in the digital space.

## **Conclusion**

The study brings out the complex dynamics of misinformation within the Malayalam-speaking community on Facebook, emphasising the critical need for effective strategies in combating false information. Delving into the digital realm, this study has revealed various aspects of user engagement and the impact of third-party fact-checking.

The examination of user engagement patterns revealed a prevalent difficulty among users in discerning misinformation, necessitating media and information literacy initiatives. The findings also shed light on the effectiveness of third-party fact-checking in curtailing the circulation of false information on social media platforms. However, the limitations inherent in the study, such as sample representativeness and the challenges of analysing deleted posts, underscore the complex nature of researching misinformation in the digital age.

Beyond these limitations, the research serves as a crucial step toward understanding the contours of the misinformation landscape in the Malayalam-speaking community. The insights derived from the analysis of user engagement and the impact of third-party fact-checking contribute valuable perspectives to ongoing discourse on combating misinformation. This study reinforces the need for a multi-pronged approach, combining technological innovations, media literacy campaigns, and collaboration with fact-checking organisations to navigate the evolving challenges of misinformation on social media.

As digital landscapes continue to evolve, it is important to adapt strategies continually, considering the evolving nature of misinformation. The findings of this research pave the way for informed interventions, emphasising the collective responsibility of platforms, media organisations, and users in fostering an environment that upholds the integrity of information dissemination in the digital era.

### ***Conflict of Interest Declaration***

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Algorithmic Management: Impacts on Labour Autonomy in Gig Platforms with Special Reference to Uber

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## Abstract

This research investigates the dynamics of algorithmic management and communication, focusing on their effects on labour autonomy within the gig economy, with Uber drivers in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, as the focal point. As the gig economy continues to reshape the nature of work, algorithmic decision-making has emerged as a central force, presenting both challenges and opportunities for workers on app-based platforms. While discussions on algorithmic injustice have gained attention, this research uniquely explores the lesser-explored facet of the impact of algorithms on labour autonomy. The purpose of this research is to investigate how the algorithmic management embedded within Uber's app influences the capacity for drivers to make independent choices. The results show a complex relationship between driver autonomy, information transparency, and the larger labour dynamics in the gig economy. The prevalent issue of information asymmetry, communication difficulties, and isolated incidents of resistance among Uber drivers are among the major themes. In addition to adding to the increasing body of knowledge on algorithmic management, the study emphasises the need for more in-depth research on the relationship between algorithmic platforms and gig work in particular socio-political contexts. This is because understanding and addressing the dynamic changes that occur between algorithmic platforms and gig workers are crucial.

**Keywords** : *Algorithmic Management, Gig Economy, Labour Autonomy*

## Introduction

The gig economy's rise and spread have changed the nature of work and presented new opportunities and problems for employees using app-based platforms. Out of all the changes, algorithmic management has become one of the main factors influencing how work is done in this setting. In order to fully understand the complex consequences of algorithmic decision-making on the structural conditions of their

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job, this study explores the implications of algorithmic management on the lives of Uber drivers operating in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Algorithmic decision-making has applications in a variety of fields, including criminal justice, credit scoring, and healthcare, and is not limited to the gig economy (Kitchin, 2017). Internet users frequently come across algorithms that customise the selection and presentation of online content, relying on the analysis of user and behaviour-related data (Gran et al., 2021; Sundar, 2020). Search engines, social media, content platforms, and product recommender systems are just a few of the online activities where personalisation and recommendation services are being used extensively (Latzer et al., 2016). Recent research has started examining the potential impacts of algorithmically curated content in domains such as online news (Helberger, 2019; Thorson, 2020), music and video streaming (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Prey, 2017), and online information searching (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Ridesharing platforms, which are a subset of the on-demand economy, widely use algorithms for the allocation and management of their services. These algorithms play an important role in matching riders with drivers, route optimisation, and dynamic price adjustment. In order to improve the effectiveness and timeliness of the service, ridesharing platforms rely on sophisticated algorithms that consider user preferences, real-time data, and a variety of external factors. Ridesharing platforms use algorithms to make decisions in order to give drivers and passengers a smooth and customised experience, which helps to make the on-demand economy in the transportation sector successful and long-lasting. The purpose of this research is to investigate how the algorithmic management embedded within Uber's app influences the capacity for drivers to make independent choices.

The app-based work that drivers do in places like Brazil, the US, England, India, and South Africa is similar as Uber is a worldwide firm that operates similarly throughout the world. Globally, there are uniform algorithm-based management approaches. But the real working circumstances that result from this algorithmic management vary from nation to nation, particularly when contrasting the global North and South. This is because every country has a different labour market structure and set of labour laws (Amorim & Moda, 2020).

While there has been extensive exploration of the political economy of platform labour in Western contexts, research on this subject within the specific Indian context remains comparatively limited, with a few notable exceptions (Thuppilikkat et al., 2023). Given Kerala's reputation for political activism and robust labour organisation, it is interesting to note an apparent lack of scholarly work addressing how algorithmically mediated gig platforms are impacting workers' autonomy in the state.

Kerala's historical engagement with labour movements often situates it at the forefront of workers' rights discussions. However, the rise of algorithmic management on gig platforms, which significantly influences labour dynamics, seems to have received minimal focus within local academic circles in Kerala. The shortage of research on how algorithmic systems affect worker autonomy in Kerala's gig economy raises important questions about applying traditional labour frameworks to evolving employment. This gap highlights the need for targeted research on how Kerala's sociopolitical landscape intersects with emerging technologies within gig work and the potential implications for worker agency.

## **Literature Review**

Many academics have explained and defined algorithmic management, but Mateescu and Nguien's (2019) work stands out for its thorough understanding. In their study, algorithmic management is identified as a diverse set of technological tools and methods specifically crafted for remotely overseeing workforces. The core mechanism involves the collection of data and the surveillance of workers, enabling the facilitation of automated or semi-automated decision-making processes. This phenomenon predominantly originated from companies within the "sharing" or "gig" economy, characterised by features such as consumer-sourced rating systems and the deployment of automated "nudges." The adoption of these algorithmic management practices has sparked significant debates around the employment classification of workers, especially within the "gig" economy, where individuals are often labelled as independent contractors despite the evident use of technology to exert control over their work activities.

Scholz (2013), in his article to the volume "Digital labour: The Internet as Playground and Factory," presents a spectrum of questions concerning digitally mediated labour and novel models of production and consumption. Scholz emphasises the emergence of web-based work environments that lack the worker protections found in even the most precarious working-class jobs.

Prior research on ridesharing has investigated the phenomenon in various contexts, including ad hoc arrangements, not-for-profit models, and cooperative setups (Anderson, 2014; Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014; Furuhata et al., 2013). Lee, Metsky, and Dabbish (2015) present the most detailed independent examination to date regarding the driving habits and preferences of Uber drivers, introducing the term "algorithmic management" to delineate the mechanisms guiding Uber and Lyft drivers. This concept of algorithmic management has been expanded to shed light on



the automated enforcement of company policies impacting the behaviours and practices of Uber drivers.

Choudary (2015) proposes that the unique logic of platform intermediation is based on three distinct operational aspects: a network community comprising platform participants fostering relationships, an infrastructure composed of software, tools, rules, and services, and data facilitating the matching of supply with demand through the platform. Smartphone mobile connectivity plays a pivotal role in bringing users together and accomplishing tasks that were previously time-consuming and required involvement with numerous institutions (Morozov, 2015).

The gig economy platforms such as Uber and Airbnb represent the current state of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2016), in which users are connected by digital intermediaries for services and transactions. Network effects that reshape work dynamics, algorithm-driven optimisation, and data-centric matchmaking characterise this change. While offering flexibility, it also raises critical concerns about labour rights, fair compensation, and concentrated market power, necessitating regulatory scrutiny for equitable and ethical practices in this evolving economic model.

Amorim and Moda (2020) conducted research on algorithmic management and the working conditions of Uber drivers in Brazil. They investigated the complex relationship between technology-driven management practices and drivers' labour experiences. Their argument states that using apps to manage labour processes enables algorithmic control, establishing a new way to direct and monitor labour power. This trend increases the real subordination of workers to capital and intensifies forms of work exploitation and domination.

Greenhouse (2016) explores the difficulties and rights associated with on-demand labour. The piece examines the experiences of on-demand workers, highlighting their challenges and broader implications for labour relations. Greenhouse's comprehensive analysis provides valuable perspectives on current employer-worker dynamics within the realm of on-demand work.

There is a remarkable lack of research in the Indian context about algorithmic management and how it affects worker autonomy, especially in the gig economy. Seeing this gap, the current study is an attempt to further our knowledge of how algorithmic systems influence labour autonomy and working conditions in India. Examining how algorithms manage and influence workers is crucial for having educated conversations about labour dynamics and the wider consequences for worker autonomy in this particular socioeconomic context, especially as the gig economy gains momentum in the country. The purpose of this study is to fill the void

in the existing literature by providing insights that are especially relevant to the Indian labour landscape.

## **Methodology**

The complex dynamics of algorithmic management and communication is examined in this study using a qualitative methodology to explore how they affect the labour autonomy of Uber drivers in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. A detailed examination of the experiences, viewpoints, and individualised interpretations of participants in the context of gig platform work is made possible by the qualitative methodology.

### ***Sampling***

Twenty-one drivers were chosen through the use of purposeful sampling, guaranteeing a cross-section of Thiruvananthapuram Uber drivers. In order to capture a wide variety of experiences within the local environment, criteria like age, years of experience, and working circumstances were taken into consideration. The sample's are between the ages of 23 and 37, and they have one to four years of experience driving for Uber. This sampling approach was to give the study's conclusions more depth and scope.

### ***Data collection***

Primarily, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather data. The interviews took place in two sessions, from May 20 to June 3, 2023, lasting from 45 to 90 minutes each. The interviews were conducted using a series of open-ended questions that were carefully crafted to extract detailed accounts about algorithmic management, communication dynamics, and the perceived influence on labour autonomy. The interviews were carried out face-to-face, with a focus on privacy and secrecy as well as ethical considerations. With the participants' cooperation, audio recordings were made, guaranteeing that the subtleties of their comments were accurately captured.

This methodological approach, which is based on qualitative research, offers a strong basis for investigating the complex interactions that Uber drivers in Thiruvananthapuram have between algorithmic management, communication practices, and labour autonomy. Purposive sampling, which places a strong emphasis on participant diversity, improves the findings' validity and richness and enables a thorough knowledge of the varied experiences found in the gig platform economy.

## Discussion

When examining the results, three main themes stood out, and we'll examine each of them in the following sections. These themes offer detailed insights into the experiences of Uber drivers in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Exploring these themes helps us understand the complex interactions between algorithmic management, communication practices, and labour autonomy in the gig economy.

### *Information asymmetry*

*Driving for Uber is risky. We don't know where the passenger is going until they get in the car. For example, the ride might be short, like 5 kilometres. But getting to the passenger first could mean driving 6 or 7 kilometres through busy traffic. Not knowing the final destination ahead of time can make these rides less profitable for us taxi drivers (P 17).*

The theme of information asymmetry emerged as a pervasive concern among the respondents. Participants P3, P8, and P17 expressing a shared perspective on a specific issue. These respondents unanimously pointed out that Uber conceals critical details concerning the dropping point of a trip from the drivers. Despite Uber having comprehensive knowledge of the entire trip, encompassing both the pickup and drop-off locations, drivers are left uninformed about the destination until they physically reach the pickup point and acquire the passenger's details. This operational opacity significantly impacts the autonomy of drivers, hindering their ability to negotiate more favourable terms for the trip. Blind passenger acceptance leads drivers to undertake trips where the distance travelled to pick up the passenger exceeds the distance of the actual route. Since the mileage covered to reach the user is not compensated, these journeys are not financially beneficial. Furthermore, not disclosing the final destination to drivers when they receive the ride request hinders their ability to use their judgement in deciding whether to accept the trip.

By withholding information about the trip's endpoint until the driver is already en route, Uber creates a situation where drivers are essentially operating at a disadvantage. Because of this lack of transparency, drivers are unable to decide for themselves whether a given trip fits their schedule, preferences, or financial goals. It lessens their ability to bargain for better terms from other users or the platform, which adds to the power asymmetry between the driver and the platform.

The effects of not knowing the passenger's destination go beyond just inconvenience. It shapes the driver's autonomy within the gig economy. As key players in providing the service, drivers should have full trip details upfront. The drivers' common concern

highlights a bigger problem with how algorithmic management systems work on these platforms. It emphasises the need to share information more fairly to empower drivers. This would help create a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship between the platform and its workforce. It underscores the complex interactions between transparent information, driver autonomy, and the overall labour dynamics in the gig economy. The unequal access to information in these algorithm-driven apps is inherent in their architecture, purposefully creating an unequal power dynamic. This information asymmetry is embedded in the intentional way the apps are constructed to maintain disparities favouring the platforms over the workers.

Uber frequently offers financial incentives to drivers, known as "partners," by providing extra payments for achieving a specific number of rides within a set timeframe or offering bonuses during periods of high demand. The timing and specifics of these promotions can be unpredictable, and the parameters for each promotion may vary. Drivers interpret these incentives as a way for Uber to influence and enhance their work engagement. Although the additional compensation renders these trips financially advantageous, drivers recognize that such incentives involve a degree of direction from the company, as illustrated by one participant:

*On certain occasions, especially during holidays or festival days like IFFK days, there's an incentive for working after midnight, and they guide me to work at that time, probably because they anticipate a higher demand for drivers. Is it a profit for me? Yes, but it's guided... (P 21).*

### **Communication challenges:**

A primary obstacle highlighted by participants centred on the absence of direct and substantive communication channels with the platform.

*It's tough to communicate with the platform. It is difficult to voice my concerns because everything seems automated. I can't ask questions or obtain clarification easily (P 5).*

Most interactions seemed standardised and automated, which made it difficult for drivers to talk about specific issues or get clear responses. The lack of personalised communication prevented them from raising questions, or providing feedback. This absence of direct communication made it tough for drivers to voice their concerns, underscoring the need for more straightforward and human-centred ways to engage with the platform.

Furthermore, participants felt the algorithmic communication system limited their capacity to negotiate terms or conditions. The automated nature of the system offered little opportunity for individual discussion or dialogue with the platform, resulting in a lack of agency and control over their work conditions. The rigid rules and guidelines predefined by the algorithmic communication framework allowed minimal flexibility or customization

P 5 also emphasises a particular problem with payments, emphasising how hard it is to get in contact with an Uber representative in person. Initially, when they tried to contact support over a payment issue, they received only automated responses. *"It's irritating to communicate with these computer's when we need clarity, especially in money related issues"*. P5 says, expressing annoyance.

This frustration is common among gig workers, automated solutions frequently lack the complexity and understanding needed to handle individual problems, especially those involving salary disparities. When automated technologies are used for first communication, workers' ability to fully understand and resolve their concerns is hindered. When faced with difficulties, particularly those pertaining to their pay, employees may become even more annoyed and irritated due to the impersonal character of automated responses. Instead, they may seek out a more responsive human engagement...

### ***Subtle resistance***

Despite the absence of significant collective resistance among Uber drivers in Kerala, there are hints of subtle resistance. P 1, P 2, P 10, P 11, P 12, P 18, P 19, and P 20, who were guaranteed confidentiality, disclosed examples of their efforts to resist algorithmically managed platforms. In an effort to challenge the control exerted by algorithmic management, these drivers are involved in a subtle form of resistance. To be precise, they encourage passengers to cancel trips, subsequently proposing to complete the same trip at the original Uber cost.

*Initially, our strategy was contacting the passenger from our registered mobile number, requesting them to cancel the Uber trip, promising the ride at the same cost as offered by Uber. But, unknown to us, Uber was monitoring these calls, which led to some drivers being deactivated. We then tried contacting them from our personal numbers with the same request, but passengers were reluctant to cancel since they didn't know if we would arrive as promised. Now our approach is to arrive at the pickup*

*location, ask the passenger about their trip, and request they cancel while assuring we will take them for Uber's quoted fare ( P 11).*

This strategy reflects a subtle way drivers resist the constraints of algorithmic decision-making. By influencing them to get trips cancelled, drivers aim to work around and interfere with the predetermined algorithms, seeking to regain some control over their work. This demonstrates how drivers creatively challenge the algorithmic systems that often dictate their operations. It highlights the adaptive techniques drivers use to assert agency within the limits of gig platforms.

While these acts of resistance may be small-scale and individually motivated, they reveal underlying tensions between drivers and algorithmic management. Drivers trying to sidestep the system points to a desire for more autonomy and frustration with perceived restrictions from algorithmic decision-making in the gig economy. Examining these subtle resistance tactics provides key insights into the evolving relationship between gig workers and the algorithmic platforms they must navigate.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, this study has examined in detail how algorithmic management affects the autonomy that Uber drivers have over their jobs in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. With the rise of the gig economy and the extensive use of algorithms, workers in rideshare platforms face new challenges. The aim of this study was to understand how algorithmic management influences the fundamental conditions of work, shedding light on the experiences of Uber drivers in this new environment.

The concept of "algorithmic domination" is put forth to analyse how algorithms, particularly in gig work, are utilised as tools to impose control over workers. Though discussion of algorithmic unfairness is increasing, this research uniquely examines a less-studied area – the impact of algorithms on personal freedom. The findings shed light on the intricate connections between information access, drivers' independence, and the broader structure of labour relations within the gig economy.

The theme of unequal access to information was a prevalent concern, with drivers voicing similar perspectives on Uber withholding key trip specifics. This lack of transparency significantly constrains drivers' autonomy, hindering their capacity to negotiate favourable terms and creating an imbalance in the driver-platform relationship. The research advocates for a more fair distribution of information to empower gig workers.

Communication challenges highlighted by participants reveal the limits imposed by automated, standardised messaging systems. The absence of direct, substantive channels prevents drivers from effectively addressing issues or negotiating conditions, reducing their agency and control over working terms. Frustrations with automated responses underscore the need for more responsive, human-focused communication, especially regarding sensitive payment matters.

Moreover, indications of minor resistance among Kerala's Uber drivers shed light on adaptive tactics used to navigate and disrupt predetermined algorithms. While individually motivated and relatively small-scale, these subtle acts of defiance reflect a collective desire for more autonomy within gig platforms. Examining these emerging dynamics provides key insights into tensions between gig workers and algorithmic management, signalling a reassessment of algorithmic practices is needed.

This research contributes to the broader academic discourse by exploring the impacts of algorithmic gig platforms on worker autonomy in Kerala specifically, a state with strong labour organisation history. The lack of local research on this topic reveals a significant gap, prompting further investigation into the unique intersection of algorithmic management and gig work in Kerala's sociopolitical context. As the gig economy continues evolving, these perspectives are critical for promoting balanced, ethical relationships between gig workers and the platforms influencing their labour experiences

### ***Conflict of Interest Declaration***

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Exploring Human-Wildlife Coexistence in the Theyyam Art of Kerala

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## Abstract

This study delves into the fascinating realm of human-wildlife coexistence as depicted within the unique context of *Theyyam* art in Kerala. Theyyam, a traditional art form deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the region, serves as a powerful medium to explore the intricate relationship between humans and wildlife. The primary objective of this study is to dissect the artistic and symbolic elements present in Theyyam performances that illuminate the harmonious interaction between humans and the natural world. Through meticulous analysis of various Theyyam rituals, costumes, narratives, and folklore, we aim to uncover the profound ecological insights and indigenous wisdom embedded within these artistic expressions.

Our research draws upon interdisciplinary approaches, intertwining anthropology, art history, ecology, and cultural studies. By decoding the messages encoded in Theyyam art, we can decipher how local communities have historically perceived, respected, and coexisted with wildlife. This exploration takes us beyond mere aesthetics, revealing a deep-rooted ethos of sustainability and reverence for the environment. Through engaging visuals and narratives, this presentation offers a journey into the captivating world of Theyyam art. We will showcase how the art form encapsulates stories of deities, spirits, and animals, intertwining human narratives with the natural world. By understanding the cultural nuances, rituals, and beliefs surrounding Theyyam, we will gain valuable insights into the past and present dynamics of human-wildlife coexistence.

Ultimately, this research presentation serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of traditional art forms in shedding light on pressing environmental challenges. By learning from the past, we can derive inspiration and knowledge to inform contemporary strategies for sustainable coexistence with the wildlife that shares our planet, in line with the paradigm shift of human-wildlife coexistence in human-wildlife conflict research globally.

**Keywords:** *Human-wildlife conflict, Human-wildlife Coexistence, Cultural Belief*

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*System, Theyyam, Indigenous*

## **Introduction**

The traditional societies practised the deification of nature and wildlife, ancestors, warriors, and supernatural characters of legends as stones, objects, and images. Theyyam is a regional ritualistic dance of North Malabar in which the god is taking human form to meet humans and listen to their sorrows. Theyyam is a synonym for *daivam* or god. There are more than 400 varieties of Theyyam recorded, and a similar ritualistic dance form is present in Karnataka also- the *Bhuta kola*. The origin of Theyyam is assumed to be at least 1500 years ago, and the first available evidence of Theyyam is found in the Sangha texts. The Theyyam is performed from November to June every year closely related to the steps of agriculture.

In Theyyam, the god dances with extensive costumes by chanting ballads –*thottam pattu* for Theyyam – which describe the origin story of the particular Theyyam. Playing of Theyyam as an offering is known as *Ketti aadikkal* and is done in the sacred spaces (and sacred groves) called *Sthanam, Kaavu, Mundy, Palliyara, and Madappura*. The communities, people, and houses are conducting Theyyam for the blessings of god to them. The Theyyam performers belong to historically lower castes such as *Vannan, Malayan, Mavilan, Karimpalan, Cheruma, Pulaya*, and more. However, devotees of Theyyam have no caste barrier and Theyyam is one such unique ritual where the upper caste seeks blessings from the lower caste performer. The god brought out to the body of the performer through several steps, both vocal and visual stimuli; *Varavili, Thottam pattu* are the vocal stimuli, and *Mudi vekkai* (mudi-hair accessories), *Ari charthu* (throwing rice on the head of the performer by the shaman) ritual, *Kannadi nokkal* (once the *Kolakkaran* - performer- has put on all the make-up and costumes he check himself in the mirror. Here, the *Kolakkaran* is not seeing himself in the mirror, but the god) are some other steps to bring god into human's body (Namboodiri, 1980).

## **Classification of Theyyam**

The Theyyam ritual has a local origin with close relation with *Shakteyam (Shakti devata)*, however, it has been influenced by *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism* in the due course of time, and legends of Theyyam have strong elements of these. Each of the Theyyam has unique stories of origin with geographic variations. Many of the Theyyam stories even picture the injustice people had to suffer in the caste-driven society. Many types of Theyyam represent mother goddesses, ancestral gods, warriors, village goddesses, virgin goddesses, nature goddesses, male gods, gods

representing Islamic people, gods who cause and cure particular diseases, forest gods, hunting gods, and animal gods.

Like many of the old traditional societies mother goddess is a popular deity and many of the Theyyam are strong women characters such as chamundi (*Karinchamundi, Thee chamundi, Pula chamundi*, etc.), *Bhagavati (Thottum kara bhagavati, Kannangattu bhagavati, Neeliyar bhagavati, Padar kulangara bhagavati*, etc.), Kali (*Pulloor/Puliyuru kali, Bhadrakali, Chudala bhadrakali*, etc.). The virgin goddesses are *Ariya poonkanni, Kanni mathe, Marakkalathamma, Poovilli, Muchilottu bhagavati*, etc. The list of ancestral gods and people who became god after death includes *Kandanar kelan, Kathivannur veeran, Karinthiri Nair, Kurikkal Theyyam, Kudi veeran, Thottumkara bhagavati, Manayil pothi* (pothi for bhagavati), *Palanthayi kannan, Pada veeran, Kadathanattu makkam, Ponnuan thondachan*, etc. many of these gods are believed to come after death to the injustice did to them. For each community there are particular ancestral god called *Thondachan (Puli maranja thondachan, Ponnuan thondachan, Perumbuzhayachan*, etc.). The warrior gods of Theyyam include *Angakkaran, Aadi mooliyadan, Oorppazhassi, Kundora chamundi, Kshetra palan, Padakkethi bhagavati, moovalam kuzhi chamundi, Vettakkarumakan, Vaira jathan*, etc. Village gods include *Chuzhali bhagavati, Aippalli Theyyam, Chanayum kothayum, Kavumbayi bhagavati*, etc. They are considered the protectors of the respective village and its people. The gods and goddesses closely related to earth and nature, and to the daily lives of the people are *Kalichon (or Kalichekavan), Kunjar kurathi, Aadi vedan, Onappottan, Karkkidothi*, etc., and these gods are related to various stages of agriculture. There are many male gods (*Aan kolangal*) also which are played as Theyyam, including *Kuruntini kaman, Kizhakken daivam, Vatta pootham, Undayan, Gulikan Theyyam, Pula pottan, Daivathar, Nedu paliyan or Bali Theyyam, Daivathar*, etc. People also believe that certain gods are capable of curing diseases such as *Maari Theyyam, Vasoori mala, Ucchara Theyyam*, etc., since people had no solution to certain pandemics, they approached gods to save them. There are some Muslim Theyyam also reflecting the religious coexistence, including *Bappiriyan Theyyam, Aali Theyyam, Kalanthu mukri*, etc.

Nature and its components are also worshipped as Theyyam, *oorvara devata* (earth gods), *vana devata* (forest and hill gods), *mriga devata* (animal gods), and *nayattu devata* (hunting gods). For a community living close to nature and its resources, believing these kinds of gods was necessary. Nature gods are explained in detail in the following sections of this paper. About the animal gods, like the many other indigenous societies of India (Warli tribe of Maharashtra worship Waghoba deity, Tiger is worshipped in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, Tigers are worshipped by

the Irula and Solega tribes of Karnataka a few to list), worshipping the majestic carnivores – tiger and leopard – is present in Theyyam as well. There is a group of Theyyam that are based on tigers and/or leopards, and are known as *Puli Theyyam/ Puli makkal/ Aivar puli daivangal*. *Puli Theyyam* is not a single Theyyam but a general term using to refer to eight Theyyam mainly – *Puli kandan, Pulli karinkali, Kandappuli, Marappuli, Puli maruthan, Kalappuli, Puliur kannan, and Puliur kali*, where *Puliur kannan* and *Puliur kali* are most popular Theyyam (Namboodiri, 1980).

### **Human-wildlife Coexistence**

Human-wildlife coexistence is a way of understanding and conceptualising the human-wildlife relationship. Humans and wildlife are observed to have positive as well as negative relations. The constant conflict of interest between humans and wildlife on common natural sources, and other resources of humans are generally called human-wildlife conflict, and it often negatively impacts wildlife by affecting their existence, and humans by affecting their food security and economic well-being (through impacts such as crop loss, livestock depredation, etc.). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – the international body to manage the matters of conservation of nature, and wildlife - has recognised the increasing trend of Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) across the world, and constituted a specialist group on it. The Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence Specialist Group (HWCCSG) identifies multiple dimensions of HWC and provides solutions and policy interventions to the negative interaction between people and wildlife. The term ‘coexistence’ is to seek the positive relationships between humans and wildlife for attitudinal change on wildlife and to cultivate tolerance and acceptance towards wildlife, for the sustainable management of HWC. A better management of human-wildlife conflict is necessary for ensuring peace and for the conservation success of wildlife. The IUCN HWCCSG (Human-wildlife Conflict and Coexistence Specialist Group) defines human-wildlife coexistence as the choice made by humans to share land and natural resources with competent agents of wild-wildlife species – in sustainable ways at some time and continued through generations through cultural belief systems and traditional ecological knowledge.

This study explores the cultural belief systems on wildlife existing in the state of Kerala (India) associated with the ritualistic dance of Theyyam to find the preliminary elements of human-wildlife coexistence, through the analysis of legends of Theyyam and Theyyam’s origin stories from the literature and ballads of Puli Theyyam. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karippath, 1986., Kannan, 2013)

## **Human-wildlife Coexistence and Cultural Belief Systems**

Culture can influence local wildlife management, and attitude towards wildlife and can influence sustainable management of natural resources and wildlife. Indigenous societies have been incorporating measures for wildlife conservation over the years through Cultural Belief Systems(CBS) based on fear, respect, gratitude, and kinship with tools such as totemism (a symbolic representation of living non-living things; associated with a group of people-clan, ethnic group, tribe- which use as a tool to symbolise ancestry, oneness, and unity of the particular group), animism, taboos (certain rules to restrict people from certain activities, restrict movements, etc. associated with particular places, by keeping sacred space for protection of and from wildlife. Entry to these spaces is restricted to people in particular periods by fear of ‘polluting’ the sacred space - an example of taboo. Violation of taboos is believed to bring negative consequences - wildlife attacks, natural calamities, diseases, loss of direction in the forest, etc.), rituals, festivals, ceremonies, and these are transferred through generations through oral history, folk songs and stories, folk art, ritualistic dances, etc. over centuries (Morris, 2000). Sacredness of particular species of trees, birds, and animals, and particular spaces are aiding the conservation and sustainable management of nature. CBS also manages Human -Wildlife Conflicts, by building tolerance and acceptance by associating wildlife with belief systems.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Co-living with wildlife for thousands of years makes people capable of formulating ways of coexistence through beliefs, knowledge, and practices that are passed through generations; it includes mitigation strategies, sustainable land use management, cultural linkage with various wildlife with a spectrum of fear and respect according to the threat they are posing, and positioning of them in the legends and stories. This relation with wildlife originating from culture is established and reiterated using cultural belief systems using tools such as taboos, totems, religious institutions, rituals, and ritualistic art forms (Morris, 2000).

### **Snippets of Human-wildlife Coexistence through Cultural Belief Systems**

Indigenous groups have the tradition of coexistence with nature, and a wide spectrum of CBS associated with nature is identified around the world. The CBS of the indigenous societies of Africa, the Amazon, and Asia are mapped in literature. A brief review of it brings the following information.

### **Cultural belief systems and ritualistic dances**

Ritualistic dances are preached and practised by indigenous communities, with multiple purposes – to ward off diseases, pay respect to wildlife, celebrate victories in wars, celebrate victories and memories of warriors and hunters, and share happiness and sorrow of various situations. Many indigenous societies have the traditions of enacting particular species of wildlife in their ritualistic dance forms to pay respect to those wildlife, which are associated with their life through stories of ancestry, kinship, permission for hunting, and display of penitence.

#### ***World***

The Amazon has many indigenous groups who pay respect towards wildlife-from Jaguars to monkeys - through ritualistic dance forms. The puma dance (also known as *danca da onca*) of Bororo Indians of Brazil represents the spirit of the puma that got killed by a Bororo. The Jaguar dance of Coraro Indians is to pay respect to Jaguar gods, and many of the tribes from the early Mayans believe in the Jaguar gods. The *Akan tribe* of Ghana performs *adowa* dance, to pay respect to the spirit of the animal that they hunted and is a dance-mime to show other members of the tribe, how they did the particular hunt (Ampomah, 2014). Many of the tribes have this tradition of dance performances related to hunting (Gasper, 2009).

In addition to the ritualistic dance forms, indigenous communities practise their CBS through totems, taboos, animism, and more. The *Nharira* community of Zimbabwe follows customary laws and regulations regarding wildlife (breaking customary rules believed to bring long dry spells and reduced crop yields for the whole community), rituals and ceremonies (conduct *mukwerera* and *matatenda* - rainmaking and thanksgiving ceremonies respectively- to please rain gods) totems, and taboos. *Tongo-Tengzuk* tribe of Ghana protects the West African crocodiles since they believe these crocodiles are their ancestral spirits, *Sankhana* tribe protects pythons and frogs which are believed to have helped their ancestors in crisis (Arhin,2008).

#### ***India***

In India, many of the communities follow Cultural Belief Systems- totems, taboos, sacred groves, local-traditional-indigenous knowledge, religious beliefs, rituals, and ritualistic and folk art forms that aid biodiversity conservation (Bhagwat. et.al., 2011). Ritualistic dance forms are a popular medium of connecting the gods in tribal and non-tribal belief systems in India. The ritualistic dance forms include folk dances-which originated according to the local traditions and, other categories of dances which originate from the *Natyasastra* (a Sanskrit text that explains the rules

of dances). Bharatanatyam of Tamil Nadu, *Bhuta kola* of Karnataka, *Dalkhai* dance of Gond, Mirdha, *Kuda* tribes of central India, and Cham of Ladakh are some of the ritualistic dance forms to list. Many of the ritualistic dances are for worshipping wildlife by mimicking their movements and costumes resemble those species' appearance such as *huluk lam* of Naga tribe mimics monkeys, and *Senggeh Garcham* is a lion dance prominent in the *Tawang* of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Hunting dances are also prominent in many tribes of the country, with a focus on many wildlife species. To list the cultural belief systems of indigenous groups of India, *Idu Mishmi* tribe of Northeast India take part in tiger conservation based on kinship-they consider tigers as their elder brother, since both are from the same womb as per Mishmi mythology and killing a tiger is equivalent to homicide (Aiyadurai, 2016). The Karbis of Assam believe every animate and inanimate object has *Karjong*(soul), which ensures respect towards everything around them. The Karbi have different clans, which revere different species; Therang clan – hornbill (believe hornbills saved their ancestors from a severe flood), Teron- Rui Teron snake, and Torbis – Eagle (Sarma & Barpujari, 2011).

### ***Kerala***

In the state of Kerala, a number of ritual dances are practised and performed by different communities, having a varied spectrum in the scale of popularity and heterogeneity of believers. There are a large number of ritualistic dance forms performed in Kerala. The theatrical dance forms of *Koodiyattam*, *Padayani*, *thira*, *vattakkali*, *Theyyam*, *sarppam thullal*, and *padakam* are a few to list. The traditional ritualistic dance forms possess central characteristics such as its links with mother goddess worship, and sacred groves. The ritualistic dance forms are performed with different aims – educating young about the legends, transmission of culture, celebrating memories of great warriors, supernatural acts of the ancestors, and more.

The innate connection of the indigenous societies with nature is inherited through generations, practices rituals, and ritualistic dance forms to remind them of their roots. Connectedness and fear towards nature and wildlife made them position nature above them and worshipped her blessings and support for their day-to-day life. The ritual dances of Scheduled Tribes are for pleasing gods to get solutions for problems of particular people. The rules of the dances are not as rigid as popular ritualistic dances, however, the people follow rigid rules of purity and sacredness associated with it. In Kerala STs from north to south have their own ritualistic dances and folk dances. *Ayyarukali* of malappanikkar tribe, *Putthariyattam* of Adiyar tribe, *Nayattu Theyyam* and *Malakkari Theyyam* of Kurichiar tribe, *Aivar*



*kali* of Malayar tribe, *Daivakkali* of karimbalar tribe, *Vilppattu* of ulladar tribe, *Attam* of irular tribe, *Vattakkali* of Kurumar are a few to list. The performers follow a strict *Vruta* (a set of rules to follow to ensure purity) for days before the performance. Some of the ritualistic dance forms are performed as a group, however, some others are performed by a single person. Theyyam of Mavilar, malavettuvar, Kurichiar, karimbalar tribes are performed by a single person who is believed to represent god. The dances mostly are associated with ballads – either elaborate expressions of legends and folk stories to educate people about the traditions, or oral commands and lines that in repetition unify the performance of the group. The movements of the performer often change with the nature of ballads, and at the end of the performance, the performance is observed to be in a fast rhythm. In addition to the ritualistic dance forms, the scheduled tribes have a vast base of dances that mimics wildlife such as *Narikkuth* (*Nari*- leopard/tiger) of Pathiyar, Kurumar, and Kadar tribes, *Puli nritham* (dance of tigers) of adiyar tribe, *Elelam karadi*(*karadi*-bear) of Irular tribe, *Pulikandi kurathi* of malavettuva tribe, *Kooman pattu* (*kooman*-owl) of Kurichia tribe, Muthala Theyyam (*muthala*-crocodile) of mavilar tribe are a few of such dances. The performers remind the particular species through their realistic mimicking of that wildlife. Continuous observation of the particular species in their lives enables them to do so. (Mathirappalli.M., 2013)

### **Ritualistic Dance of Theyyam: Nature as god**

In earlier times people were living closer to nature and wildlife, and keeping their resources safe from the wildlife was necessary for them. The humongous power of nature made them believers in nature's power, which made them believe nature and wildlife as gods. In Theyyam also, there are certain gods which are *vana devata* (gods of the forest) and *mriga devata* (animal gods). People of traditional societies believed these gods saved them and their resources from the calamities. In addition, hunting was another important aspect of their life. Hunting was not for leisure but as a way of survival and food. These gods are still respected and celebrated as Theyyam in North Malabar. The hunting gods include *Muthappan*, *Vayanattu kulavan*, *Vishnu moorthi*, *Kallurootti*, etc. Some of the *vana devata* with Theyyam are *Kattu madanta*, *Thalachilon*, *Poothadi daivam*, *Malakkali*, *Kannikkoru makan*, etc.

In the *mriga devata* devotion serpent gods/*naga devata* have given very much respect. There are Theyyam of animals that people had to encounter frequently such as wild boar, snake, crocodile, leopard, and tiger. Animal gods are more frequent in the areas where forests are present. Serpent gods with Theyyam are *Naga rajavu*,

*Naga kandan, Naga pothi, Naga kanni and Naga kaman.* Other animal gods with Theyyam include *anna panchuruli*(pig), *Panchuruli* (pig), *Muthala Theyyam* (crocodile), *puli kandan, Pulli karinkali, Pulloor kali, Kandapuli, marapuli, Puli maruthan, kalapuli, Puliuru kannan* (tiger/leopard). The crop loss and livestock depredation of the wildlife may have made the people pay respect to the wildlife to hope that the animals might leave them if they give offerings to them. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karippath.R.C, 1986., Kannan. Y. V, 2013)

### ***Puli Daivangal - Legends and Elements of Coexistence***

The ballads of Theyyam are *thottam pattu*. Stories, legends, and histories associated with each Theyyam are described in the *thottam pattu*. *Puli Theyyam* is a popular Theyyam in which the leopards/tigers are represented. The *puli Theyyam* also known as *puli daivangal, Aivar devata, and aivar puli makkal*. Similar to many other Theyyam, the origin of *puli daivangal* has traces of the legends of lord Siva of the Hindu religion, it is identified that the *saiva* tradition might have influenced and incorporated into the regional legends through the years. From the records of several Theyyam scholars, the story of the *puli Theyyam* unfolds as the following.

*Siva*, together with his wife – *Parvati* - was watching over the earth to check well-being. A beautiful view of two leopards who are in love attracted their attention, and they watched the beauty of expression of love between them. Influenced by this, *Siva* and *Parvati* became leopards (*thottam pattu* describe them as *Puli*, which can be either leopard or tiger, as both locally use the word *Puli*) and came to the forest. *Siva* became *Puli kandan*, and *Parvati* became *Pullikarinkali* (black leopard). They both celebrated their time as *Puli* by enjoying love, and sex. They moved from one forest to another and reached *thathanar kaavu* to deliver their children. *Pullikarinkali* gave birth to five beautiful cubs who were called *Aivar pulimakkal/ aivar puli devata* and are *Kanda Puli, Mara Puli, Puli maruthan, Kala Puli, and Puliuru kannan* (also known as *Puliuru nayanar*). *Puliuru Kali* – came to help *Pulli karinkali* to deliver the babies and take care of them, and is believed to be sent by the god *vishnu*. *Pulli karinkali* was pleased to have her by her side and blessed her that she would be known as the youngest of their children. *Pulli karinkali* and *Puli kandan* left the *Aivar puli makkal* and *Puliuru kali* to fend for themselves and left for *Kailasa* (where *Siva* and *Parvati* reside). They travelled through many forests – *Manchattiyam kunn, Mayattiyam para, Idimuzhngan kunn, Nari mayangan chalu, and thollarveli*. One day, they felt too thirsty for blood, but could not find anything in the forest, and they saw that *Kurumbrathiri Vanor* (a local ruler) had a lot of cattle in his seven cattle houses. They waited till night to hunt them down, and all the *Puli makkal* ate all the cattle of *Kurumbrathiri vanor*, with the help of *Puli kandan* - their

father. The next morning, *Kurumbrathiri vanor* was devastated to see his cattle farms empty, so he asked *Karinthiri Nair* – a well-known hunter in that area - to teach the *Puli* a lesson. *Karinthiri Nair* waited with his arrows for the *Puli makkal* at night on the top branch of a mango tree. The *Puli makkal* came at night without knowing any of these. However, their father saw the hunter and came to help his children. The hunter pointed his tools, but before he could even move an inch *Puli kandan* attacked him from below, following their father's lead the children – *kanda puli*, *marapuli*, and *Kalapuli* attacked the hunter from all sides. The next morning, *Kurumbrathiri vanor* saw the dead body of the hunter hanging on the mango tree. The *puli makkal* continued livestock depredation and other disturbances, and no solutions were effective. In those days, when people were helpless, astrologers were the last hope. Similarly, *vanor* also asked astrologers to find solutions to the disturbances from the *Puli*. The astrologers found that these animals are not merely some normal carnivores, but children of *Siva* and *Parvati*, and the only solution is to give them proper position and offer prayers, and offerings and perform Theyyam in their names. The *Kurumbrathiri vanor* was hesitant to give a position in his country as they had no experience of having animal gods, therefore he prayed to his favorite deity - *Tulu bhagavati*-to help him to decide the proper place for *Puli daivam*. As a result, they were given *sthanam* (sacred space) at *Pulikkunn* of *Tulu nadu*, north of *Kurumbrathiri vanor's* place, as instructed by the *Tulu bhagavati*. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karipath, 1986., Kannan, 2013., Raghavan, 2017). The following lines of *thottam pattu* identify the godly spirit of these leopards and explain the transformation of leopards into gods

*Vrighakriti poondavarum Puli*  
*Roopathe vedinjudharaayaam*  
*Sheekhratharam nalla puli*  
*Daivangalumayan*

There are some elements of cohabitation between humans and top predators like leopards and tigers in the above-said story. The presence of the leopard (and black panther, a type of leopard), and tiger near human inhabitation is evident as it is described in the story that *siva* and *parvati* were observing leopards playing, and also from the threads that *Pulli karinkali* wanted to eat the heart of *godavari* cow of *kurumbrathiri vanor* during her pregnancy. On analysing the particular Theyyam representing leopards/tigers a close relationship between humans and higher order carnivores can be seen. The movements and facial expressions of the performers of this Theyyam resemble the tigers and are pointing at the close observation derived from the cohabitation in closer spaces. The legends on the origin of this Theyyam display both attacks of wildlife on human inhabitation and human's reactive measures

– hunting – to the problem. Encounters with wildlife including large carnivores like leopards and tigers were common, and they were eating the cattle of the people. It is evident that there were expert hunters at those times, Theyyam of *karinthiri nair* – the hunter who was killed by the *puli makkal* in this story - is proof of that. However, Deification was the final solution when all of humanity's known solutions were in vain, and respect originated from respect towards powerful, fear, and helplessness. It was a popular way of coping and coexisting with the threats from nature where people were helpless. The tradition of annual repetition of the ritualistic dance of Theyyam to reiterate respect towards the wildlife - *Puli* in this case. The people believed the blessings of *Puli daivangal* along with other Theyyam related to the protection of livestock, like *Kalichan/kalichekon* are believed to keep their cattle safe from wildlife attack, and it might have helped to increase tolerance and acceptance towards the wildlife species. Similar to many other communities around the world these ritualistic elements contributed to sustainable interaction with the wildlife, and sustainable hunting.

Upon seeing the Theyyam of *Puli daivangal*, many of the people from different communities wished to have their presence in their native places. *Puli* Theyyam spread across the villages bordering forest in the North Malabar, people's fear and respect towards majestic carnivores might have been an agent for this geographic spread. As the legend says *puli daivangal* went to the places where the devotees wished for their presence, and the ballad (*thottam pattu*) sees this as the following:

*Paarithilithamotthamavare varumoro dikkil*  
*Paaraathe vasichathu paravaan paaramasadhyam*

The ballad simply translates as they (*Puli daivam*) went to and lived in the areas where people wished for their presence, and it is impossible to explain the limits of *Puli daivam*'s presence. (Namboodiri, 1980., Karippath.R.C, 1986., Kannan. Y. V, 2013., Raghavan. K, 2017). The *puli* Theyyam is performed in *puli* temples, *puli kunn*(hills), and *puli sthanam* (sacred space). Keeping some spaces exclusively for the worship of animal and nature gods is a traditional way of coexisting with wildlife in many of the indigenous societies. Worship of *Puli daivam* in sacred sthana, *Kunn*, and temples can be seen in the light of this tradition. In addition, it is written in some regional historical documents that, people used to see leopards in these hills and they did not attack humans (Kannan. Y. V, 2013).

About the performance of these Theyyam, the following characteristics are seen, some of the *puli* Theyyam (*kanda puli* and *mara puli*, *Pulikandan* and *puliyur kannan*) are performed together, some other *puli* Theyyam performed alone (*Puliyur/pullur kali*, *Puli kandan*, *Puli maruthan*, *Puli chekon*) and some performed

along with other Theyyam (*Pullur kali Theyyam* is performed in *Muchilott bhagavati kaavu*, *Puliyur kannan* along with *wayanattu kulavan*, etc.).

## Conclusion

The ritualistic dance forms act as a strong medium for the cultivation and propagation of cultural belief systems and to practise and display respect towards Other Than Human (OTH) animals in folk cultures. Theyyam representing *puli makkal/puli Theyyam/ aivar puli devata* originated to show respect towards higher order carnivores – leopard, tiger – whom they had to have constant encounters with. Even if the scenario was like this, the cultural belief system iterated through the annual ritualistic dance performance of Theyyam, might have been a tool to cultivate tolerance towards those species, and which might have acted as the tool for sustainable hunting and sustainable management of wildlife, thus aiding wildlife conservation in the regions of North Malabar. It might have acted as a medium to propagate the culture of tolerance through the generations.

However, the heterogeneity of the present society makes it relevant to enquire about the importance of popular ritualistic dance forms such as Theyyam in popular culture for the same purpose of conservation and human-wildlife coexistence. Much of the Cultural Belief Systems(CBS) and Indigenous Knowledge(IK) have been washed away due to the influx of socioeconomic and political changes for years, however, recognition and respect of the existing IK and belief systems might be able to revive Human-Wildlife coexistence practises. This study demands further inquiry in the field about the elements of coexistence through the cultivation of tolerance and acceptance, as studies focusing on wildlife conservation are rare in the Theyyam studies.

## Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Portrayal of Menstruation and Womanhood in 'Ayali' Tamil Web Series

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## Abstract

The study on the “Portrayal of Menstruation and Womanhood in 'Ayali' Tamil Web Series” is a qualitative content analysis of the 2023 Tamil web series Ayali directed and produced by Muthukumar. Ayali focuses on the patriarchal characteristics of Tamil society in particular and Indian society in general. The plot centres on Tamizhselvi, a young teenage girl who rebels against the dreadful traditions and practices that had been oppressing women in Veerappannai village in Pudukkottai for 500 years in order to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.

The eight-episode series starts with an animated segment that narrates the evolution of Veerapannai. According to traditions, the locals suffered the wrath of their deity (Ayali) after a young girl from the village of Pannaiyur eloped with a man from a nearby village. Consequently, the entire community moved to a new location in Pudukkottai district that eventually became known as Veerapannai. A temple for Ayali was constructed in the new village and girls were married as soon as they reached puberty.

Girls on reaching puberty are no longer permitted to attend school. They have to sacrifice their education and beliefs, and get married. The males of the hamlet and political leadership blindly adhere to maintaining the caste purity. The web series revolves around the struggles of Tamizhselvi against this tradition.

The study intends to analyse the series on the basis of three objectives. The prime objective is to explore the depiction of menstruation in Ayali, and the implications of this depiction on the societal attitude towards menstruation. Secondly, the researcher will analyse the portrayal of gender roles in Ayali. Thirdly, the study will analyse the socio-economic positioning of female characters in Ayali. Feminist media theory and cultivation theory will form the theoretical foundation of the study.

**Keywords:** *Menstruation, Puberty, Menarche, Culture, Tradition, Caste, Beliefs, Rituals*

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## Introduction

Menstruation is thought to have played an important role in human evolution. Since puberty, women experience menstruation and the menstrual cycle. However, in many parts of the world, menstruation remains largely hidden from the public. In addition, many women in our society are reluctant to even acknowledge that they are menstruating. Myths about menstruation are still a barrier to social progress, even in the digital age. In our country, which is known for having the largest population in the world, there are still girls who have to stay out of their homes during their periods.

On November 16, 2018, in Tamil Nadu a 14-year-old rural girl passed away when Cyclone Gaja struck her “period hut”; she had been made to sleep alone while she was bleeding. She was trapped inside the hut by a fallen coconut tree, making it hard for her parents to save her.

She was stranded in the hut on November 16 when the cyclone struck, her family reported to BBC Tamil. Considering that it was customary to separate menstruation females from other girls, some locals called this a "wake up call". In many rural areas of India, menstruation is a social taboo. It is customary to view women as impure when they are menstruating. (BBC News, 2018)

As soon as a girl enters menarche, different instructions are imposed on her, even though she is pampered by her parents and other family members at home. She is subjected to a constant barrage of warnings, ranging from "don't talk to them," "don't walk like that," "don't sit like that," "don't eat that," and so on.

The monthly shedding of the uterine lining is known as menstruation. Menses, menstrual period, menstrual cycle, and period are the other names for menstruation. Menstrual blood passes through your cervix and exits your body through your vagina. It is a mixture of blood and tissue from within your uterus. Hormones in our bodies cause menstruation. Our bodies use hormones as chemical messengers. The ovaries, which are a component of our reproductive system, and the pituitary gland, which is located in our brain, both produce and release specific hormones at different points during the menstrual cycle.

The lining of our uterus thickens as a result of these hormones. This takes place in order for an egg to implant into our uterine lining in the event of a pregnancy. Our ovaries release an egg due to hormones as well (ovulation). The fallopian tubes are where the egg travels through while it waits for sperm. When sperm cannot fertilise an egg and cause pregnancy to occur, the uterine lining then degrades and sheds. This biological process is known as the "period" (clevelandclinic.org, 2022).



## Previous Research

Hindi cinema has portrayed women as a category that can't possibly imagine a real life. Bollywood filmmakers portrayed them without knowing their bodily changes like sexual desire, menarche, menopause, ageing, pregnancy etc. Hindi cinema has created a cultural imagination that depicts menstrual blood as an alien thing, like offal, cadavers and bodily waste. In *Gaze Averted: Interrogating the Portrayal of Menstruation in Hindi Cinema* by Yadav and Gaur (2023), they discuss the two critically acclaimed films: the 2018 film *Padman*, directed by R. Balki, and the 2019 Oscar-winning documentary *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Rayka Zehtabchi. In these films, women's reproductive health and debates about shame, the power of economic independence and patriarchy are explored. (Yadav & Gaur, 2023).

In *The Good, the Bad, and the Bloody: Images of Menstruation in Television and in Menstrual Activism*, Tripp (2021) explores how it is important for campaigners to keep in mind that everyone should be included when talking about menstrual health. To reiterate, not all people who menstruate are female, nor do all women menstruate. The lives and experiences of people who do not identify as cis-women are being erased when we only refer to menstruators as women and girls. The movement is more inclusive and representational of the menstrual community when inclusive language is used, such as "menstruators" or "menstruating bodies." Without taking into account the experiences of all menstruators, particularly those from underrepresented populations, menstrual activism cannot hope to fulfil its mission of normalising menstruation. By having the conversation, individuals will feel more comfortable asking questions and gaining a complete understanding of all parts of menstruation—the good, the bad, and the bloody. It is far too common for people who menstruate to be unaware of the changes their bodies undergo at menarche (Tripp, 2021).

The discourse of historical approach is used in the paper *You're a woman now: Depiction of first menstruation in movies and TV series* by Anna Matreveli to compare how menarche has been portrayed on TV over the years and to examine the intergenerational experience of menarche. She came to the conclusion that menarche is no longer portrayed on TV as a shameful taboo but rather as a strong visual narrative device. Nonetheless, the menarche scenarios remained mostly unchanged, strongly depending on a mother-daughter bonding storyline and emphasising childbearing as the primary and perhaps the only benefit of menstruation. The conversation on television is still dominated by the constant use of menstrual euphemisms (Matreveli, 2023).

## Methodology

In order to achieve the study's goal, the researcher used a qualitative research methodology. Aiming to collect and evaluate non-numerical (descriptive) data, qualitative research seeks to comprehend people's attitudes, beliefs, and motivations in order to better grasp their social reality.

Muthukumar is the director and producer of the *Ayali* Tamil web series, which focuses on the patriarchal aspects of Indian society in general and Tamil society in specific. In order to fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor, Tamizhselvi, a young teenage girl who battles against the horrible customs and traditions that have been oppressing women in the Veerappannai the village in Pudukkottai for 500 years. The researcher examines how *Ayali* depicts menstruation and how this affects social attitudes towards menstruation. Feminist Media theory and cultivation theory form the theoretical foundation of the study.

## Objectives of the Study

- To explore the depiction of menstruation in *Ayali*, and the implications of this depiction on societal attitude towards menstruation.
- To analyse the portrayal of gender roles in *Ayali*.
- To analyse the socio-economic positioning of female characters in *Ayali*.

## Analysis and Findings

The web series *Ayali*, both produced and directed by Muthukumar, was released in 2023. The protagonist of the tale, Tamilselvi, along with her parents and fellow students, make the major cast. A flashback that is shown as animation opens the story. The 14th century is when the goddess *Ayali*'s narrative starts. *Ayali* is the name of a clean deity who lives in the Tamil village of Panaiyur. Since the goddess is regarded as a virgin, men are not permitted on the land she owns. The shrine is exclusively open to women. If they are in their periods, they are also forbidden from touching the goddess. You can only touch the goddess and offer prayers close to her if you are a non-menstruating girl.

A man who lived close to the village once came there to collect honey. One drop of honey dripped on a woman under the tree as the man was gathering honey from it. She attracts the man's attention, and they end up falling in love. However, they were not supported by their caste, so they left the village. The village of Panaiyur experienced numerous issues following the couple's elopement, including fields

turning to ashes and fish in the river dying. Cows perished as well. An illness similar to chicken pox swept through the entire community.

All the villagers got chicken pox, and they thought that the goddess' wrath was due to the girl who had run away. The villagers decided to depart from that location as a result. Although they travel to many different regions, the villagers still don't get well. At last, they arrive in Veerapannai, which is located in Pudukottai and they construct Ayali's temple.

The goddess's wrath lessened, and she gave permission for mankind to reside there. The people made a vow that girls will get married as soon as they reach adolescence. The girls made a commitment to uphold that custom at all costs. The Veerapannai villagers haven't altered their customs in 500 years. Because of the fear, no one investigates or dares to question their systems. This marked the conclusion of the flashback story and the beginning of the actual story, which is set in the 1990s.

It is their belief that a menstruating girl entering the temple is not good for the future. They also restricted boys from entering the temple. The goddess Ayali "gets angry" with them if they allow a menstruating woman into the former's place.

They believe that menstruation is dirty. Because the temple is such a pure thing, the people do not want menstruating women to enter it and contaminate it. The only thing that allows the villagers to procreate for the following generation is menstruation. The only reason they receive attention from society is because they wish to increase their numbers. They never consider the deteriorating health of teenagers who get pregnant.

The primary character, Tamilselvi, is a passionate girl who is eager to do well in school. Kuruvammal is her mother, and Thavasi is her father. One day, when in the eighth grade, she realises that she wants to be a doctor.

Tamilselvi once asked her mother, "Did you cry on the wedding day?" The mother retorted that she had wept all night and disclosed another fact: the girls from the villages married as soon as they reached menarche, thus they were unable to continue their education. Following marriage, the spouse becomes their entire universe and their everything. After puberty, they have to support their family because they can no longer spend their time studying, playing games, or hanging out with friends. It is necessary since the groom's family looks for a girl who is well-versed in handling everyday life and household chores.

Since none of the community's boys passed the tenth public exam, there are no male doctors. Additionally, as girls enter puberty, they stop teaching them. After menarche, girls are not permitted to continue their education in their system or culture. That being the case, the community does not produce any female doctors. Everyone claims that the goddess does not wish the girls to study, and they have a deep belief in the cultural rites that are centred around the former.

Tamilselvi learned about menstruation from her senior's (Mythili) menarche function. She was given false information that girls go through puberty when they sleep at night. However, Tamilselvi's mother told her that menarche can occur at any moment. There is no set age at which puberty occurs. She therefore advises her daughter to keep her puberty a secret from everyone. She also needs to notify her mother first. As she approaches menarche, she prefers to look down and tell her mother that she is now a woman rather than looking at her father or any other relative.

Tamilselvi is aware, first of all, that females receive any food item and clothes they desire during their menarche. However, their circumstances deteriorated after that. The females are required to stay in their home after they reach puberty and perform all household chores, including cleaning the house, cow manure, gathering firewood from the forest, fetching water from the well, and so forth. Living as a woman is incredibly difficult. They got married as soon as they reached puberty, and a year later they gave birth to a child. Girls face numerous pregnancy-related issues, such as early abortion and malnourishment.

After acknowledging the problems surrounding her village, Tamilselvi enters the Ayali temple. She prays that she should not have periods. She wants to study well and become a doctor. If she enters puberty, she thinks that Ayali will no longer be a goddess to her.

Tamil Selvi and her friends were playing at school one day. She was playing with great joy when suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her stomach which made her flee from the playground without telling her friends. She sat on the ground. Because of the severe stomach pain, she started sweating and her hands were shaking. She sat there for a while, doubting herself. She noticed blood when she looked down at her legs. She had started menstruating. The actual colour of the blood is shown in the scene.

She thinks about what would happen if she told her parents about her menstruation. If she tells her parents, they will celebrate her menarche and after that she will have to do a lot of household work. She has to make food for the cow, go to the forest to collect firewood for cooking. She also has to fetch water from the deep well. When

she walks to class, the blood that drips through her legs is shown. And also, there are blood stains in her white shirt and blue coloured middy. Her math master called her into the office room. The sir is a very small man, so he can't reach the ink that is placed on the almirah. So, he asked Tamil to fetch it. She got scared and the ink bottle fell and broke. The red ink spread all over her body. The teacher teased her but the headmistress came and made her calm down. The headmistress told her that it was only ink, that she need not worry. She allowed her to go to the house. Suddenly she realised that no one noticed that she was menstruating. She is very happy and goes to her house. The villagers noticed her clothes and asked her what happened to her, she told them that it was just ink that fell on her body. The entire community was staring at her as if she were someone strange. Tamil enjoys the situation because she has escaped from the 'big problem'.

Her mother asked her what had happened when she came home. She repeated that it was just ink. Her mother told her that she was scared. She had trouble falling asleep at night, unlike other days. She was anxious. Looking at herself in the mirror, she reassured herself that her physical appearance had not changed. This is why she believed she had kept her menarche a secret from everyone. She decided to keep the secret from her parents and the community as a whole.

Unfortunately for her, the next menstrual period came. Tamil came home from school and was talking to her neighbours. Suddenly she got cramps. She ran to a nearby pond. After a few minutes she went back to her house. But she was afraid. If her mother comes to know about her period, it would be very difficult for her to study further. When she returned home, her mother had decorated the house with mango and coconut leaves. At first, she thought her mother had found out her secret. She thought her studies ended here. But her mother said that it was Vaikasi Pournami, the rituals in the house are because of that. She assumed that everyone knew about her menstruation, that's why they decorated the house for her menarche celebration. Once again, she escaped the situation. After reaching Ayali temple she was confused whether to enter the temple or not. In the temple there is a woman who is not menstruating and so she is the only one in the village who helps the non-menstruating girls and teaches them how to pray or behave inside the temple.

This woman also made up stories that two girls once entered the Ayali temple on the days of their menstruation. Apparently, those girls died from vomiting blood. It is a curse of Ayali. Tamil Selvi heard this story and was afraid to enter the temple. But her mother and the lady inside the temple tried to take her inside without knowing that she was menstruating. When she entered the temple, she had no changes. She felt nothing.

If a menstruating woman entered the premises of the deity, it was believed that she would get sick. If she does not get sick, she will not survive the Amavasi day. She will vomit the blood and die before Amavasi. Tamilselvi had doubts that she would survive the Amavasi. She thought that Ayali was angry at her and that she would kill her. But nothing happened. The next day of the Amavasi, she realised that there is no problem entering the Ayali temple during menstrual days.

That day she went to the Ayali temple to thank the goddess for helping her. But her mother discovered the clothes that were used as sanitary pads in her bag. Tamil Selvi got the idea of using the clothes to collect menstrual blood from her mother and other women whom she knew. Her mother Kuruvammal tries to share the news but Tamil Selvi restricts her. She says she wants to study. Tamil Selvi told her mother that if the locals knew that she was menstruating, they ought to be informed that it was her first time.

Mother Kuruvammal agrees to her daughter's wishes and tries to perform a small menarche procedure. The menstruating girl should eat raw egg. In Kerala, the same rituals are performed even today. The consumption of raw eggs with gingelly oil and turmeric powder is an essential part of the procedure.

In the series, the sanitary towels were dried in the sun along with other clothes. But the father said that they should be dried in some other place; not in a public place where everyone can see. The sanitary napkin is never touched by any other person, even a woman in that house. In Kerala and in most parts of the country, women experience the same restrictions. They dry the clothes in a closed area away from the sight of men. And also, old clothes are used for collecting the menstrual blood. White clothes are avoided to prevent visibility of the menstrual blood.

At first, there were six 9th standard girls in the classroom. After a few days or months, there is only one girl student. Other girls dropped out after their menarche. When Tamil Selvi reaches 10th standard, she is the only girl child who represents the 10th standard girls in the morning assembly.

There are rumours among the villagers about Tamil Selvi. She is studying in the 10th standard now, her girlfriends have got their periods and she has not even got her menarche. So, the villagers assumed that the reason she does not get periods is something wrong her parents did in their lifetime. Also, her father's co-workers bullied him and made fun of him that he will never be a grandfather as his daughter does not menstruate and that he will always stay young. It was very difficult for Tamil Selvi to be a woman who “did not menstruate” even at this age.

One day the father asked the mother whether their daughter was in a good state of health or not as the man was worried for Tamil not menstruating. The situation was tough as only his daughter and the lady in the temple were the only ones who were not menstruating.

Tamil Selvi appeared for the SSLC exam and passed with high marks. When the lady inside the temple got a spiritual power, she said that every single woman should enter the Ayali temple because Ayali told her so. So, all the women of the village waited for the *Pournami* day to enter the temple. But the chauvinist men of the village burnt fields and killed animals and said that Ayali was angry and hence women should not enter the temple. It was then that Tamil Selvi revealed the truth that she had been menstruating for two years. Her father in shock beat her in front of the villagers. They soon fixed the marriage of Tamil Selvi and Sakthivel as she revealed that she was menstruating. Based on their rituals, when a girl reaches puberty, she should get married.

As they arranged the marriage of Tamil Selvi, she tried to run away from the village with the help of other women. But she soon realised that she never wanted to leave the place. She had to live there, only then the villagers would know about the power of education and only then would they allow girls to enter the temple.

### **Gender roles in Ayali**

The gender roles are very well designed. The characters do justice to the period of the 1990s. At that time the society is shown to follow a male patriarchal system. Women listen to their husbands without having a voice of their own. They only had discussions about their problems in their kitchen or in their women's groups. Most men affirmatively believed in their culture and rituals.

The majority of males also think that their community, Veerapannai Makkal Nala Sangam, exists. The community has no name at all. It is a part of the larger society that suppresses women's rights and higher education.

The community association has no female candidates in this series. Most of the men went to town for the association meetings, otherwise they just lived in the village. It demonstrates that women enjoy neither equality nor respect. During community meetings, there is no female presence on stage or among the audience. They think that women should solely live at home. They should cook delicious food, provide excellent care for themselves and their kids, clean their homes, gather wood for fire, tend to the cows, and so on.

In the series they show the existence of the dowry system. In the first community meeting, Sakthi Vel, the Villain character, tries to help a poor man for his daughter's wedding. Prior to that, the father of Tamilselvi had begged everyone present at the event to marry off the daughter of that impoverished guy without giving her a single dime in dowry. But nobody accepts. Then Sakthi Vel entered and gave his gold chain as a donation. Then he asked his dad if he had anything more to donate. The father gave a gold ring. Sakthi Vel gave this gold to the maths teacher and asked him to collect all the money from the people attending the function. The incident strongly indicates that there is a dowry system and they marry off a girl by giving a huge amount of money or gold.

There is only one character that lives inside the temple in this series, and there is no representation of queer people at all. The reason she resides at the temple is that she is not menstruating. Once, the young boy who plays with Tamil Selvi inquired if he could go inside the temple. Which god forbids boys from entering the temple and which god forbids touching them. Majority of the male characters portray themselves as cultural protectors.

The community exclusively supports male students seeking higher education. The females are able to attend school prior to the onset of menstruation. Their schooling ends when they get their periods. It is not the elders' concern whether they are diligent students. However, no boy has been able to pass the tenth exam before the protagonist did. The only person who passed the tenth-grade exam was Tamil Selvi, and four other boys passed the exam with her help.

Almost all of the female characters are simply restricted to their homes and household chores. They pay attention to what their mother-in-law, spouse, and mother speak.

### **Socio-economic positioning of female characters**

It is evident that many of the female characters in the series lack formal education. They discontinue their education due to menstruation. Kuruvammal once said that her lack of knowledge of English caused her to quit her schooling in the fifth grade. The Science teacher's wife only studied till eighth grade. Mythily, the senior of Tamil Selvi, dropped out of school when in the ninth grade. Every female student drops out of school due to menstrual issues. Studying is not possible after menstruation. Thus, the women are unemployed. They only perform household chores like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the spouse, kids, and parents. They don't work at any paid jobs.



They put a lot of effort into providing for their family and their home. They allot their girl children a lot of hard work because they think that if she does everything, she will become very strong and will be able to handle any challenge. This will also help the girls to accept all the odds in their lives. Menstruating women are not permitted to enter the temple by the community, nor are they permitted to go to the town. The culture there would be malignant if they went. Thus, from the fourteenth century, men have always had the upper hand over these women.

Mother Kuruvammal and daughter Tamil Selvi have a close friendship. When Kuruvammal married Thavasi at the age of 14, she was mistreated by society and did not become pregnant. Thavasi was advised by his relatives to remarry, but he refuses. Kuruvammal prays to Ayali for a child. At the age of 21, she gave birth to Tamil Selvi. Thus, Kuruvammal thinks that Ayali revered her. As a result, she treated Tamil more like a friend than a daughter. For this reason, she chose to keep Tamil's menstruation a secret. She was aware of the way her society treated women. She keeps the secret from the public because she is so proud of her daughter. Kuruvammal believes Tamil's words that she wants to become a doctor. Tamil's commitment to her studies is a source of great confidence for the mother.

Mythili's mother is Easwari. In this story, they portray very critical roles. Easwari abides by the opinions of others. Her daughter Mythili is often teased by her. Her angry face is first seen by the audience. However, Easwari admits in the midst that she is not angry with her daughter and that she acts so in order to save her daughter. Easwari was tortured by his mother-in-law and husband. She then promised to educate her daughter to take care of the household, clean its surroundings, and other chores. However, Mythili endured a great deal of suffering. Being a student is quite simple; being a wife or a bride is quite difficult. She is a talented student as well, but society has stopped her from getting educated.

She realised that marriage is not a wonderful thing after entering into wedlock. Both mentally and physically, it tormented her. She was battered daily by her inebriated spouse, which made her depressed about her marriage. She had one child in her womb and one in her hand when her husband passed away from alcohol addiction. She had big plans for her schooling but was left with a miserable marriage. Her husband and her in-laws' family never gave her any respect.

Kayalvizhi is the girl who dropped out of school in the ninth grade. She's a typical student. The majority of them think she is mediocre and uninterested in learning. Tamil people also misunderstand her. However, she acknowledges to Tamil that she is a mediocre student in the class who only receives passing grades on tests. Still, she enjoys studying and going to school. Selvi, Kayal's mother, reconciled with her

sister's husband. Kayal's sister is not giving birth, therefore her family decided to label her a "Sakarathi," which means co wife. She elopes and stays at the temple on the day of the wedding. Selvi's predicament is so pitiful that her girls' lives are getting worse.

In her husband's home, Kayal's sister is voiceless. She never expresses disagreement with her spouse. Her spouse intends to remarry other women because she is unable to bear a child. When Kayal elopes on her wedding day, her sister's husband yells at her parents, telling them she'll elope with any man. After a disagreement with her son-in-law, Selvi informs him that Kayal would never elope with a man. She may commit suicide for marrying the man. Today, most girls face a situation where the family never asks their permission to marry a man. The patriarchal system does not want to hear a word from the woman's side. These women have no voice, no job, no salary and don't even have the freedom to be independent.

## **Conclusion**

According to the research study, menstruation is portrayed in society as a private topic, yet it must be discussed. It is high time to lift the taboo and misconceptions around menstruation, and to eradicate them from our society. Menstruation is no longer something to be hidden. It is crucial to educate a girl child so that she grows up to become a societal teacher with the support of her family. She will instil in her kids a respect for other people. Thus, educating a girl is really important.

Savitri, the headmistress in the series, always supported girls' education. As she knew Mythili so well and as she had assured the girl's family that she will have a bright life if they let her pursue her education, she attempted to call off the wedding. Most people believe that going through a menstrual period is unclean exercise, and that going into a temple during those days is risky, and that the deity will become enraged with them. This series contends that there is no logic or scientific evidence to support the myths surrounding menstruation.

In short, the series affirms that women should be well educated and financially independent. People should be able to distinguish between science and myth.

## **Conflict of Interest Declaration**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Images of Decision Making in Families: Reinforcement of Family Roles, Stereotypes and Gender Bias in Mutual Fund-related Advertisements in India

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## Abstract

Due to the increasing awareness of gender sensitivity, the depiction of women in advertisements has been shifting away from objectification, male gaze, and stereotyping. However, prevalent notions of gender roles still persist in the financial product segment. This study analyses select mutual fund-related advertisements in India to understand whether it carries the images of archaic gender norms in conventional families. The study focuses on how the presence or absence of women gender in mutual fund ads invokes lack of representation, gender-bias and reinforcement of existing norms within families in matters of money and how the power is exercised in decision making. It has been observed that the niche of such advertisement segments is still male dominant and the texts are made to appeal to men to a great extent.

The study is built within the framework of Alice Eagly's Gender Role theory which states that defined roles of different genders reinforce their behaviour and create imbalance of power within any systems and structures. The theory predicts that 'gendered behaviour will change when gender roles change'. Hence it is important to rethink depiction of gender roles in decision making related to financial matters within families in advertisements in order to address the gender gap and power imbalance. The researchers analysed advertisements released in the past ten years by conducting a content analysis through classification of elements such as 'brand ambassador', 'niche audience', 'protagonist'. By using the content analysis, the researchers intend to reveal bias, reinforcement and stereotyping aspects of mutual fund advertisements in India.

**Keywords:** *Gender-bias, Stereotyping, Reinforcing Family Roles, Mutual Fund Ads*

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## **Introduction**

Advertising encompasses the use of strategies and tactics to raise awareness of specific goods, services, viewpoints, or causes, aiming to influence people's behaviour. The majority of advertising revolves around promoting products for sale, often through brand marketing. However, similar techniques are also employed to support various causes, or garner support for political candidates, among other purposes. In many countries, advertising stands as the primary source of revenue for media outlets like newspapers, magazines, and television stations. In the non-communist world, advertising has grown to become a prominent and sizable service sector. Numerous studies have revealed the impact of advertising on individuals in our society. Throughout different eras, advertising has sought to depict society, either in fragments or in greater detail. The evolution of our society is prominently reflected in all forms of media advertising. Advertisers not only aim to promote their products or services but also convey ideas.

A corporation that pools money from several people and invests it in securities like stocks, bonds, and short-term debt is known as a mutual fund. Mutual funds are crucial to the growth of the financial sector. Mutual funds in India are actively promoted through various media channels, including digital platforms. The target audience of these advertisements typically includes newly employed young individuals as well as professionals who have retired from service.

Many studies on advertisements have revealed regressive aspects, including biases related to colour, gender, religion, and social status. This study focuses on analysing mutual fund advertisements in India, specifically examining their tone and how they may reinforce prevailing concepts of family, gender roles, and stereotypes.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The premise of Alice Eagly's Gender Role Theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) is that people who are socially classified as male and female often hold various responsibilities within social institutions and are assessed according to different standards of behaviour. As a result, the idea predicts that men and women would conduct differently and acquire distinct abilities and attitudes. The main argument of this theory is that the division of labour according to gender is the root cause of gender stereotypes. It also leads to differentiated skills for various genders.

Gender role theory has been used by communication scholars to explain and predict (a) the communication behaviours of males and females as well as (b) the evaluation of the same communication behaviour when performed by males and females. The

debate over whether the emphasis should be on gender differences or similarities has been greatly influenced by this research.

## **Literature Review**

Gender and sexuality seem to be one of the important aspects of advertising. Advertisements still represent a space where gender expression is quite important (Haripriya, 2010). Stereotypical pictures of women are frequently used in advertising. She might be a wife, mother-in-law, sister, or wife. For decades, women have frequently been seen in advertising- cooking food, doing laundry, bandaging cuts, or taking care of their husbands and kids and giving food (ibid.) While it's reasonable to assert that women and men are generally depicted equally in today's advertising, it's important to acknowledge instances where this balance is not maintained (Das, 2009). Studies persistently raise concerns about the specific content of individual advertisements (ibid.), emphasising the need for changes in how women are portrayed in commercials (Soni, 2020).

Different genders have distinct ways of interpreting advertisements aimed at women, which suggests that advertising teams may exhibit bias towards the opinions of the majority gender within the team. When these teams are predominantly composed of men, the perspectives of the millions of women who view these advertisements can be negatively influenced by the team's preconceptions and perceptions of women in advertising (Soni, 2020). Despite women being assigned more prominent roles and positions in advertisements, stereotypical portrayals still persist. To mitigate the inequalities perpetuated by gender stereotypes, advertisers must elevate the representation of women's roles (Sharma and Bumb, 2021).

## **Methodology**

This study investigates how mutual fund advertisements depict decision-making dynamics within families. It aims to analyse the reinforcement of specific family roles, the creation and perpetuation of gender bias and stereotypes in mutual fund-related advertisements, focusing on audio-visual advertisements as the primary research material. The researcher employs a qualitative content analysis method and supplements it with theoretical analysis to examine concepts related to gender roles and their portrayal.

This research focuses on audio-visual advertisements in the mutual fund industry and related areas. It examines advertisements from two prominent mutual fund companies and one mutual fund investor education initiative that have aired within the past 10 years. The selection criteria for these advertisements include a duration of less than 2

minutes. Specifically, the study analyses advertisements from *Mutual Funds Sahi Hai (A1)*, *Tata Mutual Funds(A2)*, and *HDFC Mutual Funds(A3)*.

## **Analysis and Findings**

### ***A1***

The advertisements of 'Mutual Funds Sahi Hai', an initiative of Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) primarily focus on general awareness about mutual fund investments. Majority of their advertisements predominantly feature male characters. Although female characters are present, only a few advertisements depict women as mutual fund investors directly. The Mother's Day advertisement, in particular, indirectly highlights women as investors. In others, female characters are part of the storyline.

Most of the advertisements involve male characters, who appear as colleagues, friends, or acquaintances, sharing mutual fund investment ideas and advice among themselves or with others in their circle. Even when cricketers Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni feature in these advertisements, they retain their own identities as Sachin and Mahi. In such cases as well, male characters tend to play the predominant roles, with only one or two advertisements including female characters.

### ***A2***

This is one of the prominent mutual fund investment companies in India. Their advertisements feature various stories encompassing men, women, and children, set in diverse locations such as homes, public places, and restaurants. Upon analysis, it becomes evident that the majority of these advertisements predominantly showcase male characters from various age groups and professions. These male characters engage in discussions about mutual funds, offer advice, and raise awareness among one another and the public.

In contrast, advertisements featuring female characters are less frequent and vary in significance. Some women play supporting roles, while female children are characters in a few advertisements. A couple of ads portray men imparting insights about mutual fund investments to women. In others, women are depicted in common roles, managing household activities and caring for their partners and children. One advertisement stands out by showcasing an independent woman actively involved in mutual funds, alongside a man and a family.

## A3

HDFC Mutual Funds advertisements show a more inclusive portrayal of women compared to previous mutual fund advertisements such as Tata Mutual Funds and Mutual Funds Sahi Hai. Women appear as characters in various advertisements, not limited to Mother's Day promotions, although they remain integral to the storyline rather than being the central focus.

However, these advertisements do not emphasise women as potential investors. Some simply provide details about mutual funds or advise people to invest in them. The majority of advertisements continue to focus on men as investors, portraying them as the central protagonists. There is one exception where a mother advises her son to invest in a mutual fund-related plan, but this stands out from the others in terms of focus.

To quantify the above results, nine advertisements (A1, A2 and A3- three each) were analysed.

**Table. 1 Gender representation in mutual fund advertisements.**

Advertisement Brand	No. of shots	Duration (In seconds)	Shots with women and %		Shots with Men and %	
MF Sahi Hai 1	30	60	0	0	30	100
MF Sahi Hai 2	39	60	4	10.26	36	92.31
MF Sahi Hai 3	31	60	19	61.29	30	96.77
Tata 1	30	40	13	43.33	14	46.67
Tata 2	16	78	9	56.25	10	62.5
Tata 3	13	38	0	0	11	84.62
HDFC 1	10	35	7	70	9	90
HDFC 2	40	86	12	30	39	97.5
HDFC 3	31	62	24	77.42	0	0
Mean =	26.67		9.78	38.73	19.89	74.49

The table shows that female representation in mutual fund advertisements is lower compared to males. On average, 26 to 27 shots are used in mutual fund ads. Men occupy central positions in about 20 shots, while women are seen in only 9 to 10



shots. In the mutual fund ads considered for the study, men enjoyed 74.49% of screen time, whereas women's chances of appearing were only 38.73%. Furthermore, women often appeared in supporting roles alongside men on a significant number of occasions. Some ads completely avoid featuring female characters to promote this financial product.

## **Discussion**

A closer look at the mutual fund ads clearly shows the aspects as discussed below. The gender roles of males are reaffirmed as bread-winners of the family and females are homemakers who have no financial autonomy and decision-making capacities. As a corollary, female representation in this ad segment is limited and their social roles are not considered worth mentioning in texts. Reinforcement of stereotyping of female gender is clearly visible through limited screen space and dialogues. Although there are exceptions to this general trend, it's miniscule and tokenistic in nature.

**Male breadwinners:** The content and dialogue in most of the advertisements convey the male character as the primary breadwinner of the family. They are often depicted as the central protagonists, and most of the shots focus on male characters. The majority of advertisements are centred around male characters and predominantly address a male audience. This emphasis on men as breadwinners is reinforced through dialogue, scenes, and settings.

**Limited female representation:** While some advertisements feature female characters, they have limited screen time and few lines of dialogue. They are frequently shown engaged in traditional roles, such as preparing and serving food, household activities, and caring for family members. In a few cases, female characters are portrayed as employees, but their roles are often not explicitly defined or emphasised. Female characters typically have fewer lines of dialogue and less screen time compared to male characters. They are often depicted as homemakers or family members. The use of imagery like women in traditional sarees and performing kitchen tasks may reinforce stereotypes of women as powerless or unemployed within the family.

**Exceptions and female empowerment:** While there are exceptions, with some advertisements focusing on female characters, these instances are not the norm. Male celebrities are commonly featured and given more dialogue and screen space. Although some advertisements feature female characters or make them protagonists, they may not necessarily target a female audience. Female characters often seem to serve as narrative devices rather than addressing women directly.

**Protagonists and brand ambassadors:** Most advertisements feature men as the protagonists. However, in some instances, female characters also take on the role of the protagonist. The issue arises when even in these cases, female protagonists are portrayed in ways that adhere to traditional stereotypes related to their appearance, attire, behaviour, and engagement in household chores. Rarely are female protagonists depicted as employed (although without clear visuals of their jobs) and making financial decisions. In the majority of cases, women are included in the storyline as common characters. As mentioned earlier, brand ambassadors of some ads are cricketers and they address the male 'breadwinner' generally.

**Niche audience:** One crucial aspect to consider when analysing mutual fund advertisements is the primary target audience of these companies. In this context, mutual fund companies predominantly cater to and address a male audience rather than females or other gender groups. Men are typically depicted as employed individuals responsible for providing financial support to their families. Most advertisements, either directly or indirectly, encourage men to invest in mutual funds. By portraying male characters as the financial backbone of their families who make decisions about financial matters, including mutual fund investments, these advertisements may reinforce the perception that this reflects the reality of our society.

## **Conclusion**

The advertisements of mutual funds clearly show a dominance of male characters. Most of the advertisements in the field are representing and addressing men. Even though the advertisements show women characters, they are portrayed as jobless, powerless people in a family barring a few exceptions. The age-old family roles like women doing household work, taking care of other family members and men engaged in earning etc. are portrayed in such ads. These advertisements evidently show the decisions taken in families are mainly by men. Financial matters are typically considered the domain of men. Women are stereotyped as home makers and jobless people as in some other advertisement segments.

Stereotyping, particularly the objectification of women and the portrayal of women as jobless individuals, persists in contemporary advertisements, which is disheartening. These stereotypes subtly influence the audience and reinforce antiquated perceptions of gender roles. The concept of bias is also relevant in the context of gender representation. It becomes evident in advertisements that promote progressive ideas. However, the majority of mutual fund advertisements continue to depict men as the key decision-makers within families, especially regarding financial

matters such as mutual fund investments and insurance. These portrayals further solidify gender-biased concepts in the minds of the audience.

### **Conflict of Interest Declaration**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Assessing Digital Media Literacy among Adults in Rural Kerala: A Micro-level Investigation

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## Abstract

This study endeavours to probe the realm of digital media literacy among adults residing in a rural setting in the state of Kerala, India. Digital media literacy encompasses the capacity to proficiently navigate, critically evaluate, and pose relevant, insightful inquiries to comprehend and derive meaning from content prevalent in the digital landscape. It often amalgamates the multifaceted aspects of media literacy with the technological prowess of digital literacy. As we step into an era where competence in employing, participating in, and comprehending digital media and services becomes an imperative prerequisite for active engagement in the digital economy and broader societal discourse, this study assumes paramount significance. In the backdrop of the "Satyameva Jayate" initiative launched by the Government of Kerala in 2021, with a primary focus on countering the proliferation of fake news, this micro-level investigation aims to provide insights into the contemporary state of digital media literacy among the adult population within a rural milieu. The primary objectives of this research were two-fold: firstly, to evaluate the patterns of digital media usage prevalent among adults, and secondly, to gauge their awareness levels concerning the reliability of information sources.

The findings, rooted in a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among adults residing in Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath, Alappuzha district, unveil intriguing facets of digital media engagement. A substantial proportion of respondents exhibited limited awareness regarding fact-checking mechanisms and the potential perils associated with disseminating counterfeit or unsubstantiated content encountered through various social media platforms. The study also disclosed that more than half of the surveyed households relied on broadband connections for internet access, while the remainder depended on mobile data services. These findings illuminate the urgent need to enhance digital media literacy among adult populations, particularly in rural areas, and underscore the importance of initiatives like "Satyameva Jayate" in promoting media literacy and responsible digital engagement.

**Keywords:** *Digital Media Literacy, Micro-level Study, Digital Economy, Reliability of Information*

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## **Introduction**

Digital media literacy has emerged as a crucial skill in the contemporary world. As the digital landscape rapidly evolves, the ability to navigate, critically assess, and comprehend the deluge of digital content becomes increasingly important. Digital media literacy is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various competencies required to effectively engage with digital media. Buckingham (2007) emphasises critical thinking, digital production skills, and the ability to analyse and evaluate media content. Hobbs (2010) posits that digital literacy includes technical skills for accessing and using digital tools and platforms, as well as the capability to critically assess and communicate information in digital environments.

In the Indian context, governmental initiatives have been implemented to promote digital literacy. The National Digital Literacy Mission, launched in 2012 by the Government of India, aimed to provide basic digital literacy skills to all citizens, particularly those in rural areas (Kumar, 2019). The Digital India campaign further emphasised the need to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy, advocating for digital literacy at the grassroots level (Sharma, 2016).

### **Digital media literacy in rural contexts**

Research on digital media literacy often concentrates on urban settings, overlooking the unique challenges faced by rural communities. Singh (2018) highlighted the barriers in rural areas, including limited access to technology, linguistic challenges, and a lack of infrastructure. Singh (2018) emphasised the urgent need for tailored digital literacy programs designed for rural populations. The digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas, where access to resources and internet connectivity is limited (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). Studies like Rangaswamy and Sridhar (2016) emphasise the necessity of raising awareness about fact-checking mechanisms, guiding individuals on identifying reliable sources, and fostering critical thinking skills to counter misinformation in digital spaces.

## **Governmental initiatives and media literacy programmes**

The "Satyameva Jayate" initiative, launched by the Government of Kerala in 2021<sup>2</sup>, aimed to counter the dissemination of fake news and misinformation. The program underscored the significance of media literacy and responsible digital engagement among the populace (Kerala Government, 2021). However, an in-depth assessment of its effectiveness, especially in rural areas, is essential to gauge its impact on enhancing digital media literacy.

This study endeavours to scrutinise the current state of digital media literacy among adults in a rural setting. Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath of Alappuzha district in the state of Kerala had been selected as a study locale.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study was to scrutinise the current state of digital media literacy among adults in a rural setting.

Specific objectives of the study were as follows,

- To evaluate prevalent patterns of digital media usage among adults residing in rural Kerala.
- To gauge the awareness levels among rural population on the reliability of information sources accessed through various digital platforms.

## **Study Method**

This quantitative study involved a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among a sample size of 250 adults residing in Thekkekkara Grama Panchayath in the Alappuzha district of the state of Kerala. Out of a total of 19 wards in the panchayat, five wards were purposively selected, and 50 respondents from each of the wards participated in the survey. The selected wards were *Thadathilal*, *Choorallur*, *Ponnezha*, *Ponakam* and *Vathikulam*. The questionnaire was designed to encompass various facets of digital media literacy, including internet usage patterns, awareness of fact-checking mechanisms, and sources of information consumption.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the Kerala government announced a programme named 'Satyameva Jayate' to empower people, especially the youth, with essential fact-checking tools and methods of combating fake news. Under the initiative, the government would encourage several schools and colleges to equip their curriculum with digital media literacy rules.

The sample was selected using a stratified sampling technique to ensure representation across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational diversities within the rural area. From among the selected 5 wards, 50 each of the households were randomly chosen using the voters list (modified list-2019). From each selected household, one eligible adult was invited to participate. This process aimed to ensure a diverse representation of the village population in the final sample. Trained researchers with the help of ASHA workers conducted face-to-face interviews with the selected participants and noted down their responses in the questionnaire.

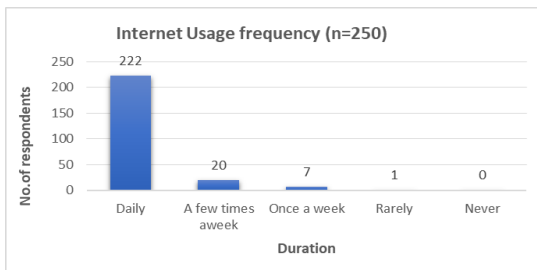
**Analysis and Findings**

A total of 267 responses were collected from the household survey through the structured questionnaire in the month of April, 2023. To enable a smooth and full response the investigators have helped the respondents by noting down their responses in the printed questionnaire. At the time of analysis of the data, 17 incomplete questionnaires were discarded and the rest 250 were selected for final analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis based on the responses are reported as follows;

**Internet usage frequency of the respondents**

The study revealed that a significant majority of respondents (88.8%) use the internet on a daily basis, with a smaller percentage accessing it a few times a week (8%). A minimal proportion of participants reported using the internet once a week or rarely (3.2%). This suggests a substantial level of data connectivity and usage in the study area. (see table 1).

**Table 1**

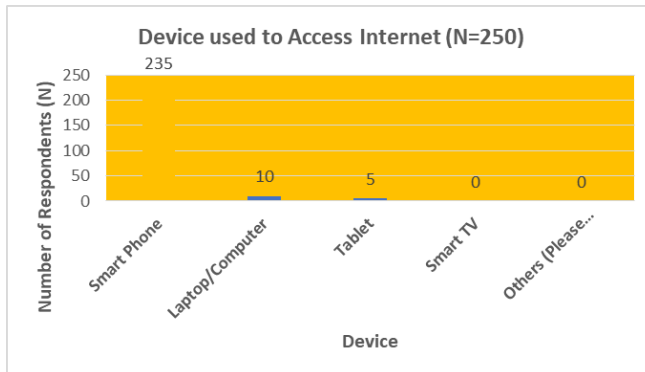


**Device used to access the internet**



The overwhelming preference for internet access is through smartphones, with 94% of respondents primarily using this device. Laptops/computers are used by 4% of respondents, while tablets and smart TVs are less commonly used. Smartphones dominate as the primary device for internet access indicating the increasing reliance on mobile technology for online activities (see Table 2).

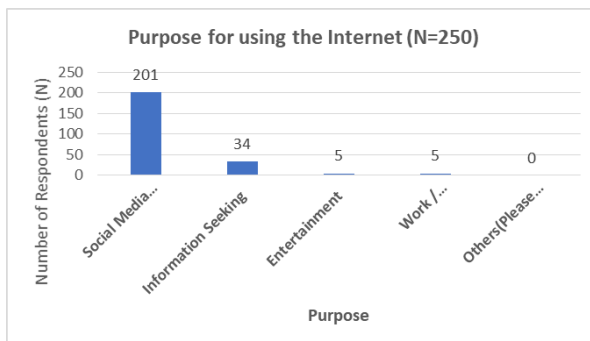
**Table 2**



### Main purpose for internet usage

The main purposes for internet use vary, with the majority of respondents engaging in social media interaction (80.4%). Information seeking is the second most common purpose (13.6%), followed by entertainment and work/professional use. (see table 3).

**Table 3**

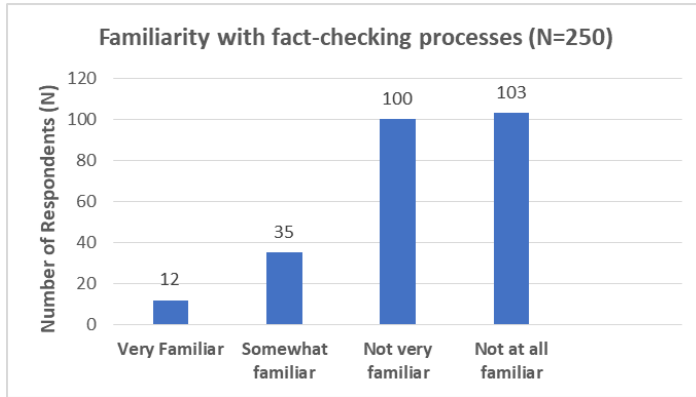


### Familiarity with fact-checking processes

Respondents show varying degrees of familiarity with fact-checking processes, with a significant number indicating they are not very familiar or not at all familiar (80%).

This suggests a potential need for education or awareness campaigns regarding online information verification. (see table 4).

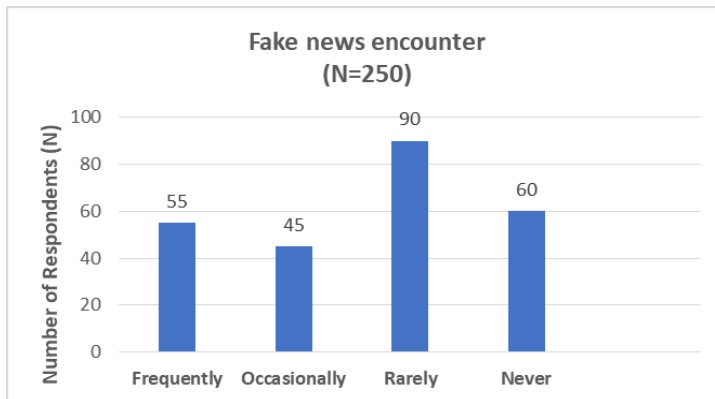
**Table 4**



**Encountering fake news**

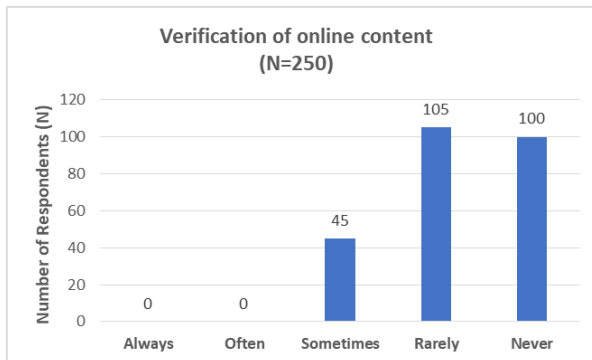
A notable portion of respondents frequently (22%) or occasionally (18%) comes across fake news online, emphasising the importance of cultivating critical online information consumption habits. (see table 5).

**Table 5**



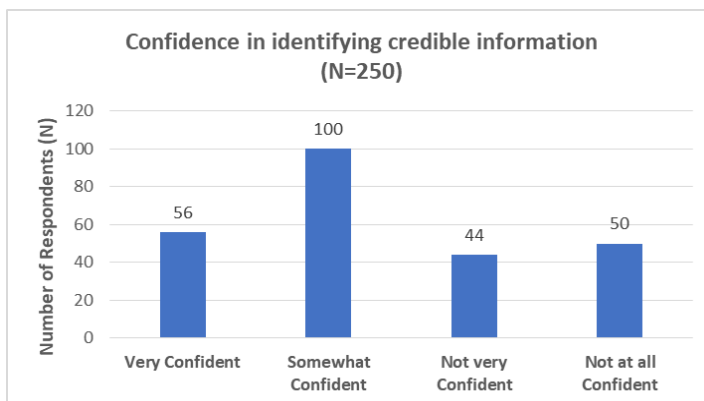
**Verification of online information**

A significant proportion of respondents (54%) rarely or never verify the sources of the news or information they encounter online. This highlights a potential area for improvement in digital media literacy and fact-checking behaviours. (see table 6).

**Table 6**

### **Confidence in identifying credible information**

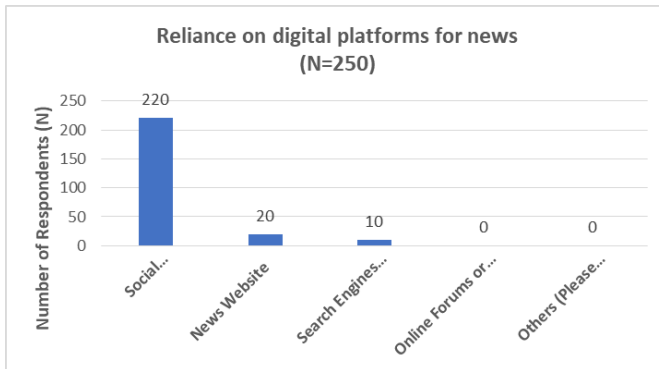
While a substantial number of respondents express confidence in identifying credible information online (56% very confident, 40% somewhat confident), a notable percentage (44%) feel less confident. This suggests a diverse range of digital media literacy levels among the surveyed population. (see table 7).

**Table 7**

### **Reliance on digital platforms for news**

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, are the primary sources for obtaining news and information for the majority of respondents (88%). This dominance raises questions about the potential impact of social media on information dissemination. (see table 8).

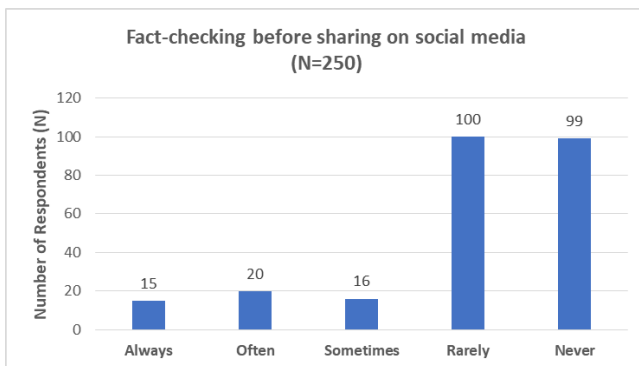
**Table 8**



**Fact-checking before sharing on social media**

Majority of respondents (79%) rarely or never fact-checks information before sharing it on social media. This behaviour may contribute to the spread of misinformation. A significant number (54%) rarely or never verifies online information sources, suggesting a need for increased awareness and education on information validation. (see table 9).

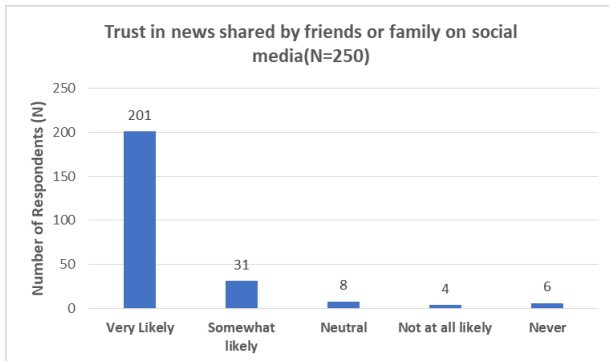
**Table 9**



**Trust in news shared by friends or family on social media**

The majority of respondents (80.4%) are very likely to trust news shared by friends or family on social media. This highlights the influence of personal connections in shaping trust in online information. A noteworthy percentage frequently (22%) or occasionally (18%) encounters fake news, emphasising the challenge of misinformation. (see table 10).

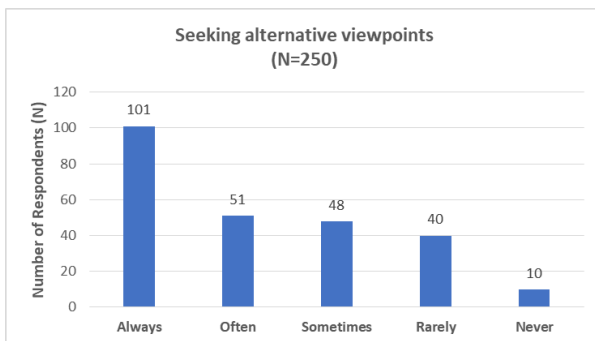
**Table 10**



**Seeking alternative viewpoints**

A substantial number of respondents actively seek out alternative viewpoints when consuming online content (40.4% always, 20.4% often). This suggests a willingness to explore diverse perspectives. The majority (74.4%) is very likely to change opinions based on new information, reflecting adaptability in forming viewpoints. (see table 11).

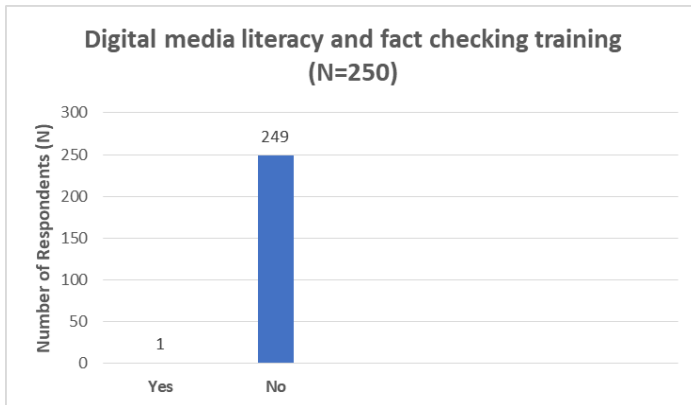
**Table 11**



**Digital media literacy training**

The majority of respondents (99.6%) have not received training or education on digital media literacy and fact-checking. This underscores the potential value of educational initiatives to enhance online information literacy. (see table 12).

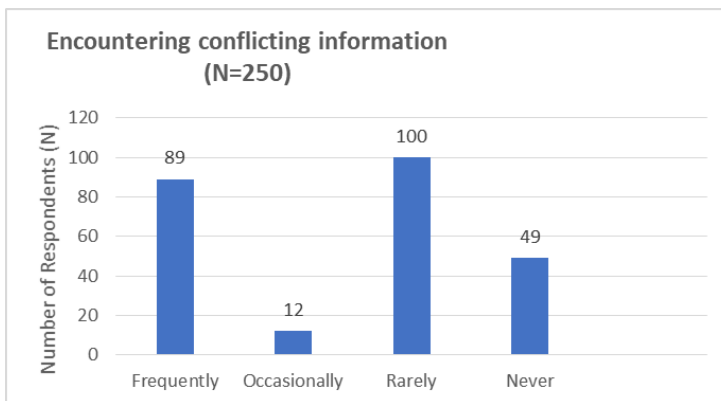
**Table 12**



**Encountering conflicting information**

A significant portion of respondents (44.8%) frequently encounter conflicting information on different websites or platforms. This raises concerns about the consistency and reliability of online information. (see table 13).

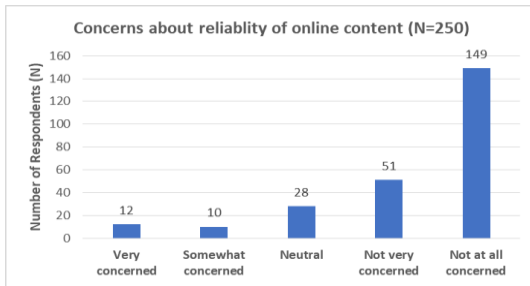
**Table 13**



**Concerns about online information reliability**

A considerable percentage of respondents (61.6%) express some level of concern about the reliability of information found online. This suggests a need for increased awareness about critically evaluating online information sources. (see table 14).

**Table 14**

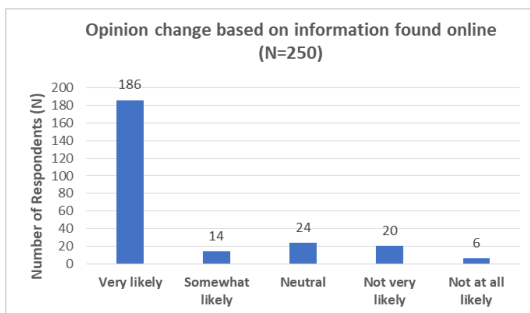


**Likelihood to change opinion based on new information**

The majority of respondents (74.4%) are very likely to change their opinion based on new information found online. This indicates a dynamic and adaptable approach to forming opinions based on the information available.

In summary, the data reflects a complex landscape of internet usage, information consumption habits, and digital literacy levels among the surveyed individuals. Efforts to enhance digital media literacy, fact-checking awareness, and critical thinking skills could contribute to a more informed and discerning online community. (see table 15).

**Table 15**



**Summary of Findings**

**Digital landscape and internet usage**

The high frequency of daily internet usage (88.8%) underscores the ubiquity of digital technology in the lives of the surveyed individuals. The overwhelming preference for smartphones (94%) as the primary device for internet access highlights the increasing

reliance on mobile technology. This suggests a need for digital infrastructure development to ensure equitable access and support for users across various devices.

### ***Purpose and nature of online activities***

Social media interaction emerges as the dominant purpose for internet use (80.4%), emphasising the social aspect of online engagement. However, the relatively lower percentages for information seeking (13.6%), entertainment, and work-related use suggest a potential opportunity to diversify online activities and promote a more balanced and purposeful use of the internet.

### ***Digital literacy and awareness challenges***

The data reveals a significant gap in digital literacy, particularly in the familiarity with fact-checking processes (80% not very familiar or not at all familiar). The lack of verification practices (54% rarely or never verify sources) raises concerns about the potential spread of misinformation. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for comprehensive digital literacy programs that empower individuals to critically evaluate and validate online information.

### ***Trust dynamics and concerns***

The juxtaposition of encountering fake news (40%) with a high likelihood of trusting news shared by friends or family on social media (80.4%) highlights the complex nature of trust dynamics. This suggests that personal connections play a substantial role in shaping trust, even in the face of potential misinformation. It emphasises the importance of fostering a culture of critical thinking and source evaluation within social circles.

### ***Critical thinking and adaptability***

While a significant number actively seeks alternative viewpoints (40.4% always, 20.4% often), indicating a willingness to diversify perspectives, the data also reveals that a considerable percentage (74.4%) is very likely to change opinions based on new information. This underscores the importance of promoting a flexible and adaptive approach to information consumption, encouraging individuals to reevaluate their views based on credible and updated information.

### ***Concerns about reliability and confidence in identifying credible information***

The expressed concern about the reliability of online information (61.6%) suggests a need for strategies to enhance confidence in navigating the digital landscape. While



a majority expresses confidence in identifying credible information, a significant percentage (44%) feels less confident. Addressing this confidence gap requires targeted interventions to enhance media literacy skills and provide individuals with the tools to critically assess the credibility of online content.

## **Recommendations and Suggestions**

*To bridge the digital literacy gap, it is imperative to implement comprehensive digital literacy programs at educational institutions, workplaces, and community centres.* These programs should cover fundamental aspects such as fact-checking processes, source verification, and critical evaluation of online information. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, educational institutions, and non-profit organisations can play a pivotal role in designing and delivering these programs.

*Collaborate with fact-checking organisations to promote fact-checking initiatives.* This can include awareness campaigns, workshops, and online resources to educate individuals about the importance of verifying information before sharing it. Encourage the integration of fact-checking tools within popular online platforms to facilitate real-time verification.

*Encourage a diverse range of online activities beyond social media interaction.* Promote the use of online platforms for educational purposes, skill development, and professional networking. By diversifying online engagement, individuals can derive greater value from the internet and develop a more well-rounded digital presence.

*Implement community-based initiatives to foster critical thinking within social circles.* Encourage open discussions about information consumption habits, share tips on source evaluation, and promote a collective commitment to responsible information sharing. Leveraging social networks for positive influence can contribute to building a culture of critical thinking.

*Work with education authorities to integrate digital literacy education into school curricula.* Equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape responsibly from an early age. This proactive approach can cultivate a generation of digitally literate individuals who are better equipped to discern reliable information from misinformation.

*Collaborate with major online platforms to enhance user awareness and promote responsible information sharing.* Platforms should actively participate in initiatives that encourage users to verify information before sharing and provide clear guidelines on distinguishing credible sources.

*Work with employers to incorporate media literacy training into workplace development programmes.* This will empower employees to critically evaluate information encountered in professional settings, reducing the risk of misinformation influencing decision-making processes.

*Establish mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation of digital literacy initiatives.* Regularly assess the impact of programs to ensure their effectiveness in addressing evolving challenges in the digital landscape. Adapt strategies based on feedback and emerging trends to stay relevant and impactful.

*By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can contribute to building a digitally literate society that engages with online information critically, responsibly, and effectively.* This multifaceted approach addresses various aspects of digital literacy and empowers individuals to navigate the digital landscape with confidence and resilience against misinformation.

## **Conclusion**

This micro-level study conducted in a rural area in the state of Kerala has yielded compelling insights into the digital media usage patterns of the local population. The findings underscore a robust penetration of digital media, revealing a high level of connectivity even in traditionally underserved rural regions. Despite this, the study highlights a critical gap in digital media literacy, with a substantial portion of the population lacking awareness of effective and responsible use of digital media, particularly in the context of combating the proliferation of fake news. The prevalence of digital media usage in rural Kerala indicates a remarkable shift in the information landscape, with technology reaching even the remote corners of the state. The high connectivity observed underscores the transformative power of digital media in bridging geographical gaps and bringing information to previously isolated communities. This aspect is particularly noteworthy as it challenges preconceived notions about the limited reach of digital technology in rural settings.

However, the study reveals a significant gap in digital media literacy, pointing to a lack of awareness and understanding among the rural population about the appropriate use of digital media. This deficiency extends to measures and mechanisms for fact-checking and discerning the credibility of information, especially in the context of the escalating issue of fake news. The findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive digital media literacy initiatives tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by the rural population.

The prevalence of misinformation and the limited awareness of fact-checking processes among the rural population emphasise the urgent need to address the menace of fake news. In this context, the "Sathyameva Jayathe" program initiated by the government of Kerala stands as a crucial step towards promoting truth and accuracy in the media. However, the study suggests that there is a pressing need to extend this program to the grassroots level. Collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are essential to ensure the effective dissemination of digital media literacy programmes.

In light of the study's findings, it becomes imperative to disseminate digital media literacy programs widely across all parts of the state. These programs should not only focus on the basic use of digital media but also emphasise critical aspects such as verifying information sources, recognizing misinformation, and employing fact-checking measures. The dissemination process should leverage various means, including community workshops, educational institutions, and awareness campaigns in collaboration with local NGOs.

The "Sathyameva Jayathe" program, with its emphasis on truth and accuracy in media, can play a pivotal role in addressing the existing digital literacy gap. However, for its impact to be maximised, it is crucial to extend its reach to the grassroots level. This requires concerted efforts from governmental bodies, NGOs, and local community leaders to ensure that the benefits of the program reach every segment of the rural population.

Governmental bodies, NGOs, and other stakeholders must collaborate to create a comprehensive and sustainable framework for digital media literacy. By working together, they can leverage their unique strengths to design and implement initiatives that resonate with the diverse rural communities in Kerala. This collaborative approach is essential for building a digitally literate society that can navigate the complexities of the digital landscape with confidence and resilience.

Therefore, the study calls for the transformative potential of digital media in rural Kerala while underscoring the urgent need for digital media literacy initiatives. The Sathyameva Jayathe program, as a symbol of the government's commitment to truth in media, needs to be extended to the grassroots level through collaborative efforts. The future of a well-informed and digitally literate society in Kerala hinges on the proactive and inclusive implementation of digital media literacy programs tailored to the unique needs of the rural populace.

### **Conflict of Interest Declaration**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Feminism vs Pseudo-feminism: Analysing Women's Engagement with Pseudo-feminist Discourse on Social Media

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## Abstract

The feminist ideology supports equality and advocates equal rights and opportunities for all genders. Contrary to feminist principles, social media platforms enable the creation and dissemination of pseudo-feminist content that exploits feminist ideals. The present study delves into examining the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourse on social media platforms and the role of social media in facilitating the spread of pseudo-feminist content. The major objectives of the study are to investigate how women engage with pseudo-feminist content on social media, to evaluate whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist content on social media, and to analyse whether pseudo-feminist contents dilute the core principles of genuine feminism. A qualitative study was conducted among ten women in the age group of 25 to 35 in the form of an in-depth interview. Purposive sampling was employed, and initial screening was done to include only women who use social media platforms in the study. The outcome of this study indicates that social media plays a crucial role in spreading pseudo-feminist notions. The study suggests that the rise of the pseudo-feminist movement on social media has made it difficult to distinguish between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism, and has also negatively impacted the core ideals and principles upon which the ideology of feminism has been built. The study indicates that the attitude of women towards pseudo-feminism is highly negative. The findings of this study are significant as they shed light on how the pseudo-feminist discourse on social media has affected actual feminist principles.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Pseudo-feminism, Women, Social media*

## Introduction

The growth of information and communication technology has made the internet and smartphones an indispensable part of our lives. Social media platforms on the internet, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, etc., have

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revolutionised the way we communicate and network, and have become an unavoidable aspect of our lives. Social media is defined as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media enable people to showcase their identity, articulate their social networks, and create or maintain connections with others (Ellison, 2007). Social media often become venues for debates and discourses on various issues. The popularity of social media is used by people advocating for various causes to spread awareness and to create an impact. People advocating for ‘feminism’ also use social media for feminist activism.

The term "feminism" is commonly employed with vagueness, as its meaning and perception can vary depending on the context and situation in which it is used. For the purpose of this research, feminism is defined as an ideology that promotes equality and advocates equal rights and opportunities for all genders. Although feminism benefits both men and women, many people think of it as only about women, perhaps because of its name (Rudman et al., 2012). Along with the struggle of the feminist movement to address inequality and women’s rights, the phenomenon of pseudo-feminism is gaining prominence. Pseudo-feminism, in the context of this study, is defined as a movement that exploits feminist principles by trying to project women as superior to men and giving women an upper hand.

The pseudo-feminist movement faces criticism as it goes against the idea of equality, and the rise of masculinity studies also came as a backlash to pseudo-feminism. Masculinity studies explore what it means to be a man in society, question stereotypes, and examine how gender roles affect men. As societal expectations for men are often more rigid, men may face greater consequences when deviating from traditional gender roles compared to women, even though both genders can experience challenges for not conforming to these norms (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

The present study is aimed at examining the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media and women’s nature of engagement with them. The study also intends to examine whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist contents on social media and whether pseudo-feminist contents on social media dilute the core principles of genuine feminism.

## **Review of Literature**

Majumadar et al. (2022) conducted a study in India that evaluated gender and identity performance on social media among young Indian users. By examining a compilation

of 442 comments from selected public Indian Facebook pages and doing a thematic discourse analysis, it revealed well known ((#mansplaining, pseudofeminism) and developing (choice feminism, MGTOW, #fuckboi etc.) discursive strategies within the main themes of feminism and antifeminism, men's rights, intersectional feminism, and sexual behaviour. The results of the study indicated that intergender communication on social media was reliant on conventional offline norms, yet it has the potential to create new discourses of gender by challenging those norms.

A study conducted in South Africa by Jagernath and Nupen (2022) that aimed to provide insights into the phenomenon of pseudo-feminism revealed that there is often a vagueness surrounding the purpose of the feminist movement. The study suggested that feminism may be perceived as a movement that has the intention to support the oppression of non-female genders, toppling decades of progress, if there is no clear distinction within society between feminism and pseudo-feminism. Another study was conducted to analyse the reflections of male-bashing in radical separatist feminist African literature (Acheampong, 2023). Using El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* as a primary text, the study disputes the reasoning behind male-bashing by bringing to the forefront several overlooked factors in this discussion. The factors include "faulty homogenization/essentialization of men and women and the constraints certain cultural expectations pose to men".

Wang and Chang (2023) conducted a study in China to understand why some women hate feminists and it examines social media and the structural limitations of Chinese digital feminism. The study discusses three themes of anti-feminist discourse held by respondents. The three themes are: "feminism as a concealed form of disciplinary normality for women; feminists as accountable for undermining women's solidarity; and digital feminism as merely a trendy business". The reasons for such misconceptions were identified as the technological affordance of Chinese social media platforms and a pro-fertility state discourse.

An Indonesian study conducted by Sokowati (2022) examined how women's issues and voices are represented by activism practices in social media and the problems in the movement. By observing the Instagram accounts of five feminist activists, the study found a representation problem when the activists published contents related to women's problems, as they only represented middle-class women's problems. The study also found an ethical problem owing to the activists' disregard for ethics when engaging in activism.

## Objectives

- To examine the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media platforms and the role of social media in facilitating the spread of pseudo-feminist contents.
- To investigate how women engage with pseudo-feminist contents on social media and their attitude towards such contents
- To evaluate whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist contents on social media and to analyse whether pseudo-feminist contents on social media dilute the core principles of genuine feminism

## Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Data was collected using an in-depth interview conducted among ten women in the age group of 25 to 35. Purposive sampling was employed in the study. All the participants belonged to Kozhikode district in Kerala, but some are not presently living in Kozhikode as their job location is in other cities. Initial screening was done to include only women who use social media platforms, as the main intention of this study is to provide insights about the prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media. The women were all educated, possessing a minimum educational qualification of graduation, and belonged to middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Of the ten women, eight were employed, and two were homemakers. Questions for the interview were designed in such a way as to explore in detail, women's nature of engagement with pseudo-feministic contents on social media platforms and their attitude towards it.

## Data Analysis

*Table 1: Demographic details of the participants*

Sl. No	Name	Age	Educational Qualification
1	Ms. A. V	32	B.tech
2	Ms. N. S	32	M.tech
3	Ms. H. S	26	M.sc
4	Ms. K. P	33	MBA
5	Ms. S. J	30	MA



6	Ms. M. A	27	B.tech
7	Ms. N. A	28	MSW
8	Ms. A. A	27	B. arch
9	Ms. A. S	30	MBA
10	Ms. S. B	33	M.sc

### **Prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media**

*If it wasn't for the proliferation of social media, I don't think fake feminism would have spread out the way it is now. There are a lot of influencers on Instagram and YouTube who spread toxic feminist content. They say things that are not related to feminism at all. Social media is actually giving these people an opportunity to spread the flawed notion that they have about feminism (Ms. A. A, 27 years).*

*I am a part of certain groups on WhatsApp where the members are only women. I see a lot of fake feminist content in it all the time. I believe the growth of social media platforms has facilitated the spread of pseudo-feminism to a large extent (Ms. K. P, 33 years).*

*I certainly believe that social media platforms contribute towards spreading fake feminist content. It is very difficult for people to stay away from social media, as it has become a part of everyone's lives. We are getting a lot of information from several sources whose authenticity and credibility are not known. So, as much as there is misinformation and lies spreading through social media in other areas, there is fake information being spread related to feminism as well. I have come across such contents many times (Ms N. A, 28 years).*

All the participants agreed that they were exposed to pseudo-feminist content on social media platforms. All of them had the same opinion that social media platforms play a crucial role in spreading pseudo-feminist content.

### **Women's nature of engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media and their attitude towards it**

The nature of engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media varied from woman to woman. The difference in their patterns of engagement with pseudo-feministic contents is mainly due to the difference in their attitudes, as some held the view that

not engaging with such contents was the best thing to do while others thought it was important to take a stand and express their opinion.

*I choose to ignore contents related to fake feminism whenever I come across them. I don't post a comment to disagree and express my take on it. I feel it is better to ignore than engage with such contents (Ms. A. V, 32 years).*

*Once I saw a video on Instagram that was supposed to be about women empowerment. But I felt that the video was extremely toxic. So, I expressed my disagreement with it. Then the comment section became a battleground, with a lot of people supporting me and many others opposing me. I don't mind getting involved in a healthy debate. But you know how social media comment sections are, right? Some people were humiliating me and using abusive words. I think that a lot of women are so carried away by fake feminism. Most of the hate replies that I got were from women. It is an irony that these self-proclaimed feminists, who are actually pseudo-feminists, do not hesitate to bring another woman down or abuse her on social media just because she expressed her opinion (Ms. A. S, 30 years).*

*I used to share videos and other contents on social media, which I think are related to empowering women. But usually, a lot of content is related to fake feminism. So, I choose not to forward it or share it with anyone else. Most of the time, I don't express my opinion because I really don't want to get into any sort of verbal spat with others (Ms. N. S, 32 years).*

While some women thought it was necessary to fight pseudo-feminist contents, others felt that ignoring those contents was the best thing to do. The fear of facing cyberbullying from pseudo-feminists online also kept some of the women away from expressing their genuine opinions. All the women had the same opinion about facing cyberbullying when they expressed their disagreement with contents on social media that promote fake feminist ideologies.

*Once I posted a comment on Facebook under a post that described gender roles and women empowerment. But more than empowering women or ensuring equal rights for both genders, I found the write-up extremely misleading by giving women an upper hand over men. My comment triggered a lot of women, and then they started accusing me of supporting patriarchy (Ms. M. A, 27 years).*

All the participants opined that rather than ensuring gender equality, certain so-called feminist influencers on social media platforms spread toxicity about gender roles and women empowerment.

*I believe feminism is about giving equal rights to women, especially underprivileged women. But we often see privileged women using feminism as a tool to defend their highly flawed notion of feminism and to spread hatred against men. There was a video on Instagram that I happened to scroll down to, in which a woman was asked if she thinks that men are important. Her reply to that was, 'like for what'? and then she compared a man with a dessert. That video was given a king of swag appeal by the creators and edited in such a way as to promote women's views on men. I wondered how the video, in any way, was related to empowering women. If it were a man in her position making such a remark about women, then things wouldn't have been the same. So, such kinds of double standards undermine gender equality (Ms. S. B, 33 years).*

All the women expressed their growing concern over social media's role in creating a highly deceptive picture about gender equality. All the women have come across contents on social media platforms that misrepresent gender equality by giving more privilege to women. According to the women, such contents bring down the core ideologies and principles of feminism. They felt that making fun of men and disrespecting men were all promoted under the banner of 'women empowerment'. They all agreed that the repercussions of such videos are different for a man and a woman because if women are disrespected or made fun of in any videos, it will invite a lot of criticism contrary to the other way around. All the women had an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the spread of pseudo-feminism using social media platforms.

*Pseudo-feminism on social media platforms needs to be condemned. But everything has pros and cons, and so does social media. While there are a lot of pseudo-feminist influencers, there are a lot of other content creators that emphasise the ideal values of feminism and have played a crucial role in contributing towards the creation of women empowerment-oriented contents (Ms. H. S, 26 years).*

*If we neglect the fake feminist ideologies being circulated through social media, social media has also facilitated the empowerment of women by giving women more exposure to real feminist contents and making them aware of their rights and the need to fight against society's unfair ways of treating women (Ms. S. J, 30 years).*

Even though the women find pseudo-feminist contents highly misleading, they all have the same opinion when it comes to social media's positive role in creating more awareness about women's rights and equality in society through genuine feminist discourses.

### **The impact of pseudo-feminism on genuine feminism**

*I think feminism has become more like a style statement for some women, which is especially used by urban privileged women. They use 'feminism' for their own advantage. All that they promote in the name of feminism actually doesn't have anything to do with the core ideology of feminism. Because of the way they have toppled the whole concept of 'feminism', it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between feminism and pseudo-feminism (Ms. M. A, 27 years).*

*I feel that it is important for people to understand what real feminism is about and not get caught in the deceptive portrayal of feminism by pseudo-feminists. Often, people are mistaking pseudo-feminism for real feminism (Ms. N. A, 28 years).*

Some of the women felt that feminism was being used by privileged women for their own advantage, neglecting the foundation on which real feminism is built. All of them felt that it was important to make people understand what real feminism stands for and what it intends to achieve. According to the women, distinguishing between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism has become very hard because of the prevalence of fake feministic contents on the internet.

*I am a feminist, and I think all the women are feminists, because none of them would like to consider themselves inferior to men. And if there are women who hold on to patriarchal values, then they need to be educated. I have come across a video on YouTube that is hosted by an ex-Malayalam actress. In the show, she invites celebrities to her show and serves them the dish that she made. I found her to be extremely supportive of patriarchy. She also blatantly made a comment in her show that "women are a bit inferior to men, and that is good for a healthy family". Even though all the comments were against her, I'm sure there are a lot of women out there who think exactly the way the host of the TV show did and they support her (Ms. A. S, 30 years).*

*I believe in equality, and I know that feminism is about equality. Still, I don't want to identify as a feminist because it has a negative connotation. I*

*suppose that could be due to the rise of pseudo-feminism. The term 'feminist' has now become polluted, and people relate it to 'men hating', 'victim card playing', etc. So, the word feminist carries a wrong perception in the minds of people (Ms. A. V, 32 years).*

All the women strongly believed in gender equality. Yet, not everyone wanted to identify themselves as feminists. While some women proudly identified themselves as feminists, others did not want to call themselves feminists because they felt feminism does not carry the positive reflection of equality with it anymore and has rather become a term associated with women who promote misandry and try to project women's interests above men's interests. Those who do not want to be identified as feminists cited pseudo-feminism as a reason because they felt that pseudo-feminism makes people skeptical of the genuine intentions of real feminism. Women expressed their concern over some women in society who support patriarchy and consider themselves inferior to men without realising the need for equality. All the women emphasised the importance of educating women who still cling to patriarchal values.

*The root cause of the backlash against feminism these days is not solely due to pseudo-feminism. The concept of feminism as a whole doesn't go well within a society, as the majority of men consider them superior to women, and a lot of women also support the inherent patriarchy embedded within the society. I think, in the name of pseudo-feminism, some people are targeting feminism and trying to project feminists in a negative way (Ms. S. B, 33 years).*

*There are a lot of trolls and memes about pseudo-feminists on social media. At times, I feel like attempts are made to degrade even genuine feminism in the name of pseudo-feminism, which is not the right thing to do. Unfortunately, pseudo-feminism is being used as a tool to bring down the values of real feminism (Ms. A. A, 27 years).*

*While there is a prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media, there are also attempts made to tarnish the values of genuine feminism in the name of pseudo-feminism. People who do not support gender equality try to project feminist values as fake and toxic (Ms. S. J, 30 years).*

Some women felt that pseudo-feminism was being used as a weapon by some people to undermine the work of real feminists. According to them, most of the men, and unfortunately some women in our society cannot support feminism, and they try to bring down the ideals of the feminist movement.

*The spread of fake feminism through social media platforms has painted 'feminism' in a bad light. I can relate it to an incident that happened in my life. One day, me and my husband were having an argument over who would do the dishes. My 12-year-old son made a comment that "mom is a feminist", and he smiled. So, I asked him, what does being a feminist mean to him? His reply shocked me. He said feminists are women who do not listen to men and are always arrogant. I had to literally educate my son on what 'feminism' is about and teach him that men and women are equal and that their gender does not define their individuality. He watches YouTube videos and shorts most of the time. I am sure his source of such unchecked information about feminism must have been YouTube. I realised it is important to monitor what your children are consuming on social media and teach them from a very young age about gender equality (Ms. K. P, 33 years).*

*It is also important to note that what I believe to be feminism may be pseudo-feminism for someone else. The concept has become very subjective. Inherently, the ideology of feminism has its roots in gender equality. But people nowadays are having their own interpretations of what feminism is and what is not (Ms. N. S, 32 years).*

All the women had the same opinion on the role of pseudo-feminist discourse on social media in negatively affecting the ideals of feminism. In their view, on top of making it really difficult to differentiate between genuine feminism and fake feminist propaganda, pseudo-feminism has greatly contributed to diluting the core values and principles upon which the movement of feminism has been built. All the women opined that pseudo-feminism has largely affected the way in which people perceive feminism. Also, subjective interpretations of what is feminism and what is pseudo-feminism are on the rise. In the opinion of women, the challenges created by pseudo-feminist discourses through social media platforms can only be countered by using social media more aggressively to spread genuine information related to feminism, which can educate as well as create awareness among people about the real intentions of the movement of feminism.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the study shed light on women's engagement with pseudo-feministic contents on social media platforms and their attitude towards them. All the participants agreed that pseudo-feministic contents are prevalent on social media

platforms, and social media platforms play a significant role in spreading fake feminist discourses.

The nature of engagement with pseudo-feminist discourses on social media was not the same for every woman. Some women opined that it is better to ignore such contents. But others were of the opinion that it is important to take a stand and express their views, as it could help fight the misconception about feminism created by pseudo-feminism discourses through social media posts. The women also noted that facing cyberbullying for reacting against pseudo-feminism was a major issue that they had to deal with. All the women believed that social media was being used by certain influencers to create toxic content under the disguise of gender equality.

According to the participants, pseudo-feminism paints a highly deceptive picture of gender equality and sends out a misleading message about women empowerment and gender roles. The participants felt that under the tagline of feminism, women are given more privilege and an upper hand over men, and men are often mocked, disrespected, and made fun of. This, according to the women, goes against the founding principles of the feminist movement. The responses of the participants clearly indicated that they held a highly negative attitude towards the spread of pseudo-feminism using social media platforms.

As much as the participants expressed their growing concern over the spread of pseudo-feminism on social media and how it impacts the fundamental values of genuine feminism, they also opined that the positive role played by social media in creating awareness about women's rights and gender equality through real feminist discourses cannot be overlooked.

All the women agreed that distinguishing between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism on social media has become a strenuous task owing to the prevalence of pseudo-feminism. Hence, according to them, it is important to create awareness among people about what real feminism stands for, as in most of the cases, the ideology of feminism is being misused by some women for their own advantage.

Even though every woman endorsed the idea of gender equality, some hesitated to label themselves as feminists, while others clearly desired to be recognised as such. Similar to the findings of the present study, a study conducted by Aronson (2003) among young women to know their attitudes towards feminism and gender relations indicated that while some of the women fell within a spectrum of feminist identification, others were either undecided or struggled to express a clear position.

The women projected pseudo-feminism as the major reason for tarnishing the genuine intentions of feminism. The participants also highlighted the importance of educating those women in society who do not recognise the importance of gender equality and support patriarchy. Some of the participants also expressed their opinion that pseudo-feminism is being used as a weapon to undermine the core values of feminism by those people in our society who strongly disapprove of the idea of gender equality and consider women inferior to men.

In the opinion of the participants, pseudo-feminism has not only made it difficult to differentiate between genuine feminism and fake feminist propaganda but has also negatively affected the founding principles of the feminist movement. The women also opined that subjective interpretations of what is feminism and what is pseudo-feminism are on the rise. According to the participants, social media should be used more aggressively to counter the false narrative of pseudo-feminism, as it can help in alleviating to an extent the distorted picture of gender equality portrayed by pseudo-feminism and in retaining the inherent values and principles embedded in the very idea of feminism.

The findings of the study align with the standpoint theory, as the women's engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media and their take on feminism and pseudo-feminism diverge. Standpoint theory posits that an individual's perspectives are shaped by their personal experiences, forming a unique point of view through which they interpret the world.

## **Conclusion**

This study was intended to examine the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media platforms and how women engage with them. The findings of the study clearly indicate that social media platforms enable the widespread circulation of pseudo-feminist content. The outcome of the study suggests that the rise of the pseudo-feminist movement on social media has made it difficult to distinguish between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism and has also negatively impacted the core ideals and principles upon which the ideology of feminism has been built. The study also highlights the negative attitude held by women against those who spread pseudo-feminist discourses in the name of gender equality. The findings of this study are significant as they shed light on the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media, how women engage with them, and how they affect the foundation of genuine feminism. The major limitations of the study are the sample size and the demographic characteristics of the participants. A large sample size with



participants belonging to all different socioeconomic statuses is required to provide a rich, contextualised understanding.

Feminism is at the centre stage in society today, as women empowerment is certainly a need of the hour. Social media is a powerful tool in this endeavour. Yet some tendencies prevalent seem to put feminism on the back foot. Such as pseudo feminism, a harsh reality in the digital world, although the term itself defies a clear cut definition. This perhaps could be considered a limitation of the study. The standpoint theory would help to substantiate why often there is a lack of agreement and difference of opinion about what constitutes feminism and pseudo feminism.

### **Conflict of Interest Declaration**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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# Media Message and Public Sensitivity: A Study on the Conditional Nature of Public Responses towards Controversial Advertisements in India

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## Abstract

The advertising boom has opened multiple ways to ensure a favourable public image of a product intended to be sold off in a competitive market today. But not all of them make up to their full efficiency and life cycle before a controversy comes up. The conditional nature of the public response is often very subjective, as they are shaped by many factors including individual value systems and attitudes. We analysed multiple advertisements that had become controversial in India due to their seemingly 'unconventional' content. In the study, the efficiency of such advertisements is measured against qualitative variables of communication outcomes through the Reasoned Action Approach. The result defines the factors that influence and trigger a particular response at the public and individual level towards a persuasive media message, which in this case is, the content of controversial advertisements.

**Keywords:** *Reasoned Action, Advertising Content, First Exposure, Attitudinal Shifts, Public Opinion*

## Introduction

Media has a profound impact on how people think and how they are made to think and act. It, as both a direct and indirect agency that affects public opinion, also influences how messages are received, perceived, processed, and responded by the public, which inherently shapes up the characteristic of receptive capabilities to a particular stimulus, outlined generally as 'public sensitivity'. In a way, we can assert

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that media messages and public sensitivity are highly dynamic evolving forces, conditionally and symbiotically shaping each other over time and type. It thereby yields diverse possibilities for understanding how the duplex shapes social and communication dynamics in human life. To address the wider dimensions of this multifaceted relationship, the relevant example of public responses towards controversial advertisements has been chosen as the primal research subject, with a special focus on the Indian scenario.

For those involved with advertising campaigns in India, the hailed ‘nation of extensive diversities’(www.transcend.org ), it appears that they should be aware of the potential to offend the public, which can trigger a negative response in the forms of sales drop, ill publicity, public action, boycott, ban and ultimately affecting the interests and business of the advertiser. Thus, it is important to understand the relationship between persuasive advertising messages and the public (their potential customers). ‘The last thing an advertiser would want to do is to offend its customers and cause a negative reaction in the marketplace’ (Waller, 2004).

‘Conditionality’ can be defined as when something holds, if and only when a related something else holds valid. In this study, the focus would be on how the net effects of exposure and reception patterns (especially the first one) to the message would conditionally define and affect public sensitivity as a characteristic of priorities, perceptions, permeability, persuasion and propagation of media message among the largely diverse public, through the analogue window of how people tend to respond to advertisements that go controversial in India.

### **Existing Research**

The public’s perception of advertisements has been the subject of numerous studies in the past (Alwitt, Lendell,1991; Andrews,1989, Mittal,1994; Muehuka,1987, Zanot,1881, 1984; Bauer and Greyser,1968; Gallup,1959; Louis Harris and associates, InC,1976; Red & Soley,1982; Sandage & Leckenby,1980). These perceptions are particularly relevant to advertisers because attitudes toward advertising in general impact attitudes toward a particular commercial, because likability for an advertisement is the most important discriminator of advertising effectiveness, and because brand attitude is affected by perceptions of a commercial (Mittal,1994). Wilson & West (1981) defined ‘controversial’ to be “products, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear, tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or openly presented.”

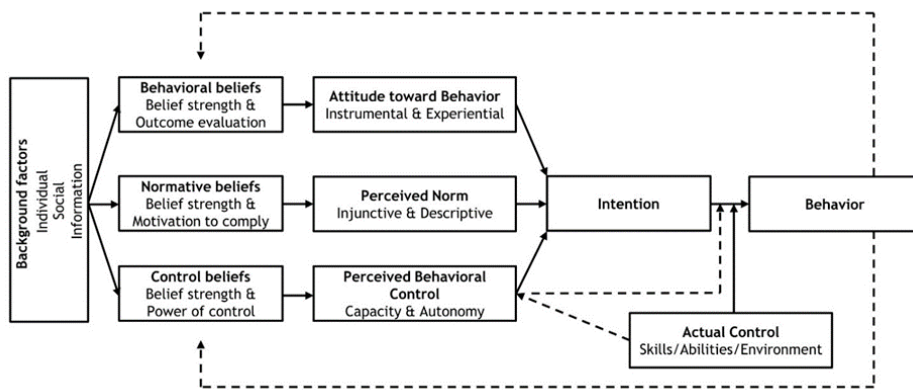
In terms of research methodology, sample types, and data collection techniques, these studies have used a wide range of approaches. For example, data for the study of Mittal (1994) were obtained from completed survey forms returned by 203 members of a consumer panel. Darrell D Muehling (1987) in his research titled 'An Investigation of Factors underlying Attitude-toward-Advertising-in-general' used an empirical study utilising traditional attitude and belief items and a thought-elicitation exercise, to support the notion that attitudes toward advertising are multi-dimensional. One of the early research studies on this topic is by Zanot (1984) in which the article begins with the first public opinion surveys which were undertaken during the Depression and chronicles 38 public opinion surveys concerning advertising. Although differences in sampling and methodology do not permit rigorous correlations, the chronological order in which the studies are presented allows a broad and general view of the changing attitudes of the public regarding advertising.

Numerous studies have looked at different aspects of how people perceive advertisements; some of these studies only focus on how people perceive them, while others also consider other factors. For example, the study of Suher & Ispir (2008) focuses primarily on two aspects; one is the attitude towards the ad ( $A_{ad}$ ), and the other is the attitude towards advertising in general ( $A_{ad}$ ) refers to specific advertisements. While one of the central ideas which Professor Sandage has attempted to communicate over the years has been that of the distinction between advertising viewed as a social institution and advertising as observed in advertisements (Sandage & Leckenby, 1980). In addition to all of these, several researchers specifically looked into some particular aspects. For example, Alwitt & Lendell (1992) identified the role of gender, and Andrews (1989) observed various beliefs towards advertisements.

A five-step information processing model was adopted by Argo and Main's (2004) meta-analysis. It comprised five elementary dimensions - attention, comprehension, recall, judgement, and behaviour. The attention dimension focused on the ability of the message information to be noticeable and recognizable. Comprehension concerned the ability of the consumer to understand the message. Recall focuses on whether the contents of the message can be retrieved for further information processing, as and when needed. The set of wide reactions and attitudes that the consumers might have towards the product was recognised as judgement, which also examines to what extent the message content was beneficial or rather applicable to the consumer, in terms of cognitive factors. Behaviour examined the level of compliance and situational dynamics that would elicit a desired response that the message stood for.

An important proposition in the study of how responses as behaviours are formed out of various factors of individual and social characteristics is the Reasoned Action Approach (2010). This framework for the prediction and change of human behaviour was developed out of the original Expectancy-Value theory by Eccels (1980), which was expanded to the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behaviour by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen as a more comprehensive view of all the earlier versions.

**Figure 1**



*Schematic presentation of the Reasoned Action Approach<sup>2</sup>*

Behaviour (as shown in Figure 1) is studied as a result determined by intention and moderated by actual control. The attitude of the individual towards the behaviour – as behavioural belief strength and evaluations of behavioural outcomes influences the behavioural intention amongst other factors of the subjective behavioural norm (descriptive – normative beliefs, and injunctive – motivation to comply) and perceived behavioural control (capacity and autonomy). Performing the behaviour then feeds back to the belief sets of these three determinants of intention. Any possible behavioural influences outside the model are considered background influences with their determinants. The intensive rationality of the framework and the rise of automatic behaviour as opposed to reasoned action behaviour are criticisms the approach faces. However, this approach has been successfully applied both

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Graphical Representation of the Reasoned Action Approach, a Psychological Model to Explain and Predict behaviour*. Peters, G. J. (2013). Available online at: [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Reasoned\\_action\\_approach](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Reasoned_action_approach)

quantitatively and qualitatively to explain health behaviours, gambling behaviour, and work-to-nonwork integration behaviour, making it adaptive to the study.

## **Methods**

We used random sampling through a survey to quantitatively correlate the relationship between media messages and public reception with a sample size of 304 respondents. Respondents include those across the ages of 18 to 65, with 156 females and 143 males (5 respondents choosing to not reveal their gender). The age breakdown of the respondents is 74.7% (N=227) between 18 and 40 years, and 25.3% (N=77) between 40 and 56 years. The demographic characteristic of age was used for comparatively analysing any differences that may exist in the formation of response towards an advertisement and general perception and priorities therein.

Respondents were queried on their demographic information, advertisement exposure, perception patterns, nature of responsive action, and what they felt about the advertisements with seemingly problematic content. We also selected four advertisements that went widely controversial in India – Tanishq Ekathvam Ad (October 2020), Layer Shots Ad (June 2022), Swiggy Holi Ad (March 2023), and Bharat Matrimony Holi-Women's Day (March 2023) to study how the public responded to their content. Responses to queries describing several characteristics of general opinion towards these advertisements like 'different individual opinion than publicly deemed opinion', 'controversy as a result of vested interests', etc. were recorded.

Responses as a result of various attitude-borne (offended and welcoming) actions to were coded separately as – criticism, calling out to the ones seemingly affected by problematic content of the ads, call for a ban (regulation through power enforcement), boycott (voluntary decision to not use), disregard, neutral stance, telling others and distribution of propaganda (spreading the word and mobilising a particular opinion) and feeling supportive – to map the dynamics of public responses based on individual preferences. Disregarding means ignoring or paying no attention to something. On the other hand, a neutral attitude is characterised by traits such as indifference and detachment. People with a neutral attitude don't give enough importance to situations or events (Gasper et al., 2019). The negative reaction that can be caused by controversial advertisements can lead to offensive attitudes, often resulting in actions of call for a ban, boycott, extensive hate, increased need for regulation, ill publicity, and falling sales, amongst others (Fam & Waller, 2003).

The results are compiled and analysed on the qualitative outlines of the behavioural model propounded by the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

We also referred to the theory of hierarchy of effects (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) in advertising – Awareness, Knowledge, Interest (originally liking), Preference, Conviction, and Action (originally Purchase) to study how advertising ultimately influences intent, decision, and responsive action.

## **Findings and Analysis**

A significant section of the respondents (27.8%) wants humour appeal to be an important factor in advertisements. This may be because humour appeal can lock in viewers to make a positive association with the advertised product or message entertainingly, as opposed to strictly serious modes of advertisements. “People’s feeling of enjoyment and indignity associated with advertisements played the strongest role in accounting for their overall attitudes towards advertising, followed by their perceptions of the trustworthiness or usefulness of the advertising content (Shavitt et al.,1998, p. 13).

23.4% of the respondents mentioned a preference for advertisements that provide social feedback. This suggests that a portion of the respondents appreciate ads that raise awareness or address social issues. Such advertisements can be thought-provoking and resonate with individuals who value social responsibility. Though in a low proportion (0.8%), there's still a small segment of individuals who enjoy advertisements with exaggerated elements, possibly for entertainment or attention-grabbing purposes. A subset of respondents (9.6%) value ads that evoke emotions such as joy, nostalgia, or empathy; as mentioned in Table 1.

The preference for advertising content by different age groups shows that the majority of people in the age group of 18-40 years want innovative content (40.98). Also, they prefer humour appeal (27.05%) to play out more as opposed to social criticism (21.56%). This might be a result of younger generations' affinity towards novelty and engagement with a limited context of social constructivism, underlining an existing finding that “the use of humour in advertising can result in increased sales of the product humorously touted” (Gruner, 1996). However, “using intertextual humour in advertising can sometimes be risky because, even though the ideal interlocutor is supposed to be familiar with the humorous reference the author alludes to, the latter can never be certain of whether it will be favourably received” (Dore, 2020). Thus, there can be a situation where some find the alluded reference humorous, but for others it might be offending.

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**Table 1*****Public preferences for content in advertisements.***

Age Group	Content preference in advertisements ( % of response)				
	Humour Appeal	Innovative Content	Social Criticism	Exaggerated Claims	Emotional Appeal
18-40	27.05%	40.98%	21.56%	0.98%	9.41%
>40	29.92%	29.92%	29.92%	0.00%	10.21%
% of Total Respondents	27.7	<b>38.6</b>	23.3	0.8	9.6

Notably, both age groups generally do not prefer exaggerated claims or emotional appeal in advertisements. Maintaining the balance in content between innovative strategies and humour appeal has to be handled carefully as it can lead to bigotry and stereotype setting.

**Public evaluation of content in controversial advertisements**

As cited in Cartmell's *Teaching Adaptations through Marketing*, F.R. Leavis demonstrated the inferiority that advertising as an entertainment medium uses through "cheap tricks to attract an audience." It all narrows down to the question of what people, the public at large, thinks ultimately, which is largely shaped by their perceptive domains.

70.46% of the sample mentioned that they have come across at least one advertisement with content they found to be problematic within two weeks of the survey (done in mid-March 2023). Another 26.54% of respondents were unsure if the content was problematic or not and only about 3% responded that they never got exposed to a seemingly problematic advertisement over the mentioned period of the survey.

The proportion of respondents finding certain content in advertising in India offensive or problematic is high in the sample and many others are not entirely sure of the nature of the content they were exposed to. This uncertainty can be attributed to three different sources (Han et al., 2011) – probability (randomness or indeterminacy of information), ambiguity (limitations in information), and complexity (uneasiness to comprehend information) – all of which can impact perceptions of the individual regarding the content.

Those who came across advertisements with objectionable content were queried to determine which aspect(s) of their perception or values were being affected by controversial advertisements in general. The majority of responses (20.3%) mentioned culture, tradition, or customs as the value(s) affected the most by controversial advertisements they were exposed to. This suggests that advertisements that deviate from accepted cultural standards and norms are more likely to get controversial. This may be because people are generally more aware of accepted cultural norms and do not accept claims that stray from the accepted path marked by them.

This argument can be again observed to be substantiated by the responses of the next majority, which indicated that controversial commercials had an impact on social norms, notably family values (18.5%). The major proposition of the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) is that when two actions or ideas are not psychologically consistent with each other; people do all in their power to avert or change them until they become cognitively consistent. This discomfort is triggered by the dissonance in the person's belief clashing with new cognition of information perceived, wherein the individual tries to find a way to resolve the contradiction to reduce their discomfort (Dawson, 1999).

**Table 2**

*Public perceptions of controversial advertisements*

Value Affected by Advertisement	% of Respondents
Religious Values	13.3
Culture, Tradition, or Customs	20.3
Minority group Values	12.5

Human rights	11.9
Social norms	21.7
Business image of the product	8.7
Personal values	11.6
Total	100.0

Social norms (21.7%) and culture, tradition, or customs (20.3%) have the most influence on public perception. The conventions and expectations that are prevalent in various cultures might affect how people view and react to commercials. If an advertisement conflicts with their established values or goes against what they consider socially acceptable, they are more likely to have a negative perception of it. Advertisements that deal with delicate cultural or traditional subjects may cause viewers to respond emotionally, meanwhile the advertisements that fail to adapt to changing cultural dynamics or address emerging societal concerns may face criticism or backlash, as they are seen as out of touch or insensitive.

Different individuals and communities may have diverse interpretations and reactions based on their religious values (13.3%) and personal convictions. Religion is one of the most universal and influential social institutions that have a significant influence on people's attitudes, values, and behaviour at both the individual and societal levels (Mokhlis, 2009). Advertisements that challenge or contradict these values may be viewed negatively by individuals who strongly adhere to their religious beliefs. These advertisements may elicit strong emotional reactions, leading people to form opinions based on their religious sentiments rather than solely on the content of the advertisement. The more religious a person is, the higher their concern for moral standards, the more of being conservative (Waller et al, 2002), and the more chances of being offended by ways that break or beyond them.

12.5% of the respondents attributed the impact of the controversial advertisement to minority group values. This shows that the advertisement may have marginalised or misrepresented some minority groups, which caused them to react negatively. This can also be due to stereotyping and prejudice. Discrimination is not randomly distributed across the population (Altonji and Pierret, 2011) and thus, it is general for people to feel offended when representation is not given its fair share of due in the advertisement content.

Among the values least represented to be affected by controversial advertisements is the business image of the product (8.7%). It is important to recognise that controversial ads have the potential to generate both positive and negative effects on the product’s image and public perception. Its impact on a product’s image can have long-lasting effects. Even after the controversy subsides, some consumers may continue to associate the brand with the controversy, affecting their perception and purchase decisions in the future.

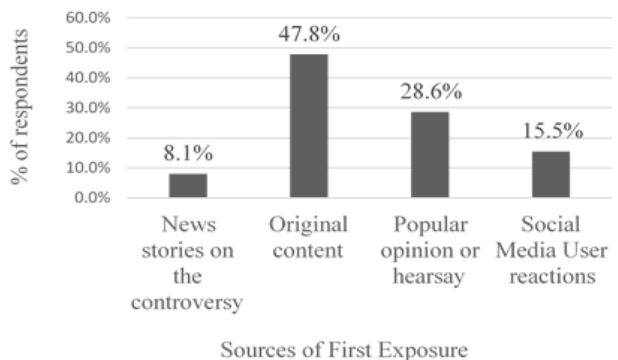
### Exposure to advertisements with ‘problematic’ content

‘Source of first exposure’ is the initial source through which individuals encounter certain content. First exposure decides the first set of experiences and interactions that the audience has toward the message. “First experiences are also utilised in retrospective and prospective evaluations of self and experience. Some histories are more culturally salient than others. Memories of firsts associated with those histories can indicate the extent to which personal meaning is derived from cultural models, and whether that is a deforming or informing influence” (Robinson, 1992, p. 1).

The various sources of first exposure and the correlations they might have with the age group of the respondents were identified. The larger the percentage associated with the source, the larger should be its prevalence in media message exposure. Among the sources of first exposure to such advertisements were original advertisements (coded as 1st-degree sources); credible and objective news stories (2nd-degree sources); popular opinion or hearsay, and social media and user reactions (3rd-degree sources).

**Figure 2**

Sources of First Exposure to Controversial Advertisements



The majority, around 47.8% of respondents mentioned that they are first exposed to content through original advertisement sources. This suggests that a significant portion of individuals prefer to explore primary material directly. Seeking out original content allows individuals to form their perspectives and opinions without relying on intermediaries.

Around 28.6% of respondents indicated that popular opinion or hearsay serves as their first exposure to content. This implies that a substantial portion of individuals rely on the opinions and viewpoints of others to shape their initial understanding of a subject. This factor highlights the influence of social interactions and interpersonal communication in the dissemination of information.

About 15.5% of respondents mentioned that they are first exposed to content through social media user reactions. Social media platforms have become increasingly influential in shaping public opinion and sensitivity. Users often share and discuss various topics, which can significantly impact how individuals perceive and engage with media messages. The relatively lower percentage suggests that social media is not the primary source of initial exposure for the majority of respondents.

Approximately 8.1% of respondents stated that they are first exposed to content through news stories. This indicates that a small proportion of the participants rely on traditional news outlets as their primary source of information, which is often considered a credible source of information. News stories often provide factual and researched information, which can shape public perception and sensitivity toward various topics. However, it's worth noting that this percentage is relatively low compared to the other factors mentioned.

One of the key factors involved in identifying the credibility of the data collected through the survey is by identifying the frequency of credible media exposure to these controversies. To analyse that we examine the responses to the question: "Do you think you were exposed to the content of credible news platforms apart from just social media interactions regarding these controversies?", surveying the frequency of exposure to 2nd-degree sources as opposed to 3rd-degree sources.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of exposure to 2nd-degree sources as opposed to 3rd-degree sources*

Level of Exposure to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Degree Sources	% of Respondents
Many	7.9

More than once, but few	33.5
Neutral (exposure to equal levels of news and social media response content)	2.3
Never	20.2
Once	36
Grand Total	100.0

As the above data shows, 7.9% say they are exposed to credible news platforms many times. This group can be considered more credible in their media interactions, as they claim to frequently consume content from trustworthy news sources. Their exposure to diverse perspectives and reliable information is likely to contribute to a more informed viewpoint on the controversies. 33.5% say they are exposed to credible news platforms more than once but a few times. This group also demonstrates some level of credibility in their media interactions, as they acknowledge consuming content from reliable news platforms, although less frequently than the previous group. Their occasional engagement shows they seek information beyond social media platforms.

2.3% claim to have an equal level of exposure to both social media and credible news platforms. While their responses don't explicitly indicate a higher credibility in media interactions, the fact that they consume news content suggests they are at least open to seeking information from reliable sources. 20.2% may have limited or no exposure to credible news sources. Relying solely on social media for information increases the risk of encountering misinformation or biased narratives, potentially impacting their understanding of the controversies.

36% of the respondents have minimal exposure to credible news platforms, suggesting limited engagement with appreciably reliable sources of information. As a result, their understanding of the controversies may be more influenced by social media interactions, which can sometimes be less credible.

**Public responses to controversial advertisements in India – Case study**

Public responses are highly specific to the nature and scope of the content embodied in the advertisement. Not all ads are perceived the same or to the same effect by the same set of the public. Thus, an analysis of some advertisements is important for comparative study. Excerpts from popular news stories and social media responses

(ones which, the news outlets chose to embed) surrounding the controversies provided basic information on the advertisement and its dynamics thereafter than a researcher's point of view of the controversy. This is because of the finding that such modes of exposure were some of the dominant forms of exposure regarding the controversial subject.

### ***Swiggy Holi advertisement***

Swiggy is an online food delivery chain where users can place orders for food from a variety of restaurants in their neighbourhood. Customers can conveniently browse menus, place orders, and have food delivered to their door using the company's website and mobile app. Swiggy offers a wide variety of cuisines and collaborates with a large number of restaurants. An out-of-home advertising billboard by Swiggy in early March raised some eyebrows, as reported below:

*Advertising has become trickier in the new age, with brands having to walk on eggshells (pun intended) to avoid hurting people's sentiments. For Swiggy, it's the 'Holi egg' billboard. The OOH ad was placed in the Delhi NCR area urging people to not throw eggs at each other under the pretext of Holi (Islur, 2023).*

*Swiggy has faced criticism over its 'Holi egg' billboard advertisements. The billboards featured eggs and read, "Omelette; Sunny side-up; Kisi ke sarr par. #BuraMatKhelo. Get Holi essentials on Instamart", promoting the consumption of eggs instead of wasting them by smashing them on someone's head during the Holi festival (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).*

*This seems to have hurt the sentiments of many who slammed the food delivery company for its "Hinduphobia". Several users even called for a boycott of the app with one saying, "I have been a regular user of @Swiggy and have been using it for a long time now. After watching this I was really disappointed and now I am uninstalling @Swiggy and using another app for ordering food. #HinduPhobicSwiggy. "Did you put up the same billboard during Eid, asking Muslims to refrain from slaughtering goats or during Christmas urging Christians to not cut down trees? Keep your Hinduphobia out of our festivals and let us celebrate Holi the way we want," a Twitter user wrote (TimesNow, 2023).*

5.2% of the respondents think the advertisement controversy was a result of some propaganda by certain interest groups, 4.6% find it as an effort to gain product attention, and a significant 2.3% feel it should be taken down; as shown in Table 4.

Especially in a country like India where religion is deemed culturally valued, many social media users expressed concerns about the advertisement negatively targeting the Hindu religious group. This identification can appeal to the members of the group and religion, and invoke collective action. The public may, at large, also view the advertisement as a vain attempt to get attention if they believe it is trying too hard to be provocative or spectacular without having any link to the brand or product, thereby affecting the publicity and brand image.

### ***Tanishq Ekathvam advertisement***

Tanishq is a prominent jewellery brand in India, known for its wide range of gold, diamond, and other precious gemstone jewellery. It is a subsidiary of Titan Company Limited, which is a part of the Tata Group. It continues to operate and offer its products through various retail outlets and online channels. Tanishq has 410 retail locations spread across more than 240 cities and is headquartered in Bangalore. Titan launched Tanishq, which focused largely on exports to European and American markets, to increase its foreign exchange reserve and later shifted the focus of the brand to the Indian market. A Tanishq commercial that featured an interfaith couple's baby shower in October 2020 sparked controversy on social media, as cited by various media reports:

*Tanishq has removed its new advertisement from social media after certain sections accused the jewellery brand of promoting what they called 'Love Jihad' through the commercial video (India Today, 2020).*

*Jewellery brand Tanishq said it was "deeply saddened by the inadvertent stirring of emotions" (Moneycontrol News, 2020).*

*The advertisement, released ahead of the festive season, shows a baby shower being thrown by a Muslim family for their daughter-in-law, who is a Hindu. Towards the end of the video, the young woman points out to her mother-in-law that baby showers are not a tradition in their household. To which the mother-in-law replies: "Isn't it a tradition for every home to keep daughters happy?" (The Hindu, 2020).*

*Within hours of the ad's release, the hashtag #BoycottTanishq began trending and by Monday afternoon the YouTube video had garnered over 2,000 dislikes and just 500 likes (Times Now Digital, 2020).*



*Twitter users are divided into two groups. Where some people think that the ad was beautiful, there is a section of people who believes that the ad was inappropriate (Koimoi, 2020).*

Tweets like:

*“Why I see Hindu daughter-in-law everywhere.... why don’t you show Muslim daughter-in-law anywhere. Just Asking.”, “#BoycottTanishq Now it is becoming a national problem. We have to fight this issue with legal and social motives. Protect our daughter from love jihad and save their lives,” and so on (Youth ki awaaz, 2020).*

As evident in Table 4, 4.9% of the respondents are of the view that their individual opinion was directly contradictory with that of the majority-held public opinion at some point of the controversy, outlining the defining factors of the subjective norm (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). 3.2% of them initially held opinions that were generally favourable to the advertisement content but had a change of opinion at some point during the controversy. This demonstrates how individual perspectives are influenced by prevailing popular opinion. 3.6% of them, however, feel it was an attempt to attract attention from the public.

**Table 4**

***Public responses to controversial advertisements in India***

Characteristics of the advertisement / opinion/response	Controversial advertisements under study (Affirmative responses as % of the total sample)			
	Swiggy Holi Ad	Tanishq Ekathvam Ad	Layer’r Shot Ad	Bharath Matrimony Holi -Women’s Day Ad
Existence of problematic content	3.2	2.3	7.5	3.2

Different individual opinions than public opinion	3.6	4.9	3.9	5.5
Believe that the ad should be taken down	2.3	2.3	6.9	2.6
Controversy is the result of a group propaganda	5.2	3.9	2.9	3.9
Felt initially welcoming, then different attitude	2.6	3.2	2.6	1.6
Content threatens the value system strongly	1.3	2.6	5.5	1.6
Controversial content was an attempt to gain public attention	4.6	3.6	7.2	4.2

### ***Layer'r Shot advertisement***

Layer'r is one of the fastest-growing personal care and styling product brands in India. Adjavis Venture Limited, the parent organisation of Layer'r, was established in 2013. “*LAYER'R SHOT has a range of diverse and strong body sprays for men, that complement the masculine energy and bring in a storm of freshness*” is how Layer'r describes its product. Beyond Layer'r Shot, they also offer LAYER'R Wottagirl, a range of body splashes and perfumes for women. The SHOT and Wottagirl ranges come in clear, see-through bottles. Its recent advertisement has drawn a lot of negative attention. Few media reports on the controversy:-

*Brands try out different ways to promote and sell their products and one of the most common ways is sexualizing. Such advertisements by brands have been pulled off in no time. The recent ad by the body spray Layer'r Shot seemed to have crossed all its limits (Newsroom Post, 2022).*

*The advertisement features a group of men and a woman, in a grocery store. The men talk about taking a "shot" at the woman, a pun deemed distasteful and "disgusting" by several viewers (DNA, 2022).*

*Many accused the brand of promoting rape culture and trivializing the issue of women's safety. Following the outrage, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) said on Twitter that it has taken immediate action and notified the advertiser to suspend the ad, pending investigation (India Times, 2022).*

*Layer'r Shot apologises for controversial ads, has asked media partners to stop telecast (Et online, 2022).*

One of the netizens wrote,

*"How does this kind of ad get approved, sick and outright disgusting. Is @layerr\_shot full of perverts?" while another commented, "Whoever ideated, wrote, produced, acted in and approved the new Layer'r Shot ads, shame on each one of you" (Newsroom post, 2022).*

A considerable majority (7.5%) of those who were aware of the ad chose Layer Shots as the sample ad that was the most bothersome. 6.9% of respondents favoured removing the advertisement from the public domain, and 5.5% felt it threatened their moral principles. The fact that the Layer Shots advertisement was disliked by a significant proportion of people and that most people wanted it to be taken down suggests that a larger set of Indians might have perceived the advertisement's message to be offensive, inappropriate, or unpleasant. People's responses to advertising might differ depending on their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, reflective of the particular sentiments and cultural values that are prominent in India.

### ***Bharath Matrimony Holi- Women's day advertisement***

Bharat Matrimony is an online matrimony service that serves the Indian community worldwide. It is one of the largest matrimonial websites in India. It provides a wide range of features and services to assist people in finding their potential life partner. Users can build profiles, conduct preference-based searches for matches, interact with other users, and initiate the marriage process.

The platform provides profiles of individuals from various communities, religions, castes, and regions across India. Users can tailor their search criteria to suit their

needs. It also offers additional features like personalised matchmaking services, horoscope matching, and assistance in the wedding planning process. The matrimony platform faced a severe backlash on social media over its latest ad on Holi, news reports:-

*As the festival of Holi coincided with the International Women's Day on March 8, Bharat Matrimony released an ad which raised the issue of harassment and domestic abuse (The Indian Express, 2023).*

*In the video, a woman - her face spread throughout with colour - is seen washing her face to remove the colour, but cannot take the mark off her face, left behind after celebrating the festival (Money Control, 2023).*

*However, the video did not go down well with netizens as many expressed their anger over linking a severe social issue with a Hindu festival (Outlook, 2023).*

*People are hollering as to why the brand chose to post such an ad during Holi, a Hindu festival, and not during Muslim festivals and against its traditions (Afaqs, 2023).*

*“How dare you link a social message with the Hindu festival of Holi. What has domestic abuse got to do with Holi?” said a user, while another said, “Women harassment is not a festival linked activity but companies like you unnecessarily link such things to Hindu festivals. Stop such gyan on Hindu Festivals” (Business Today, 2023).*

The majority of those who took part in the study held a substantially different viewpoint contrary to the commonly held opinion (5.5%). Also, a significant proportion of respondents (4.2%) believe the advertisement is a publicity stunt, while 3.9% perceive the advertisement as propaganda (as in Table 4).

### **Controversy and beyond - Regulation of advertisements**

The respondents were queried on the extent to which they support advertisement regulation on a 5-point Likert scale of various levels of support coded as – strongly support, support, neutral, oppose and strongly oppose. Most of the respondents either support or strongly support (combined 38.9%) regulating advertisements, with a strong inclination to strongly support the cause (31.3%). On the other hand, those who oppose or strongly oppose regulation make up 38.4% of the responses. The remaining 22.7% of respondents remain neutral on the matter. The question of how

far advertising should be regulated is a complex one, with much previous research pointing at different levels of opinions on regulation – some seek extensive control, self-control, to absolute freedom. These opinions may differ based on individual values, beliefs, and experiences.

### **Conditionality of responses**

The research was also extended to study how individuals would respond, relatively to the varied attitudes they might have, towards advertisements that seemed to have problematic content. As mentioned in the research methodology, variable attitudes (offended, neutral and welcoming) were provided with possible forms of response actions (boycott, support, call for ban etc.) they would engage in, had they been under the given attitude. This would ensure that a single respondent would hypothetically and generally assess the varied choices of action they might want to engage in if they harboured the given attitude towards the content of the advertisement; thus, trying to approach the notion of conditionality of responses as a function of attitudes, besides factors of age and source of first exposure.

### ***Conditionality of age group on offended attitude-borne response actions***

The age characteristics of the sample were evaluated against the responsive action of individuals in an offended frame of attitude to check if there is any correlation between the two, that would prove the conditionality of age as a factor influencing varied responses towards seemingly problematic content in advertisements.

Most members of the age group of 18-40 years would respond by telling others (28.6%), a response that would mean spreading and mobilising one's own opinion or feeling(s) by sharing information related to the problematic content, largely with an offended frame of attitude to gain pluralistic identification and weighted denomination, as opposed to doing the action alone. This is thus an action that can also lead to other responsive actions on a group scale. They would also engage in responsive actions of criticising the content (26.8%), calling for a ban on the product (24.2%), and may even go further as to boycott (22%) the promotion, sale and use of the product being advertised.

Empirical evidence (as in Table 5) suggests that individuals of the age group above 40 years of age will generally resort to criticism (30%) and call for a ban as a government or authority action (28%). They also respond by calling out to the ones affected (20%) by the problematic content of the advertisement. Notably, individuals of both age groups would least prefer to support the advertisement when in an offended attitude.

**Table 5*****Response action of different age groups with offended attitudes***

Age Group	Action when offended (% of Total Respondents)							
	Support	Calling out Affected Ones	Call for Ban	Disregard	Neutral	Criticism	Telling Others	Boycott
18-40	2.6	21.5	24.2	18.5	6.6	26.8	28.6	22.0
>40	1.7	20	28	0	10.4	30	10.2	15

***Conditionality of source of first exposure on offended attitude-borne response actions***

The source of first exposure to the controversial advertisements and the action that took place when offended by the content were analysed. The sample's (mutually nonexclusive responses) majority had been first exposed to advertisements with problematic content through the original source (1<sup>st</sup> degree) means, out of the total response (N=434) of which 11.5% would respond by criticism, 8.9% by telling others about the content and feeling, and 7.3% by disregarding, amongst others.

Respondents of first exposure through second-degree sources (news stories on the controversy) generally prefer to engage in responsive action through means of criticism (3.4%) and calling out to the affected ones (1.1%, as in Table 6).

However, individuals gaining first exposure through popular opinion or hearsay tend to prefer to act by calling out affected ones (10.8%) and calling for a power-mediated ban on the product (7.1%), than those through social media user interactions reacting out their responsive action by calling for a ban (3.9%), telling others (3.6%), wanting boycott (3.4%) and also by calling out the affected ones (2.7%). Notably, the levels of support that an advertisement containing seemingly problematic content is maximum (3.2%) with the first-degree source of first exposure and falls steeply with later levels of first-exposure sources. Thus, offended individuals respond in ways that would act as inoculums to collective action as opposed to individual responses, outlining the rise of public responsive action.

**Table 6**  
*Response Action of Different Respondents with Offended Attitude through Various First Exposure Sources.*

Source of First Exposure (*total responses)	Number of Respondents Engaged in Offended Attitude-Borne Action (*total responses)							
	Feel Supportive (17)	Calling out affected Ones (94)	Call for ban (62)	Disregard (41)	Neutral (No action) (26)	Criticism (80)	Will tell others (74)	Boycott (40)
News stories on the Controversy (31)	2	5	4	0	1	15	1	3
Original Content (202)	14	28	10	32	16	50	39	13
Popular Opinion or Hearsay (127)	1	47	31	3	3	6	18	18
Social Media User Reactions (74)	1	12	17	2	3	9	16	15

### *Conditionality of source of first exposure on welcoming attitude-borne response actions*

When feeling welcomed with the content (mutually nonexclusive responses, N= 323) of a controversial advertisement, most individuals across all sources of first exposure prefer to feel supportive (57.2%) of the content being seemingly misunderstood as problematic. However, responsive action of disregard (9.9%) and neutral stance (11.1%) followed by criticism (8.3%) are also dominant. Individuals with first-degree sources of first exposure are more likely to respond with criticism (7.4%) and a neutral stance (6.5%), after supporting the content cause. With third-degree sources of first exposure through popular opinion or hearsay, individuals tend to disregard (8.9%) much more than they tell others (2.7%).

Notably, the actions that build collective response and mobilisation among the public like telling others, public criticism and calling out to the ones deemed ‘affected’, all

enjoy minimal effectivity, thus underlining a wide gap in mobilising action when welcoming as opposed to when offended in attitudes.

**Table 7**  
*Response Action of Different Respondents with Welcoming Attitude by Various First Exposure Sources.*

Source of First Exposure (*total responses)	Number of Respondents Engaged in Welcoming Attitude-Borne Action (*total responses)							
	Feel Supportive	Calling out affected ones	Call for ban	Disregard	Neutral	Criticism	Will tell others too	Boycott
	(185)	(18)	(6)	(32)	(36)	(27)	(17)	(2)
News stories on the Controversy (23)	17	3	1	0	2	0	0	0
Original Content (129)	69	2	4	3	21	<b>24</b>	4	2
Popular Opinion or hearsay (127)	66	12	0	<b>29</b>	9	2	9	0
Social Media User Reactions (44)	33	1	1	0	4	1	4	0

## Discussion and Conclusion

The study focused on evaluating the conditional nature of public responses as a narrower prospect of understanding the inherent dynamics and correlations between media messages and public sensitivity to them. Responses at the wider public level can be seen as an accumulation of individualistic characteristics of responses bound together by common identification, group power and mutual trust.

Innovative and humorous content is generally preferred over exaggeration and emotional appeals in the advertisement message content. However, audience sensitivity exists to the level that they are more likely to have a negative opinion of advertising if it contradicts their established beliefs or goes against what they deem socially acceptable. The forms and frequencies of the first and succeeding exposures determine public engagement and the mode of response and attitude they might develop. A significant portion of the public is first exposed to advertisements with



controversial content through popular opinion, social media interactions and news stories than original content alone.

An advertisement in India, that people largely believed to have problematic content (Layr'r Shot advertisement), they prefer that it be taken down as they felt that the controversial content strongly threatened value systems and that it was an attempt to gain public attention. In another advertisement in India that the least respondents found problematic (Tanishq Ekathvam advertisement), they were affirmative of the holding that the controversy was a direct result of group propaganda of vested interests rather than a real issue. In the case of regulating advertisements, the public generally held a view of mixed opinion, as approximately equal levels of support, opposition and neutral arguments were recorded.

The case of age being a characteristic of the public that conditionally influences the way a response is made, individuals of a younger age group (18-40 years of age) generally preferred telling others while those of an older age group (above 40 years of age) preferred criticism and call for a ban. Also, through comparative analysis of various modes of first exposure and effective attitude duplex (offended and welcoming), offended individuals respond in ways that would act as inoculums to collective action as opposed to individual responses, outlining the rise of a larger public responsive action unlike welcoming individuals who would resort to actions that embody minimal mobilising effect. Thus, individual response formation largely affects the building up of public opinion. This can be effectively viewed with the qualitative framework of the Reasoned Action Approach by Fishbein & Ajzen (2010).

In general analysis of the findings in combination with the framework, viewing the 'controversial response' as the final behaviour, we observe that attitudes of the individual are shaped through anticipatively placing preferences for innovative and humorous content (Instrumental aspect) and by the perceived negative experience of finding content problematic (experiential aspect). This can also be due to reliance on inferior levels of sources of first exposure (social media user reactions and popular opinion) as opposed to first-degree sources (original content), which is being more and more prevalent today.

Subjective behavioural norms are operational with the acceleration of such individual perceptions in social dynamics. When the content affects a highly perceived public value like social norms, religion, culture or minority affairs, dissonant convictions arise on a larger scale. Descriptive norms of other's behavioural action take shape when there is an increased level of a strong offensive response action (call for a ban, boycott, criticism etc.) combined with mobilisation effects of spreading information (telling others and calling out potential victims) in contrast to falling levels of fair

criticism and support and mobilisation for reasonable content being deemed problematic. Injunctive norms are thus shaped by public action, and at times the individual finds themselves with an opinion that conflicts with the widely accepted public opinion, as some controversies are identified to be a direct result of vested interests and group propaganda.

Perceived behavioural control is the perceived autonomy of individual liberty of freedom of expression through media and user reactions freely on social and popular platforms, combined with the perceived capacity of self-efficacy (Albert Bandura, 2010) and social persuasion. The combined effects of all these can result in the intention of an offended attitude-borne unwelcoming response that can fuel a responsive action of a controversial effect in public. Thus, the response (as the action) can be thought of as a function of attitudes and norms, which conditionally influence the former through actual control and intent.

Conditionality may be attributed to being present when something holds valid only when something else holds valid. The conditionality of factors can be understood with a simple AB – alphabet conditionality proposition:-

*If A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system with A preceding B, then B will succeed A.*

*Conversely, B will succeed A, if and only if A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, and A compulsorily precedes B.*

*Also, B will immediately succeed A, if and only if A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, A compulsorily precedes B and no factor exists between A and B at all.* Therefore, the conditionality of B immediately succeeding A can be summarised as:- A and B are factors present together and simultaneously in a single system, A compulsorily precedes B and no factor exists in between A and B at all.

Similarly, the conditionality of offended action public responses towards controversial advertisements depend on a multitude of mutually non-exclusive and independent, yet accumulative factors depending on their varied characteristic:-

- Involve out-of-preference and problematic content messages.
- Threaten or misrepresent strongly held norms and beliefs (dissonance effects).

- The falling order of source of exposure brings in more noise and miscommunication between the advertiser (sender) and the public (receiver audience).
- Higher levels of mobilisation that push the public for controversy.
- Provoking strong public actions of call for ban and boycott.
- Suppression of varied opinion as opposed to a widely held public opinion.
- Rise of vested interests and propaganda effects from both public and advertisers.

Future research can focus on quantitative evaluation of responses in the reasoned action approach, comparative analysis of other factors like believability of the brand, durability and popularity of the product, previous history of controversies, response public relations strategies by the brand, role of self-regulatory bodies like Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) etc. to systematically map how public responds to advertisements with controversial public opinion.

Advertising in the mass media is bound to cater to the needs and preferences of the audience (the general public) for increased effectiveness and marketing. Thus, media messages have to take into account how sensitive and receptive the public audience is towards it, for enhanced communication that aims for successful public reception of messages both assonant and dissonant with them and their beliefs.

### ***Conflict of Interest Declaration***

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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