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Review Paper

Manipulation Tactics Used by Social Media to Change Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Could a viral meme or reel influence your political decisions without your awareness? In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where digital access is rapidly expanding, social media has emerged as a subtle yet powerful instrument of persuasion. This systematic review investigates how platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube shape public opinion through emotionally charged, culturally grounded, and psychologically tailored content such as fear-based narratives and identity-driven appeals. Based on peer-reviewed literature and credible sources (1970–2025), the study identifies five dominant manipulation patterns: political propaganda, algorithmic echo chambers, influencer-driven persuasion, youth-oriented misinformation, and caste or religion-based polarization. It applies agenda-setting theory to examine platform bias, social learning to analyse influencer impact, and fear appeal frameworks to unpack emotional tactics. Regional language content, especially in Telugu, enhances message relatability and influence. The paper highlights the consequences of low digital literacy and weak content regulation and recommends region-specific media education, stronger platform accountability, and expanded interdisciplinary research to foster informed digital communities.

Keywords: *Social media manipulation, Digital misinformation, Political propaganda, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Media literacy*

India, with over 800 million internet users, ranks among the top countries globally in terms of social media penetration (Kumar & Sen, 2023). Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have become not only tools of communication but powerful instruments of political and social influence. Political parties, media agencies, and social influencers increasingly rely on these platforms to shape narratives, rally support, and disseminate ideologically charged content. While this digitization of discourse has enabled greater democratic participation, it has also raised concerns regarding manipulation, misinformation, and the psychological targeting of users.

Regional Focus

The states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana present a compelling case for examining social media manipulation. These regions have witnessed rapid digital growth and high levels of youth engagement on platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube (Narayan & Raju,

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2022). Notably, both states have seen frequent surges of political propaganda, emotionally charged misinformation campaigns during elections, and influencer-driven opinion formation. Political parties and digital PR firms have allegedly used coordinated efforts to amplify specific narratives while suppressing disse6nt or alternative viewpoints (Reddy, 2021). These developments call for a critical understanding of the tools and tactics used to influence public sentiment in this sociopolitical landscape.

Need for Review

Despite the growing body of global research on digital manipulation and media psychology, there is limited systematic analysis focusing on the Indian context especially with regard to regional dynamics in states like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. A review of credible literature and empirical reports is necessary to identify recurring psychological tactics (e.g., fear appeals, confirmation bias exploitation), platform-driven strategies (e.g., algorithmic filtering, echo chambers), and actor-specific manipulations (e.g., by bots, influencers, political entities). This study brings together insights from multiple disciplines to address this gap and offer a more context-specific understanding of how digital influences operate.

Research Aim

This review aims to synthesize academic literature and verified reports that examine the manipulative strategies used on social media to influence public opinion in India, with a specific focus on Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. It seeks to identify and categorize the tactics used across political, commercial, and social domains, and to evaluate their psychological impacts on digital users in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review approach to critically analyse and synthesize literature examining manipulative strategies used on social media platforms to influence public opinion in India, with a regional focus on Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The literature search was conducted across the following academic and open-access databases: *Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, Shodhganga, INFLIBNET, and the Social Science Research Network (SSRN).* These sources were selected for their coverage of interdisciplinary publications, regional research, and grey literature relevant to Indian sociopolitical contexts.

In alignment with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), this study followed a structured four-phase process for selecting relevant literature: identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion. During the identification stage, a comprehensive search was carried out using targeted keywords such as “digital manipulation in India,” “social media propaganda,” “algorithmic influence,” “political misinformation in Andhra Pradesh,” and “emotional appeals online.” This initial search yielded 198 documents from various academic databases and grey literature repositories During the screening stage; 43 duplicate entries were eliminated. The remaining 155 titles and abstracts were then examined to filter out sources that were irrelevant or unrelated to the topic. After this review, 92 articles advanced to the eligibility phase, where their full texts were carefully evaluated based on predefined inclusion criteria- specifically, works published between 1970 and 2025, relevant to India (with emphasis on Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), and containing empirical or analytical insights on social media manipulation. After thorough evaluation, 38 sources were deemed suitable and selected for the final inclusion phase. These documents were then analysed using thematic analysis to

extract recurring patterns of manipulation. The selection and review of literature followed a structured approach based on the PRISMA framework, promoting transparency, methodological rigor, and the ability to replicate the process.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included based on the following criteria:

- Published between *1970 and 2025*
- Focused on *India*, with preference given to literature explicitly covering *Andhra Pradesh and Telangana*
- Peer-reviewed *journal articles, government publications, and NGO/advocacy reports*
- Sources available in *English, Hindi, or Telugu*

Exclusion Criteria

The following types of literature were excluded from the review:

- Studies focused on non-digital media manipulation or traditional broadcasting
- Publications in languages other than English, Hindi, or Telugu
- Opinion articles, blogs, or non-credible sources without empirical or analytical depth

Analysis Method

The selected documents were examined using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns of manipulation, specifically across political, emotional, and algorithmic dimensions. *Political manipulation* is characterized by the coordinated efforts of political parties, IT cells, and affiliated influencers to disseminate election propaganda, fabricate or distort information, and construct party-centric narratives to sway voter sentiment. These include the use of bots, fake accounts, and targeted content that glorifies party achievements or vilifies opposition leaders, often timed with electoral cycles to maximize impact. *Emotional manipulation*, on the other hand, leverages psychological triggers such as fear, anger, nationalism, and moral outrage to evoke heightened emotional responses. Techniques like fear appeals (e.g., "threat to religion or culture"), emotionally charged videos, and communal or caste-based narratives are frequently used to mobilize support or incite division. Algorithmic manipulation takes place through platform algorithms that personalize content based on users' browsing patterns and preferences. This personalization often strengthens pre-existing beliefs by repeatedly showing similar viewpoints, while contrasting or opposing perspectives are minimized or excluded resulting in the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Such recommendation systems especially on platforms like YouTube and Instagram intensify opinion polarization and hinder critical thinking by narrowing the scope of information. Collectively, these manipulation tactics exert a powerful influence on public discourse, electoral behaviour, and youth perception in the digitally active regions of AP and Telangana.

Each theme was then critically assessed in terms of its *psychological impact, reach,* and *sociopolitical relevance* in the regional context of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This systematic review is informed by a combination of media and psychological theories that help explain how social media platforms influence individual attitudes, shape collective behaviour, and manipulate public discourse. These frameworks provide a conceptual basis for understanding the mechanisms through which digital actors such as political parties, influencers, algorithms, and automated bots manipulate information to guide opinion

formation, particularly within the sociopolitical landscapes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. To contextualize these strategies, several media and psychological theories offer valuable explanatory frameworks.

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) posits that media do not dictate what audiences should think, but rather what they should think about. Social media platforms, through repeated exposure and selective content visibility, prioritize certain topics such as regional politics, controversial policies, or emotionally provocative incidents while downplaying or ignoring others. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, political campaigns often utilize agenda-setting tactics to push specific issues like regional development, caste dynamics, or party ideologies to the forefront of public conversation.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) highlights the influence of learning through observing others, where individuals acquire behaviours by watching, imitating, and modelling the actions of those around them. On social media, individuals especially younger users are likely to imitate behaviours, speech patterns, or opinions displayed by influential figures, including celebrities, political leaders, and content creators. This mechanism plays a significant role in the viral spread of propaganda, moral panic, or even misinformation, as individuals model their beliefs and behaviours after the content they consume.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) focuses on how information is selectively structured and presented to influence interpretation. Social media posts often frame stories using emotionally charged language, sensational headlines, or selective imagery to provoke biased understandings of events or individuals. For instance, the same political rally may be framed positively or negatively depending on the ideological alignment of the content creator or digital campaigner, thereby shaping user perception without overt misinformation.

Fear Appeal Theory (Witte, 1992) suggests that messages invoking fear can effectively influence behaviour if accompanied by perceived efficacy. In the Indian context, emotionally manipulative content often utilizes fear appeals such as threats to national identity, religious values, or personal security to polarize communities or push political agendas. This tactic is particularly evident during elections or crises, where fear-based messages are designed to mobilize support or suppress dissent.

Third-Person Effect (Davison, 1983) refers to the cognitive bias wherein individuals believe that others are more influenced by media than themselves. This illusion of immunity can reduce critical evaluation of content, leading users to underestimate their own susceptibility to propaganda or digital manipulation. In high-consumption regions like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where social media is embedded in daily life, this effect may allow manipulative content to spread unchecked as users fail to recognize its influence on their own beliefs.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the selected literature and credible reports revealed five interrelated patterns of manipulation that recur across social media platforms in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These include *political manipulation during elections, algorithm-driven echo chambers, influencer-driven content manipulation, youth-targeted misinformation, and religious and caste-based polarization*. Together, these themes underscore the multi-layered, psychologically rooted, and technologically enabled nature of social media influence in these regional contexts.

1. Political Manipulation During Elections

A prominent and well-documented theme was the deliberate use of social media platforms to influence political outcomes, particularly during the 2019 state elections. Political parties across the spectrum actively deployed IT Cells and digital teams that systematically created and circulated WhatsApp forwards, Facebook memes, and short-form videos in regional languages such as Telugu and Urdu. These messages often included emotionally loaded slogans, manipulated visuals, and misleading statistics aimed at glorifying particular parties or demonizing opponents (Kumar & Raju, 2020). The ease of forwarding such content, combined with the lack of source verification, enabled widespread dissemination within a short time. Particularly concerning was the targeting of voters based on caste, region, and linguistic identity strategies that tapped into historical tensions and pride, subtly framing political loyalty as a cultural duty. Such tactics not only bypassed ethical standards of political communication but also undermined voters' ability to make informed choices.

2. Algorithm-Driven Echo Chambers

Another major theme was the algorithmic reinforcement of bias and polarization. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook use recommendation algorithms to optimize user engagement. However, during critical periods such as the Amaravati capital protests (2019–2020) these algorithms disproportionately recommended ideologically aligned content, reinforcing the user's existing beliefs while filtering out contradictory viewpoints. For example, users who viewed pro-capital protest content were increasingly shown similar posts, resulting in echo chambers that distorted public understanding and discouraged balanced discourse. Furthermore, the lack of regional content moderation meant that many provocative or misleading posts in Telugu or Urdu bypassed detection systems trained primarily on English, Hindi, or global context, allowing such content to persist and amplify.

3. Influencer Culture in Urban Telangana and Andhra Pradesh

The rise of social media influencers has introduced a subtle yet powerful form of opinion shaping. In urban and semi-urban areas of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, content creators on TikTok (prior to its ban), Instagram, and YouTube gained significant followings by producing relatable entertainment, comedy, or lifestyle content. However, analysis revealed that many such influencers engaged in ideological signalling, subtly embedding political or commercial agendas within their content. In some cases, influencers entered paid collaborations with political candidates or parties to promote slogans, manifestos, or campaign messages through skits, reels, and songs (Varma, 2021). This blending of promotional content with entertainment created an illusion of neutrality, making manipulation less detectable and more psychologically persuasive particularly for young and impressionable viewers.

4. Youth Engagement and Misinformation

The 18–30 age group emerged as the most actively engaged demographic across social platforms and simultaneously the most vulnerable to manipulation. This age group was extensively targeted with memes, reels, digital challenges, and trending hashtags, designed to blend entertainment with subtle ideological messaging. The gamification of political discourse through humorous yet persuasive content resulted in widespread sharing without fact-checking. Psychologically, young users were particularly susceptible due to FOMO (fear of missing out), social conformity pressure, and herd mentality, which made them more likely to accept and forward content that appeared popular or emotionally resonant. Furthermore, limited digital literacy among some segments of the youth population

contributed to a lack of skepticism and critical evaluation of the content they consumed or shared.

5. Religious and Caste-Based Polarization

Perhaps the most ethically concerning theme identified was the deliberate weaponization of religious and caste identities to sow division and emotional conflict. Several studies and reports noted the use of cultural symbols, religious icons, and caste-based slogans in videos, memes, and status updates to create an 'us vs. them' narrative. These narratives were not only divisive but also often based on misinformation, edited videos, or false historical claims, and targeted specific groups by portraying them as threats to regional pride, tradition, or security. This type of manipulation was often hyperlocal, using Telugu or dialect-based expressions to connect emotionally with viewers while inciting distrust toward other communities. The consequences of such digital polarization are particularly harmful in diverse and sensitive societies, where historical caste and religious tensions can be easily reignited by targeted, misleading content. The consequences extend beyond public perception, influencing electoral outcomes, fragmenting civil discourse, and contributing to policy polarization.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review underscore the complex and multilayered impact of social media manipulation on public opinion in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. One of the most significant consequences observed is the *increasing erosion of trust* in both digital and traditional sources of information. As manipulated content often disguised as news, humour, or user-generated expression continues to circulate, users are becoming more polarized and suspicious, not only of opposing viewpoints but also of legitimate information channels. This environment fosters *cognitive dissonance*, where individuals cling more tightly to their pre-existing beliefs and are less open to diverse perspectives or factual correction.

The *deep emotional and cultural ties* that communities in AP and Telangana hold with caste identity, regional pride, religious affiliation, and linguistic heritage further exacerbate this issue. Manipulators often exploit these sentiments to frame political and social narratives in ways that feel personally relevant and urgent to the user. As a result, content that appeals to local pride or perceived threats to tradition tends to gain rapid traction, even when it is misleading or false. This culturally embedded vulnerability makes the public more receptive to propaganda and emotionally manipulative content, particularly when it is delivered in their native language.

Another critical factor contributing to the success of manipulation campaigns is the widespread digital illiteracy, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. While access to smartphones and mobile internet has grown rapidly, the ability to critically evaluate content, recognize misinformation, or verify sources has not kept pace. Many users lack awareness of fact-checking resources or do not possess the digital literacy required to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources. This gap allows propaganda and misinformation to spread unchecked, especially through peer-to-peer platforms like WhatsApp, where forwarded messages are often trusted based on social ties rather than content accuracy.

Together, these findings highlight a growing crisis of digital trust and critical awareness in the region. Addressing this issue requires not only technical interventions such as stronger content moderation and algorithmic accountability but also educational initiatives aimed at

fostering media literacy, cultural empathy, and critical thinking, particularly among younger users and rural populations.

While this systematic review provides valuable insights into the manipulative strategies employed on social media within Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, there is a *scarcity of peer-reviewed academic literature* that specifically focuses on these two states in the context of digital manipulation. Most scholarly work tends to examine India at a national level, which limits the depth of region-specific analysis.

Secondly, the review had to rely heavily on news reports, NGO publications, and grey literature, which, although informative, may lack the methodological rigor and empirical validation typical of peer-reviewed studies. These sources are often influenced by temporal news cycles or organizational perspectives, which could affect the objectivity and generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, *language barriers pose a significant constraint*. Several reports and studies relevant to digital manipulation in AP and Telangana exist in Telugu or other regional languages but remain unpublished or inaccessible through academic databases. As a result, important grassroots-level insights may have been excluded, leading to a partial representation of the on-ground reality. This limitation highlights the need for more inclusive academic publishing and translation efforts to capture the nuances of regional digital behaviour.

Future studies could benefit from direct interviews or surveys with regional users to validate how psychological manipulation is personally experienced.

Recommendations

Based on the thematic findings and limitations identified in this review, several targeted recommendations are proposed to address the rising threat of social media manipulation in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These recommendations are rooted in the need for localized, sustainable, and multidisciplinary interventions that involve policy-makers, platforms, educators, and academic institutions.

At the policy level, there is an urgent need to implement *localized digital literacy campaigns,* particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where digital consumption is rising but critical awareness remains low. Government bodies, in collaboration with state education departments and NGOs, should design and deploy culturally relevant programs that educate users about misinformation, echo chambers, online privacy, and responsible content sharing. These campaigns must include materials in regional languages like Telugu and Urdu to ensure accessibility and comprehension across diverse communities.

Social media platforms must take greater responsibility in mitigating the harms of manipulation. This includes improving language-sensitive content moderation systems that can detect misinformation, hate speech, and manipulative content in Telugu and other regional dialects. Currently, automated moderation systems are largely optimized for English or Hindi, leaving regional content under-monitored. Investing in regionally trained moderators, culturally specific AI detection tools, and transparent reporting mechanisms is essential to protect vulnerable users from emotionally and politically exploitative content.

At the community level, media literacy must be integrated into school and college curricular. Educational institutions should regularly organize interactive workshops, digital awareness drives, and peer-learning activities that teach students how to critically analyse content, identify biases, verify sources, and understand how algorithms influence what they see online. Engaging students through relatable formats such as meme analysis, video decoding, or role-playing exercises can make these lessons more impactful and relevant to their daily digital experiences.

Lastly, there is a pressing need to *encourage more region-specific academic research.* Universities and research bodies should fund and support studies that explore digital behaviour, manipulation, and opinion formation within specific cultural, linguistic, and political contexts. Creating opportunities for scholars to publish work in both English and Telugu and making such work accessible via national databases like Shodhganga and INFLIBNET will strengthen the body of knowledge and offer more nuanced insights for future policymaking and intervention design.

CONCLUSION

This review highlights that *social media manipulation represents a significant and escalating threat* to public discourse in India, particularly *in linguistically and politically sensitive states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.* The use of digital platforms for agenda-driven messaging whether political, ideological, or commercial has become increasingly sophisticated, exploiting local languages, cultural identities, and psychological vulnerabilities. The thematic findings reveal a complex interplay of algorithmic biases, influencer-driven content, and emotionally manipulative strategies that disproportionately impact youth and digitally underserved populations.

Given the regional nuances and depth of manipulation uncovered, there is an urgent need for coordinated, multi-stakeholder action. This includes efforts from academia to produce localized, empirical research; media organizations to promote responsible reporting and fact-checking; social media platforms to enhance language-specific moderation tools; and governmental bodies to develop inclusive digital literacy programs. Without such collaboration, the manipulation of public opinion may continue to deepen existing social divides, undermine democratic engagement, and erode trust in institutions.

By recognizing the specific patterns and consequences of manipulation in AP and Telangana, this review calls for context-sensitive, evidence-based interventions that can build public resilience against misinformation and restore the integrity of online discourse. Only through interdisciplinary collaboration, sustained digital education, and locally grounded research can India begin to protect its citizens especially its youth from the psychological consequences of manipulated digital discourse.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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