



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Journalism & Mass Communication

DIGITAL INFLUENCERS, CITIZEN JOURNALISM, AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN INDIA

KEY WORDS: citizen journalism, public discourse, audience engagement, political communication, digital media.

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how citizen journalism transforms the evolving face of public discourse in India, with digital influencers becoming potent actors and influencers in these decentralized media spaces. The advent and adoption of social media platforms have enabled individuals to creatively produce, distribute, and interact with political content, leading to a transformation of traditional political media communication platforms. The paper follows a mixed-methods approach (integrating a survey of 120 participants and a brief qualitative analysis of a selected subset of digital influencers). The quantitative data were obtained by presenting a structured questionnaire and measuring the five-point Likert scale and were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression techniques. The paper has found that audience engagement is the most robust predictor of public discourse, followed by exposure and credibility. The qualitative findings throw more light on the utilization of different kinds of citizen journalists as influencers in creating varied types of content styles (informational, opinion-based, and conversational) to foster understanding and engagement among the audience. It also establishes that while citizen journalism can open up opportunities for accessibility and engagement, it also raises concerns about the quality and reliability of the discourse. The results are useful in terms of the appreciation of changing realities of digital political communication in the current context of India.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital media is significantly altering the territory of data flow particularly in places like India, where social and political communication has turned into a digital space. For many years, it was carried out through institutionally related agents, including the mainstream news organizations, political elite, or even professionals such as reporters, who were the gatekeepers of information. They weren't merely in charge of deciding what the public was supposed to be exposed to but also of what was framed and interpreted (i.e., put in the public's eye). But now, with the rise of digital platforms, this hierarchical setup has been given a blow, giving rise to a more decentralized and participatory way of communication. To put it another way, at the heart of it is the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism has also been defined as the active citizen involvement in creating, spreading, and interpreting news and information. Digital media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly also known as Twitter) have enabled individuals to bypass traditional media structures to reach out to audiences. This made the information creation democratic because they had all the right voices in hand to get involved with mass discourse. In this larger context of a digital economy, digital influencers have emerged as an important category of citizen journalists by helping to produce and disperse political content, as well as affect the perception of the audience. The emerging trend of influencer-driven citizens is a part and parcel of the bigger transformation, such as the public discourse. In a democratic society, public dialogue will help to enable informed, open debate that is open to different points of view. However, citizen journalists are increasingly joining the fray with their own points of view, creating some dynamics that challenge and complicate this ideal. In other words, though it increases inclusiveness and is helpful in giving a voice to the voices that have not been conventionally present in the media landscape, citizen journalism is essential. In the meantime, it lacks proper oversight, which can question its credibility, quality, and accuracy. In the Indian context, these changes are even more pronounced due to the fast-growing digital space in the country. As the world has been smartphone-reliant and has cheap internet access, social media has been one of the main sources of information for political topics, especially among younger audiences. There has been a rise in citizen journalism with people and influencers taking part (and often driving political conversations) in election campaigns. This includes more

informational content and explanations of policy, opinion-driven narratives, and shorter-form videos that maximize their reach. A main trademark is the audience engagement within citizen journalism in digital spaces. Unlike the one-way communication in traditional media, digital media allows more interactive participation, such as likes, shares, and comments. This kind of engagement is one of the vital variables influencing the visibility and reach of the material, with algorithms being biased towards posts with more interactions. Thus, engagement is one of the key variables through which citizen journalism dictates the conversations in the public sphere.

While credibility is also an enormous factor in this case. Digital influencers generalize trust through reliable, perceived authenticity. The lack of standardization of journalism has left a conundrum in determining the credibility of information. Such audiences might place greater reliance on what is perceived as truer than on what has been verified. Thus, credibility is yet another variable that will influence the ways in which political information is understood and will be disseminated. Despite the rising importance of citizen journalists, there's a demand for systematic empirical research to explore the influence of citizen journalism on public discourse. Existing studies tend to categorize social media more generally, without distinguishing citizen journalists from influencers. Furthermore, there is a paucity of studies in the literature that examine key variables such as audience engagement, exposure, and credibility to understand their combined impact on public discourse in India. In an attempt to address these gaps, this study incorporates those that have been left unexplored by the literature. So it takes a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative analysis of audience perceptions and qualitative insight into influencer-generated content.

Here, the study discusses how exposure to citizen journalism, linked to perceived credibility and audience engagement, influences political awareness, opinion formation, and wider public discourse dynamics. As digital platforms continue the flow of information across the planet, citizen journalists play a greater and larger role in shaping how political public discourse is formed and lived. So by weaving together quantitative and qualitative perspectives, it provides a multidimensional analysis of citizen journalism's importance while addressing the implications and concerns of citizen

journalism for the evolution of public discourses in India, by the basis of the findings, offering evidence for the transformative and changing role that citizen journalism has, as well as its implications and concerns that may be evolving related to citizen journalism's importance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does exposure to citizen journalism affect public disclosure among audiences?
2. How does the perceived credibility of citizen journalism influence audience engagement?
3. How does audience engagement with citizen journalism affect public disclosure?
4. To what extent do exposure, perceived credibility, and audience engagement collectively predict public disclosure?
5. How do influencer content styles affect audience interaction and public discourse?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To look into audience exposure to citizen journalism.
2. To evaluate audience-perceived credibility of influencer-driven content.
3. To study audience engagement with citizen journalism.
4. To find out the influence of exposure, perceived credibility, and audience engagement on public disclosure.
5. To look into the impact of influencer content styles in shaping public discourse.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In a similar vein to Manuel Castells (2015), who conceptualizes this shift with the form of networked societies, communication flows are decentralized, and so communication becomes decentralized, allowing individuals to create the means to distribute information on a mass level. That challenges traditional media gatekeeping and suggests that non-governmental actors are increasingly controlling public discussion about the media. Yet Castells' work is still largely theoretical and fails to analyze specifically the role of digital influencers as such an actor.

The rise of citizen journalism has been critiqued by Stuart Allan (2013); he mentions how the rise of citizen journalism can have a positive impact, as it would be able to democratize the production of news. Nonetheless, it has led to concerns over credibility and verification. In a similar vein, Andrew Chadwick (2017) examines the notion of hybrid media systems and how traditional and digital media interact, with citizen journalists being important in transforming political communication.

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) is related to the affective dimension of digital discourse, where they have been trying to explore how we think about the online and digital society as being guided by emotions rather than being about rational debates. Sahanna Udupa (2018) explores the Indian context, which is how the digital platforms can enable more participatory and more engaged, as well as polarized discourse. Bencettes (2013) and Segerberg (2013) proposed notions of connective action and explained how digital media enables more individualized engagement with politics.

Furthermore, Crystal Abidin (2016) examines the culture of influencers and explores how authenticity and relatability are major factors when considering audience interaction, which becomes relevant for understanding of influencers as citizen journalists. In summary, the previous literature identifies the development in terms of participatory communication and the value placed on engagement and credibility in the public discourse. Nonetheless, there are few studies using those variables to understand how digital influencers work as agents in citizen journalism in the context of India. This study fills that gap by examining, in an empirical approach, how exposure, credibility, and engagement are structured together in the public debate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is rooted in the concept of citizen journalism, which denotes the active participation of individuals in the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of news and information through digital platforms. In the current media space, digital influencers operate as significant stakeholders within citizen journalism in creating and sharing political content that influences audience understanding and engagement.

This study is further informed by the public space theory, which conceptualizes public discourse as a space for discussion and debate. In digital contexts, citizen journalism expands this space by enabling greater participation; however, this also poses challenges related to fragmented participation and discourse quality.

Additionally, this study draws on the agenda-setting theory, which outlines how citizen journalists' and influencers' engagement impacts the salience of political issues by shedding light on certain issues and structuring narratives in a way that will influence what audiences consider important within public discourse.

Moreover, this work incorporates principles from uses and gratifications theory, which explains audience engagement. Audiences actively engage with citizen journalism content to meet informational and sociable requirements, thereby shaping its impact and reach.

Despite the relevance of these frameworks, past studies typically examine these elements in isolation, inadequately integrating these frameworks to analyze how citizen journalism collectively contributes to shaping public discourse. Further, in India, very few empirical studies incorporate both audience behavior & content-level analysis. This study fills this gap through an integrated mixed-methods examination of exposure, credibility, and engagement in shaping public discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative insights to evaluate the impact of citizen journalism, particularly influencer-generated content, in molding public discourse in India. It is a descriptive and analytical study wherein it was guided by research questions and objectives to examine the relationships between exposure to citizen journalism, the perceived credibility, the audience, and its collective impact on public discourse.

The study adopted a sample size of 120 respondents, chosen using a convenience sampling technique. This is because of the availability and accessibility of respondents who are currently using the digital platforms (which made the suitability of the sampling technique fit for our study, as it was an exploratory research to understand the current behavior of media consumption through digital platforms). The target population for the study is considered individuals aged between 18 - 35 years, as this demographic is actively using digital platforms and is more likely to be engaged in citizen journalism and influencer-generated political content. The sample of respondents included both urban & semi-urban, as it ensures familiarity with social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly known as Twitter) that are key sites for citizen journalism.

Primary data collection utilized a well-structured questionnaire administered online, designed to capture the key constructs directly related to the research objectives. Items measuring exposure to citizen journalism, perceived credibility of influencer-generated content, and audience engagement patterns, as well as the occurrence of public discourse, were included. All responses were encoded on a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree) to quantify the subjective perceptions.

Table 1. Demographic qualities of respondents depicting the distribution of respondents based on their gender and age groups.

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18-21 years	38	31.7
22-25 years	42	35.0
26-30 years	25	20.8
31-35 years	15	12.5
Total	120	100

Table 1.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents showing distribution across age groups.

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	62	51.7
Female	58	48.3
Other	-	-
Total	120	100

Table 1.2. Demographic characteristics of respondents showing distribution across gender.

Each of the constructs was assessed using multiple items, with composite scores calculated to represent variables. Exposure and credibility were treated as independent variables and audience engagement as mediating variables, while public discourse was the dependent variable. The dependent variable was operationalized by including indicators such as political awareness, opinion formation, and perception of political issues.

Data were analyzed through the SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarize the behavior of respondents and overall trends. The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore and observe the strength and direction of the relationship among variables. In addition, the research further included multiple regression analysis, where the predictive effects of exposure, credibility, and engagement were taken into account to study how they influence public discourse.

The regression model used in the study is expressed as:

$$\text{Public Discourse} = f(\text{Exposure} + \text{Credibility} + \text{Engagement}),$$

Further than the quantitative aspect, the research considered a short qualitative component to provide the findings a contextual perspective. This component consisted of the descriptive analysis of the content published by selected digital influencers, focusing on their style, tone, and audience's engagement patterns, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how citizen journalism operates in practice.

Ethical considerations were maintained; the procedure followed was that participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality throughout the study.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This research studied the influence of citizen journalism on audiences' engagement, perceived credibility, and public discourse, employing a sample of 120 respondents. The data were analyzed using SPSS to achieve the research objectives, exploring how exposure, credibility, and engagement affect public discourse. The Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore and observe the strength and direction of the relations among these variables.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine the central tendencies of key variables. These results show all the constructs have moderate to the highest level of engagement, with audience engagement having the highest mean ($M=3.91$, $SD=0.68$), followed by public discourse ($M=3.88$, $SD=0.74$), exposure ($M=3.84$, $SD=0.72$), and credibility showing the lowest mean ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.81$)

Based on the findings, the respondents are actively engaging with citizen news content, suggesting a high level of engagement. However, the relatively lower level of perception in trust in citizen journalism aligns with a commonly acknowledged pattern in the digital realm, where high engagement is often accompanied by moderate perceptions of credibility.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the key variables of the study, including exposure, credibility, engagement, and public discourse

Variable	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Exposure	120	3.84	0.72
Credibility	120	3.56	0.81
Engagement	120	3.91	0.68
Public Discourse	120	3.88	0.74

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variable

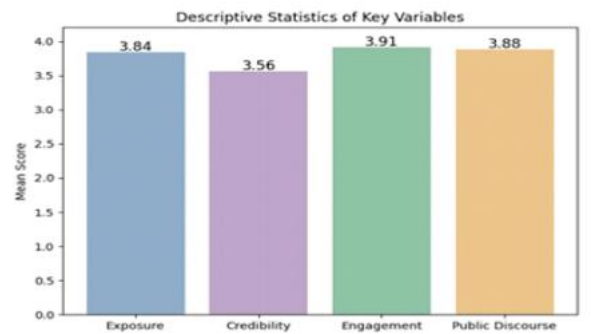


Figure 1. The mean score of key variables, indicating the level of exposure, credibility, engagement, and public discourse among respondents

The correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between exposure, credibility, and engagement as well as public discourse. The correlations indicate statistically significant relationships with varying strength.

The results of the analysis suggest that there is a positive correlation between exposure and public discourse ($r = 0.46$), suggesting that increased exposure contributes to greater awareness and opinion formation.

Engagement has the strongest relationship with the level of public discourse ($r = 0.54$), suggesting that audience interaction is central to public discourse.

The results show a positive and statistically significant correlation between exposure to citizen journalism and engagement rate ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$); it suggests that individuals who are more exposed to content generated by citizens or other influencers are more likely to actively engage with it (e.g., by liking, sharing, or commenting).

This finding underscores the precursor role of exposure in fostering audiences' engagement, suggesting that increased visibility of content enhances audience participation.

However, the relationship is moderate rather than strong, indicating that while exposure contributes to engagement, other factors—such as content relevance, presentation style, and perceived credibility—also influence the extent of audience interaction.

Credibility shows comparatively weaker correlates to engagement ($r = 0.29$) and public discourse ($r = 0.32$), suggesting trust influences audiences' interaction and their perception of citizen journalism, although it does not appear to be the main force of engagement.

Overall, this relationship reinforces the participatory nature of digital media environments, where exposure isn't merely informing audiences but is also fostering them to become active contributors to the flow of information and discourse.

Table 3. Pearson correlation matrix showing the relationships among exposure, credibility, engagement, and public discourse.

Variable	1	2	3	4
Exposure	1			
Credibility	.34**	1		
Engagement	.41**	.29**	1	
Public Discourse	.46**	.32**	.54**	1

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Note: $p < 0.01$

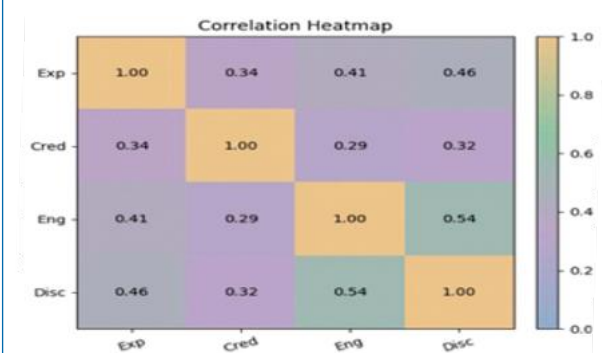


Figure 2. Correlation heatmap illustrating the strength and direction of relationships among exposure, credibility, engagement, and public discourse.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive impact that exposure to citizen journalism, credibility, and engagement have on public discourse; the model is statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 39% of public discourse.

Among the predictors, audience engagement emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta=0.36, p<0.001$), suggesting that higher levels of interaction significantly enhance the influence of citizen journalism on discourse formation. Exposure also shows a significant positive effect ($\beta=0.27, p<0.01$), suggesting that access to content contributes to shaping audience perceptions. Credibility was statistically significant and had a relatively weaker effect ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.05$), indicating that trust plays a secondary role compared to engagement and exposure.

This finding points to the participatory nature of digital media environments, where audiences engage with content in ways that may outweigh perceived credibility.

Table 4. Result of multiple regression analysis predicting public discourse from exposure, credibility, & engagement.

Predictor	β (standardized)	T value	Sig.
Exposure	0.27	3.12	0.002
Credibility	0.18	2.21	0.029
Engagement	0.36	4.48	0.000

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Public Discourse

$R^2 = 0.39$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$

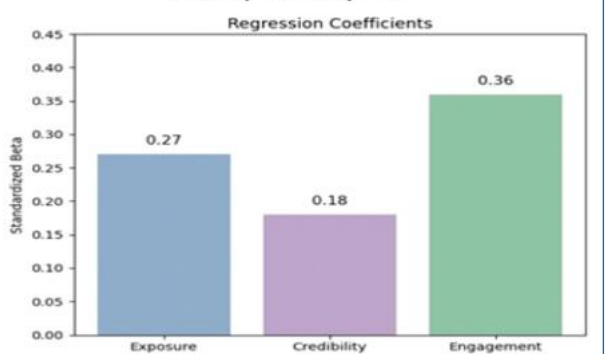


Figure 3. Standardized regression coefficients illustrating the influence of exposure, credibility, & engagement on public discourse.

The results indicate that citizen journalism's impact on public discourse varies across key variables. Firstly, audience engagement proved to be the most significant, revealing that the influence on digital content is shaped more by the degree of engagement rather than passive exposure. These findings highlight the participatory nature of digital media environments, in which users actively circulate and interpret political information.

Secondly, exposure to citizen journalism showed a moderate effect, suggesting that frequent interaction with citizen journalism content enhances awareness and supports opinion formation. However, the comparatively lower influence highlights the inherent limitation of exposure alone, as content in isolation may lack the active engagement needed to drive discourse.

Furthermore, credibility demonstrated a weaker, yet significant, role, indicating a shift in digital communication environments where engagement often outweighs trust. This may suggest that audiences engage with and are influenced by content even in the absence of strong perceived credibility.

Overall, these results point toward an engagement-driven model of public discourses where active interaction plays a central factor in shaping how information and opinions are received and interpreted.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCE AS CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

In addition to the comprehensive quantitative presentation, a brief qualitative analysis was also developed to examine the impact and role of digital influencers in terms of citizen journalists as well as in terms of public discourse. We analyzed four of these Indian digital content creators, Dhruv Rathee, Akash Banerjee, Abhi & Niyu, and Raneever Allahbadia, who cover political and socio-political content. In addition, analysis also brings to the fore different aspects of citizen journalism. Dhruv Rathee goes for a well-sourced, analytical, and contextual approach to political questions and also involves coverage and analysis of legislative or executive policies. It can be said that his work is a structured and informative model of citizen journalism. It has helped in building an increasingly credible image and a more informed audience.

Akash Banerjee is more of a satirical opinion piece that uses humor as an element as well as political critique, and he produces very engaging content that is able to engage the audience. An atmosphere of digital discourse is that it is participatory in the sense of making the readers be very interactive as well as engaged with the content. The tone is more interpretative, affecting how the audience perceives the content more through interpretative commentary instead of being presented with information or solely facts.

Abhi and Niyu, on the other hand, adopt a more accessible and well-rounded approach in tackling complex political and social topics. Combined with informative detail in relatable storytelling, it not only allows for audience engagement but also caters to a social aspect accessible to a broader age range. This is because their content aims to cater to a relatable story for the younger age group.

Ranveer Allahabadia is a conversational, interview-based version of citizen journalism, more podcast-format-based conversations, and through the dialogues, political and social issues are tackled within discussions with experts and public figures as well. The structure is focused on the dialogue through long-form reflection and a variety of perspectives, leading to a more contemplative kind of public discourse.

In all four cases, the issue of audience engagement seems to be at the heart of how content is amplified and discourse is constructed. Although the tone and language of content differ (informational vs. opinion/conversational), all influencers are citizen journalists who contribute to sharing and understanding political information. This adds weight to the quantitative findings of the study that engagement is an important means by which citizen journalism affects public discourse.

The table represents a comparative analysis of influencers

Influencer	Content style	Tone	Role in citizen journalism
Dhruv Rathee	Informational	Analytical	High credibility, awareness
Akash and Banerjee	Satirical	Opinion-driven	High engagement, critique
Abhi and Niyu	Simplified	Balanced	Accessible information
Ranveer Allahabadia	Conversational	Exploratory	Diverse perspectives

Table 5. Comparative analysis of influencers

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at examining the role of citizen journalism, particularly influencer-driven content, in shaping the public's discourse in India. It analyzed the relationships between exposure to influencer-driven content, credibility of such content, audience engagement, and public discourse formulation as well. The results obtained provided interesting insights for understanding the changing dynamics of digital political communication, highlighting the shift from traditional information consumption to interactive and participatory engagement.

A key finding of the study is the central role of audience engagement in shaping public discourse. Correlation and regression analyses consistently indicate that audience engagement is the strongest predictor of public discourse, underscoring the importance of interactive engagement rather than mere exposure in determining the impact of citizen journalism. This finding further supports the idea that digital platforms serve a role as sites of participation in which users actively contribute to the circulation and interpretation of political content. The significant presence of engagement in the results is well-suited to the current trend of algorithm-driven visibility, in which content that generates higher engagement is more likely to achieve wider visibility and shape discourse more effectively.

The significant but relatively moderate influence of exposure to citizen journalism on public discourse is also interesting and relevant. The positive association of exposure with engagement further implies that visibility serves as a precursor to interaction. However, the strength of the relationships suggests that exposure alone does not ensure meaningful engagement or influence, hence emphasizing the importance of the content characteristics, including its relevance, framing, and presentation style, in determining whether its exposure will result in active participation or not.

A more complex role of credibility in the process of digital communication can also be inferred from the findings. While credibility is positively linked to both engagement and public discourse, its relatively weaker effect suggests that a shift in the way that audiences engage in digital spaces takes place.

Unlike the traditional media context in the previous literature, where credibility is a primary determinant of acceptance of the information provided, the findings seem to indicate that users may still engage with and be influenced by the content even when it does not always manage to trigger high credibility beliefs in itself. In this respect, the implication of the findings here indicates a broader movement towards an engagement-driven communication where a content's aesthetic in how the information is delivered, such as its ability to create emotion, relatability, and presentation style, might outweigh the importance of whether it is accurate or not in shaping audiences' interaction with it.

The qualitative analysis further underscores and contextualizes these findings, revealing how different styles of influencer content contribute to varying levels of engagement and discourse formation. For instance, influencers who adopt analytical and informational approaches tend to emphasize credibility and the depth of information, fostering informed engagement. In contrast, satirical and opinion-driven formats enhance accessibility and interaction by simplifying complex issues and encouraging audience participation. Similarly, conversational and narrative-driven formats promote relatability and sustained engagement by presenting content in an easily approachable and interactive manner. These differences highlight that it is not only the availability of information that matters for citizen journalism's effectiveness, but also the manner in which it is communicated.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the phenomenon of citizen journalism operates within a hybrid communication environment wherein the interplay of exposure, credibility, and engagement defines the shaping of public discourse. However, engagement emerges as the dominant factor, suggesting that citizen journalism's impact is primarily mediated through participatory practices rather than the purely informational process. This has important implications for our understanding of the nature of public discourse in digital contexts, where the boundaries between information, interpretation, and interaction become increasingly blurred.

At the same time, these findings raise critical concerns regarding the quality and reliability of public discourse. The relatively weaker role associated with credibility suggests that highly engaging content cannot always be associated with the most accurate or trustworthy information. This highlights the potential risks associated with engagement-driven communication, including the amplification of opinion-based or emotionally driven narratives at the expense of factual accuracy.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of research on citizen journalism by providing empirical evidence from the Indian context and by integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives. It highlights the need to understand digital political communication not only in terms of

information dissemination but also in terms of interaction, participation, and content dynamics that shape how public discourse is constructed and experienced.

CONCLUSION

This study offers insightful conclusions on how citizen journalism, especially influencer-driven content, contributes to the evolving nature of public discourse in India. Considering the research objective, the findings are summarized as follows:

The quantitative results showed that audience engagement plays a predominant role in the public discourse, while exposure and credibility have weaker but still important roles. This indicates a participatory aspect of digital communication where the impact of information isn't solely determined by its availability but also by audience interaction.

While exposure contributes to creating awareness and opinion formation, its role is moderate, suggesting that visibility alone might not dictate meaningful engagement. However, credibility, despite its weaker role, shows that trust plays a role in discourse formation, and information, once trusted, can influence discourse. This finding highlights the complex dynamics of contemporary information ecosystems.

These findings contribute to the increasingly global literature on citizen journalism and digital political communication by offering empirical evidence from the Indian context, incorporating quantitative and qualitative perspectives, and underlining the importance of understanding not just how information is spread but how it is interacted with, participated in, and constructed to shape the discourse in our public sphere.

The qualitative insights complement these quantitative findings, highlighting how digital influencers, as *ciudadanos periodistas*, employ diverse content styles, ranging from analytical and informational to satirical and conversational formats, thus influencing the nature and quality of engagement as well as the formation of understanding and interpretation of political information. The results confirm that the impact of citizen journalism cannot be reduced to the mere dissemination of content but also encompasses the framing of information and its delivery.

Overall, this suggests that citizen journalism functions in two interdependent ways: quantitative patterns of engagement and content-based communicative strategies that impact public discourse. While the latter contributes to increased inclusivity and participatory rates, the growing focus on engagement-oriented content creation begs questions about the quality, credibility, and depth of public discourse on digital platforms.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study builds upon existing citizen journalism literature by incorporating the role of influencers in its conceptual apparatus. It adds new dimensions to traditional communication theories by verifying their applicability in digitally mediated ecosystems.

The results provide empirical support for the continued relevance and applicability in digital contexts of public sphere theory, but also indicate its evolution into a more fragmented, participatory space. Similarly, agenda-setting processes are not merely restricted to institutional media but are increasingly constructed with citizen journalists and influencers and through issue salience created by content visibility and engagement.

The study further reinforces the applicability of uses and gratifications theory, showing that the engagement of

audiences is facilitated by active participation and that users interact with content to meet their informational, social, and expressive needs. However, the results also suggest a redefinition of classical communication theories given the algorithm-driven, engagement-oriented digital environment.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study's findings carry several implications for various stakeholders:

- **For audiences:** There is a growing need for enhanced media literacy to help audiences critically examine citizen-generated content and discriminate between credible information and opinion-driven narratives.
- **For citizen journalists and influencers:** The findings underscore the importance of balancing engagement with credibility by adopting responsible content creation practices and ensuring accuracy in information dissemination.
- **For policymakers & digital platforms:** There is a need to develop frameworks and regulate mechanisms that foster credible information and address the spread of misinformation and biased narratives in digital spaces

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some limitations exist despite the impact of the study:

- The sample size is 120 respondents and therefore may not represent the general population.
- This study is limited to only young and digitally active users (18-35 years old) and therefore curtails the generalization of its findings to other age cohorts
- Biased responses were possible because the data were self-report-based.
- The research design is cross-sectional and does not reflect variations in discourse across time

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Possible improvements in further research can be performed on this study in several aspects:

- To further enhance the study, expanding the sample size and incorporating a diverse demographic spectrum would be beneficial.
- Furthermore, conducting comparative analysis across various geographical regions or countries can provide richer insights into the global implications of citizen journalism.
- Studies can delve deeper into the role of misinformation and polarization in shaping public discourse
- For further examination of the long-term impact of journalism on political participation and democratic engagement, longitudinal studies can be conducted.

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