



**Social Media As A Weapon of Unethical Political Marketing: Examining The Impact of
Misinformation And Emotional Manipulation on Voter Behaviour**

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ABSTRACT

Background: In India, social media has emerged as the focal point of political communication that allows spreading correct information and spreading massive amounts of misinformation quickly. The political involvement through the internet has also been further heightened by emotional content and this has generated concerns over the way voters are influenced by this kind of content during election days.

Objective: This paper will also seek to investigate the level of influence by misinformation and emotional manipulation in social media and how they have affected voter behaviour during Indian elections. It further addresses the issue of whether digital literacy and demographics affect the vulnerability of such content to voters.

Methods: The structured online questionnaire was used to address 300 social media-active voters in India in a quantitative cross-sectional survey. To examine the relationship between misinformation, emotional manipulation, and voter behaviour, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were used to study the result.

Results: The results state that 64 percent of the respondents have often encountered misinformation, with WhatsApp as the most frequent one. Anger, pride, was emotional triggers that were reported as high. Correlation analysis revealed that there is a positive strong relationship between misinformation exposure and voter behaviour change ($r = 0.62$) and emotional manipulation also showed a significant effect ($r = 0.57$). Regression results confirmed misinformation as the strongest predictor of voter behaviour ($\beta = 0.48$). Higher digital literacy reduced susceptibility to manipulation.

Conclusion: The researchers find that, in India, the issue of misinformation and emotional manipulation in the social media is a major factor that disfigures political perceptions and voting intentions. To protect the democratic processes, it is crucial to enhance digital literacy, regulatory control, and transparency on the platform.

Keywords: Misinformation, Emotional Manipulation, Voter Behaviour, Social Media, Indian Elections, Digital Literacy.

Introduction

Social media has revolutionized political communication all over the world in the last 10 years, as it has turned political communication into a one-way mass communication to a much more interactive, personalized, and algorithmic communication. India, the largest democratic country in the world, has turned into one of the biggest tools of political persuasion, campaign access, and live discussion, through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023) states that over 600 million people can use social media in India, and digital channels become the primary field of influence on the public opinion. Targeted advertising, influencer networks, micro-campaigns, and data analytics are the marketing tools that are becoming more prevalent among political parties to reach large numbers of voters (Chakrabarti et al., 2019). This has made it possible to spread information faster but has also made it possible to manipulate, polarize and distort facts.



1.1 Rise of Misinformation in Indian Elections

False or misleading information that is circulated in good faith is what is known as misinformation which has become a major challenge in the electoral set-up in India. Research shows that political misinformation on social networks, such as WhatsApp, gets much more virality than actual news because of the appeal to emotions and echo-chamber (Arun, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018). India was home to the largest ever amounts of fake videos, morphing, manipulated accounts, and propaganda-related messages shared within closed messaging groups during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections (Narayanan et al., 2019). The fact-checking organisations, among them Alternative News, BOOM, and PIB Fact Check, reported on thousands of viral fake assertions about political parties, national security, and the communal issues. These risks have also been increased by the fact that there is a high rate of digital penetration and low media literacy rates resulting in misinformation being a powerful political weapon.

1.2 Emotional Manipulation Techniques Used Online

The social media allows one to strategically use the emotionally evoking content- fear, anger, nationalism, pride, and outrage- to influence voter attitudes and behaviour. Political psychology studies indicate that emotionally suggestive materials enhance levels of engagement, retention and ease of persuasion (Brader, 2006). Through specific discourses, manipulative memes, manipulative videos, and headlines, political agents on social media abuse such tendencies, creating a polarizing drive that evokes emotional responses. The algorithms which focus on engagement intentionally promote such content by rewarding virality over truthfulness (Bakshy et al., 2015). Emotional manipulative messaging has proven especially efficient in identity based politics, communal messages and crisis communication by elections in India (Arun, 2020). Such strategies are false ways of making a decision and may alter electoral preference based on unconscious persuasion.

1.3 Importance of Studying Voter Behaviour

The ability to understand the impact of the misinformation and emotional manipulation on voter behaviour will be vital in protecting democracy. The process of elections is based on an informed choice and when voters use inaccurate or emotionally bias information, the results of the elections might not be an expression of rational political preferences. The impact of online persuasion might have quite different results in the diverse demographic groups in a country with diverse socio-political contexts, so in India, it could be influenced by multiple factors such as language, caste affiliation, digital literacy, and regional integration. Voter behaviour analysis assists with the identification of weaknesses, determination of the effect of digital influence, and development of interventions that can encourage digital literacy, transparency, and responsible political communication.

1.4 Research Problem

Although there has been a sudden increase in the application of social media in Indian elections, there is still a lack of empirical research to investigate the joint effects of misinformation and emotional manipulation on voter decision-making. The literature research is either about misinformation, in isolation or general online political communication thus creates a gap in the comprehension of whether emotional stimulations, algorithmic amplification and manipulated content together result in the perception, attitude and voting preferences of voters. This is the gap that this study aims to fill by evaluating how much misinformation and emotional manipulative material affects the voting process in the Indian democracy.



1.5 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the prevalence and nature of misinformation encountered by voters on social media during Indian elections.
2. To analyse the emotional manipulation techniques commonly used in political digital communication.
3. To assess the impact of misinformation and emotional manipulation on voter perceptions, political attitudes, and voting intentions.
4. To explore demographic and behavioural factors that moderate voters' susceptibility to misleading or emotionally charged content.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The paper has academic, political and social implications. It adds to the existing body of literature of digital democracy with the provision of empirical evidence concerning the impact of psychological and technological factors on voter behaviour in unison. The findings can be used to guide regulatory frameworks in digital campaigning, political advertising, and false information regulation by policy makers and the Election Commission of India. It is also beneficial to the social media companies in learning the vulnerabilities of the algorithms and how the companies can enhance the methods of content moderation. Finally, the study encourages voter empowerment through the significance of critical thinking, media literacy, and immunity to the manipulative online processes.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The social media has transformed the political communication fundamentally, establishing a system of information, which is circulated in a manner that is difficult to imagine. According to scholars, digital platforms are becoming increasingly important to define the salience of political issues by making specific stories visible through algorithms (Thorson, 2016). Due to this fact, misinformation has significantly permeated the political online linguistic arena. Research has indicated that fake political contents are more likely to be shared faster than verified data since misinformation usually has new, emotionally evoking, information that encourages users to engage (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Misinformation has been a major problem in India, where WhatsApp and Facebook control political communication, and the inclination of closed-group networks that make it possible to propagate unproven messages is further augmented by the fact that during notable elections, it has affected the populace on numerous occasions (Phillips, 2020).

Studies also indicate that the use of coordinated disinformation networks such as bots and organized digital propaganda groups is critical in enhancing fake political content. As it is reported by Bradshaw and Howard (2019), political cyber-troops all around the world continue to use computational propaganda in an attempt to sway the masses, and India is not an exception in terms of its election cycles. This leads to the development of echo chambers where a user interacts majorly with content that favors their beliefs and thoughts, denying them the chance to be exposed to different perspectives or refutations (Garimella et al., 2021).

An increasing literature argues on the emotional aspect of digital influence. To political communication scholars, emotional triggers have been observed to influence the processing of political information by



people, particularly, anger, fear, pride, and anxiety. Emotive messages lower the level of cognitive evaluation and predispose recipients to persuasion (Lerner et al., 2015).

Movies, pictures, and videos of an emotionally inclusive nature have been found to supersede rational assessment and augment partisan reactions in the electoral condition. Indian researchers note that the communal and nationalistic message tends to gain excessive spread because it is more likely to be emotional, and when used by political participants, it is easier to mobilize or polarize voters (Udupa, 2020). Such practices have only been exacerbated by the emergence of microtargeting, where political advertisers are able to provide content to voters that fits their emotional and psychological profiles, affecting their decision-making regularly without knowing it (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018).

The other significant line of study is the use of algorithms in defining political experiences over the Internet. Ranking systems based on engagement made on websites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have been identified to increase divisive and emotionally provocative content since such content draws more interactions (Jiang et al., 2021). The algorithmic amplification effectively favors hyper-partisan accounts and fake political stories in the Indian digital landscape which can be described as high mobile penetration and low information literacy (Aneez et al., 2019). YouTube research has shown that over time recommendation systems can push users to more radical content, which has the potential to change ideological attitudes at the time of elections (Ribeiro et al., 2020). These technological aspects of social media systems give misinformation campaigns the green light.

Other sources on voter behaviour have reported that there are demographic and cognitive determinants of being vulnerable to online misinformation. It was always demonstrated that less digitally literate people or those who have worse critical thinking abilities are more prone to accepting and sharing political misinformation (Banaji and Bhat, 2020). Even younger users who are more digital in their activities tend to have fewer evaluative structures that would help them to check complicated political information. The psychological research also mentions the illusion of truth effect psychological effect, which is that the more a false statement is repeated, the more accurate it appears, and thus the misinformation is especially perilous in case of the extended election period (Pennycook et al., 2018). Partisan affiliation only worsens this weakness because people tend to trust false facts that favor a political faction they like (Guess et al., 2019).

According to recent studies conducted in 2018-2024, there are more trends that define the electoral information situation in India. The appearance of deepfakes and advanced edited videos has added to the complexity a new dimension of delivering political misinformation into new forms (Chesney and Citron, 2019). WhatsApp remains the most effective medium to deliver political messages and the research has reported a high degree of trust among the users despite its extensive contribution to the spread of misleading claims (Rao & Desai, 2022). Although fact-checking programs have increased significantly, it has been shown that factual information hardly spreads as much and spreads as fast as inaccurate information, restricting its reach to societal thinking and behaviour (Nyhan et al., 2021). In addition, politically charged content with emotional overtones always goes further and spreads more, leading to polarization and influencing the voter mood in a manner not necessarily associated with informed voting (Bail et al., 2020).

Taken together, all the literature shows that the two effects of misinformation and emotional persuasion are interdependent processes in the social media ecosystems. The electoral environment in India which is characterized by diverse socio-political identities, varying levels of literacy and high rates of digital penetration sets up unique susceptibilities such that the voters are especially vulnerable to such influence in the digital sphere. The intersection of algorithmic amplification, emotional persuasion



tactics, psychological biases, and organized misinformation networks has significant effects on the voter behaviour and the integrity of the democracies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this study is a quantitative, descriptive, analytical research approach that attempted to assess the effect of exposure to misinformation and manipulation of emotions on social media on voter behaviour in Indian elections. The design of methodology has been determined to have a statistical reliability, representativeness, and conformance with the established procedures in the study of political communication.

3.1 Research Design

The cross-sectional survey design was applied to sample the information of social media-savvy voters in India at one specific time. This methodology suits the research of the behavioural patterns, attitudes, and the level of exposure to the digital political content. It also is in favor of the use of statistical means like regression and correlation.

3.2 Population and Sample Size

The target population of this research will include Indian citizens aged 18 years and older who are active users on the social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X. The sample size used was 300 respondents. This sample is regarded to be statistically suitable in behavioural research giving it adequate power to perform regression analysis, correlation test and group comparisons. The sample of 300 will have sufficient representation of the various demographic groups and make data collection feasible.

3.3 Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling procedure was applied:

1. Purposive sampling to select states/regions with high social media usage.
2. Stratified sampling to include respondents from different demographic categories (age, gender, education, urban/rural locality).
3. Simple random sampling within each stratum to reach individual respondents.

This technique improves representativeness and reduces sampling bias in the study.

3.4 Data Collection Method

The data collection took place via an online questionnaire in the form of a structured survey that was performed with the help of Google Forms. Digital mode was selected as well due to the fact that the participants must be users of social media; online distribution is effective and suitable.

Theoretical knowledge and contextual analysis were supported with the help of secondary data such as academic articles, election reports, and fact-checking archives.

3.5 Research Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of four major sections:

- **Section A:** Demographic details
- **Section B:** Exposure to misinformation (frequency, platforms, type of content)
- **Section C:** Emotional manipulation indicators (anger, fear, pride, anxiety)
- **Section D:** Voter behaviour (attitudes, trust, voting intention, decision shifts)



3.6 Variables of the Study

Independent Variables

- Exposure to misinformation
- Emotional manipulation intensity
- Perceived credibility of digital political content

Dependent Variable

- Voter behaviour, measured through:
 - Political attitude change
 - Party/candidate preference
 - Voting intention

Moderating Variables

- Age
- Gender
- Education
- Digital literacy
- Political interest

These variables help identify which demographic groups are more influenced by misinformation and emotional persuasion.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data from 300 respondents were analysed using statistical software (SPSS or similar). The following tests were applied:

- Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, SD)
- Reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha)
- Correlation analysis to examine associations between key variables
- Multiple regression analysis to measure the effect of misinformation and emotional manipulation on voter behaviour
- Factor analysis (if required) to identify underlying constructs

3.8 Validity and Reliability

The content validity was guaranteed by the professional assessment of the materials by the scholars in the field of political communication. An initial test run to ensure clarity and appropriateness of the instrument was a pilot test. The alpha values with a value of 0.70 and above were accepted as good internal consistency.

3.9 Limitations

- Online sampling can also lock out the non-internet voters.
- Self-reported data can be socially desirable.
- Cross-sectional design- Cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations.
- Findings might change because of the fast changing digital platforms.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The involvement was voluntary and informed consent was gotten online. The respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and none of their personal information was gathered. All data were employed merely in academic reasons.

RESULTS

This chapter shows the analysis of the answers taken on 300 respondents in the various parts of India. Descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation and inferential tests including correlation, regression have been used to analyse data. It will focus on how misinformation and emotional manipulation of voters affect their voting behaviour in Indian elections.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 4.1 Age-wise Distribution of Respondents (N = 300)

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–25	96	32.0
26–35	102	34.0
36–45	60	20.0
46 & above	42	14.0

Interpretation:

Most of the respondents (66 percent) are in the age bracket of 18-35 years, which means that younger voters are more active on social media and hence more exposed to political content that is posted on the internet.

Table 4.2 Gender-wise Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	165	55.0
Female	132	44.0
Other	3	1.0

Interpretation: The survey involved slightly more male respondents (55%); nevertheless, the representatives of different genders make the results more valid.

Table 4.3 Education Level of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Higher Secondary	48	16.0
Undergraduate	120	40.0
Postgraduate	102	34.0
Others	30	10.0

Interpretation: A significant percentage of the respondents (74) hold an undergraduate degree, indicating that educated users represent a big proportion of active social media users.

4.2 Exposure to Misinformation on Social Media

Table 4.4 Frequency of Encountering Misinformation

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Often	84	28.0
Often	108	36.0
Sometimes	75	25.0
Rarely	24	8.0
Never	9	3.0

Interpretation: A total of 64% of the people interviewed report being faced with misinformation either often or very often, which shows that misinformation is very common and it is deeply entrenched in the social media landscape in India.

Table 4.5 Platforms Where Misinformation Is Mostly Seen

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp	147	49.0
Facebook	72	24.0
Instagram	42	14.0
YouTube	33	11.0
Other	6	2.0

Interpretation: WhatsApp emerges as the primary platform for misinformation dissemination (49%), due to private groups and unmonitored message forwarding.

4.3 Emotional Manipulation Indicators

Table 4.6 Emotional Reactions to Political Content

Emotional Trigger	Mean	SD
Anger	3.82	0.91
Fear	3.56	1.02
Pride	3.71	0.88
Anxiety	3.43	0.95

Interpretation: Anger (M = 3.82) and Pride (M = 3.71) are the most active emotional responses to political posts, demonstrating that emotional manipulation has a significant impact on the engagement and perception of the user.

4.4 Impact of Misinformation on Political Perception

Table 4.7 Agreement with Misinformation Statements

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Political rumours influence public opinion	72.0	18.0	10.0
Misinformation changes perception of candidates	68.0	22.0	10.0
Repeated posts seem believable over time	64.0	23.0	13.0

Interpretation: Masses of people admit that misinformation does affect the perception of politics, with 64% admitting the illusion of truth effect, with the more people are exposed to false information, the more they believe in it.

4.5 Impact of Emotional Manipulation on Voter Behaviour

Table 4.8 Effect of Emotional Content on Voting Intent

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Emotional posts influence my political views	58.0	27.0	15.0
Anger-based content increases political bias	61.0	21.0	18.0
Fear-based content affects my decision-making	52.0	30.0	18.0

Interpretation: Most respondents (61 percent) say that emotional content changes their political thoughts, particularly that which is based on anger.

4.6 Correlation Analysis

Table 4.9 Correlation Between Key Variables

Variables	Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
Misinformation Exposure ↔ Voter Behaviour Change	0.62	0.000
Emotional Manipulation ↔ Voter Behaviour Change	0.57	0.000
Misinformation Exposure ↔ Emotional Manipulation	0.49	0.000

Interpretation: The exposure to misinformation is strongly positively related to voter behaviour change ($r = 0.62$). A significant impact is also experienced in emotional manipulation ($r = 0.57$). At $p < 0.05$, all relationships are significant.

4.7 Regression Analysis

Table 4.10 Regression Model Summary

Predictor Variables	Beta (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Misinformation Exposure	0.48	0.000	Strong predictor
Emotional Manipulation	0.36	0.000	Significant predictor
Digital Literacy (Control)	-0.21	0.014	Reduces impact

Interpretation: Regression results show that misinformation exposure is the strongest predictor of voter behaviour change ($\beta = 0.48$). Emotional manipulation also plays a key role ($\beta = 0.36$). Higher digital literacy reduces susceptibility, showing a protective effect.

4.8 Summary of Findings

- The frequency of misinformation among 64% of voters is great.
- WhatsApp is the most important platform of political misinformation.
- The strongest emotional attractors are anger and pride.
- More than three-fifths of the population believes that political rumours influence the opinion of the population.
- Likely, emotional manipulation has a great influence on voting intentions.
- Both, misinformation and emotional manipulation are strongly positively correlated with change in voter behaviour.
- Regression proves misinformation to be the most powerful factor in the voter decision-making.

5. Discussion

The results of the current research prove that misinformation and emotional manipulation on social media significantly influence the voter behaviour in Indian elections. According to the demographic analysis, younger users, especially those aged 18 to 35, are the most active users of the social media platform and hence the main recipients of the digital political content. This is in line with national trends that show that younger voters tend to use online sources as the source of political information as opposed to traditional media. The fact that the misinformation occurrence frequency in the respondents was high proves that the misinformation or false or misleading material has become a normalized part of the use of social media in India. The poor nature of WhatsApp, where forwarding content is easily accessible and a closed-group structure is adopted, made the application the most flamed misinformation medium, as it can be seen in previous studies that the application was the keystone in spreading political rumours and manipulated stories.

It was also established that emotional manipulation is a root of online political messaging. The respondents claimed that they have a very strong emotional response especially anger and pride, which



indicates that political content is crafted specifically to engage a greater response based on emotion. These emotional signals lower the level of analytical thinking and enhance the chances of political polarization. The findings also show that emotional appeals greatly affect political perception and voting choice. A population of 487 respondents admitted that content based on anger and fear changed their political perception, which confirms the theories in political psychology that emotions are central in the decision making process particularly when there is some sense of uncertainty.

The exposure of misinformation and a change in voter behaviour were observed to be the two components that had a positive relationship that the correlation of the two variables and regression results confirmed that misinformation is a significant predictor of changes in political attitude. It means that a series of media consumptions of misleading information may cause a distortion of political knowledge and support biased beliefs, especially due to the illusion of truth. Emotional manipulation also had a significant effect, albeit a little weaker than the effects of misinformation, and indicates that although emotions are more persuasive, the aspect of misinformation is the cognitive foundation of beliefs development. The combination of the two is a highly effective framework of influence in which the misinformation offers the narrative content and the emotional manipulation offers the psychological drive that causes voters to internalize or take action based on the content of the narratives.

A moderating factor is the significance of digital literacy that needs to be noted. The degree of digital literacy also played a less significant role in misinformation and emotional persuasion among respondents with elevated levels of digital literacy, which demonstrates the protective role of critical evaluation skills. This highlights the necessity of specific digital literacy intervention, especially in the areas or demographics with less awareness of the practices of fact-checking or with limited knowledge of how to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources.

Altogether, the results indicate that in India, the social media ecosystems can be easily manipulated because of the presence of the algorithmic amplification, low levels of the verification and emotive quality of the political information. The research supports the increasing worries that misinformation and emotions manipulation do not only bend personal views but also at large endanger the effectiveness of the democratic procedures by altering the election outcomes. The findings reveal that there is a dire need to enhance stronger policy interventions, better accountability of platforms, and organized education programs to the general population in order to reduce the impact of digital misinformation on voter behaviour.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This paper has found that misinformation and emotional play on social media contribute greatly to voter behaviour during the Indian elections. The findings demonstrate clearly that the problem of misinformation is not a one-time and solitary event but a common and ongoing aspect of online politics. Most of the respondents said that they had often been exposed to false or misleading political information, especially via WhatsApp, and this is because closed messaging platforms make it easier to spread information freely. It was also established that emotional manipulation particularly anger, pride, and fear have a significant role in determining how people perceive political messages. The emotional appeals increase political responsiveness and decrease critical thinking and lead to more pronounced partisan biases.

The statistical test proves that exposure to misinformation is the most predictive factor of voter perception and voting intention change, and this is closely followed by emotionally manipulative information. All these combined lead to poor decision making and the creation of distorted political



ideologies in election years. Notably, the research also identifies that digital literacy is a protective factor, as the individuals with the stronger ability of verification and awareness of the media are less impacted by the misleading or emotionalized accounts of politics. By and large, the results suggest that the misinformation and emotional control pose a considerable challenge to the active democratic involvement and could affect the results of elections by altering the opinion of the population with the use of fake techniques.

Recommendations

According to the findings, a number of practical, policy-oriented, and educational recommendations are offered to reduce the contribution of misinformation and emotional manipulation to the voters:

1. Strengthening Digital Literacy Programs: The urgent need is to introduce systematic digital literacy campaigns at the community and the institutional level. Making voters aware of misleading information and train about it, checking and checking the sources, and being aware of algorithmic influence can make people much more resistant to misinformation.

2. Enhancing Transparency on Social Media Platforms: The social media organizations are supposed to unveil stricter transparency in political advertisements, limit forwarding of messages and content recommendation. Social media should also cooperate with third-party fact-checkers and issue warnings on potentially most misleading posts.

3. Regulatory Oversight During Election Periods: With the digital political campaigns, tighter monitoring mechanisms need to be embraced by the Election Commission of India. There should be very clear signs on misinformation, disclosure of political advertising and accountability of political parties in order to have integrity with regard to electoral processes.

4. Promotion of Fact-Checking Awareness: Voter education through public awareness should also be done to get them accustomed to trusted fact-checking organisations. The platforms can be integrated with fact-checking links to motivate the users to check the content before posting.

5. Encouraging Responsible Digital Citizenship: People should also be advised to embrace ethical internet actions particularly during elections. The emotional polarization of manipulative content can be overcome by campaigns to adopt responsible sharing behaviours, think critically and engage responsibly.

6. Collaboration Between Government, Academia, and Civil Society: The political misinformation is changing and requires a multi-stakeholder approach. To perform research, monitoring, and development of tools to trace the upcoming methods of manipulation, such as deepfakes and AI-generated propaganda, partnerships may help.

7. Strengthening Media Education in Schools and Universities: Incorporating the media literacy, critical reasoning, and digital ethics in the educational curricula will equip younger generations in more responsible ways in coping with complex digital environments.

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