

Exploring Civic Participation Through Social Media: A Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT:

Movements like #Arab Spring, #Black First, #Me Too and #Nirbhaya march have left prominent marks on the way social media can facilitate communication interactions among people of the country. It created a platform of connection, expression, and empowerment, enabling individuals to share their voices, build communities, and drive social change. It has become an essential tool for connection and learning, yet its potential to shape legal awareness and foster civic engagement among students, remains under-explored, particularly in educational contexts. This study examines how Mumbai students, who have always been pinned on the commercial forefront and with little whereabouts on the socio-political landscape, engage with the Romeo and Juliet law—a recent and controversial legal issue—through social media.

Utilizing the Framing Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the research explores how social media frames legal issues and influences students' attitudes and engagement. Uses and Gratifications Theory helps to understand learners' motivations for interacting with legal content, while the Civic Engagement Framework assesses the impact on their civic participation.

By analyzing social media posts and comments from Mumbai students between August and December 2023 and conducting interviews, the study provides insights into how social media can be leveraged to enhance legal literacy and civic awareness. The findings reveal that social media not only facilitates expression and discussion of legal issues but promotes deeper engagement and understanding. This research underscores the potential of social media as a tool for educational innovation and civic education.

Keywords: Social Media, Romeo Juliet, Legal Awareness, Teenagers and Social Change.

1 Introduction

"My heart beats faster than a hummingbird's wings when you're around." We are certain that all of us have felt this heart-warming butterfly inducing feeling in our adolescence for a person that we really liked, and we often fantasized about holding its hand, kissing their cheeks and other forms of physical love. Soon, this infatuation brings two lovers into a relationship that has turned out to be a new normal or status quo for teenagers between the age of 14-17 years. According to National Family Health survey 2019-2021, 10% of females have sex before age 15 and 39% before age 18 while for males it stands to be 1% who had sex before age 15, and 6% before age 18. This gap when foreseen from the lens of legal framework in India, has led these innocent physical relationships ending up to tragic statutory rapes generally, for boys in the Indian society.

When two minors engage in consensual sexual relationship, in a paradox, they both stand as victims and perpetrators of each other, although ground level reality results in boys being overwhelmingly treated as offenders and girls as victims. The consent of a minor is held immaterial by POCSO Act. Boys are punished for engaging in sexual intercourse with minor girls by calling it statutory rape although these activities are broadly consensual. Such rise in fake cases (refer to fig 1) had obliged the Supreme Court to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on 19th August 2023 inviting public opinions for implementation of Romeo and Juliet Law to decriminalize teen sex.

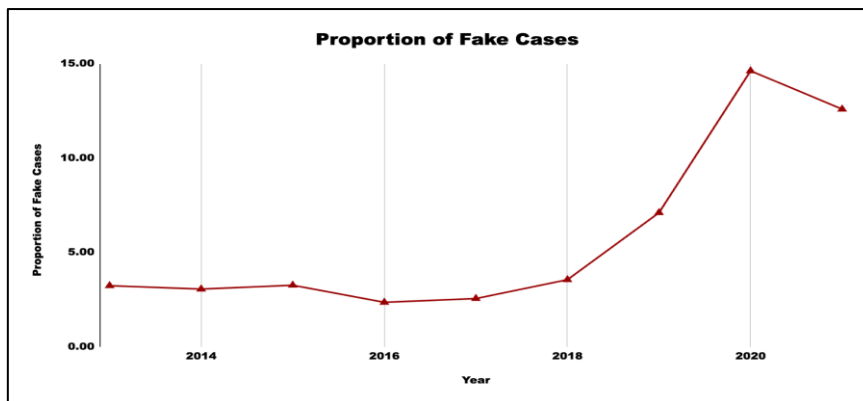


Fig 1. Trend chart displaying the rise in proportion of fake cases registered under

POSCO Act, data sourced from NCRB Annual Crime Reports 2014-2021.

The PIL sought in the above case engulfs various perceptions, belief, societal pressures and cultural norms often leading towards its ignorance. The researchers of the present study being educators themselves have experienced this huge gap in open discussions with teenagers in context of the social issues related to sex, further the above subject being culturally sensitive talk shows, panel discussions or informal discussions with family have remained sleek and so is the awareness level amongst the teenagers in the educational framework. Deeping into the seriousness of the content, it was believed social media when used in educational context for creating legal awareness amongst teenagers will act as a new battlefield to express one's thoughts and expressions.

As there has been prominent increase in the average time spent by teenagers on social media platforms like Instagram and Tik Tok (* Tik Tok is now banned in India) this study using Instagram posts examines how Mumbai students, who have always been pinned on the commercial forefront and with little whereabouts on the socio-political landscape, engage with the Romeo and Juliet law—a recent and controversial legal issue—through social media, focusing on its implications for educational technology.

2 Research Questions

How can educational institutions leverage the use of social media to foster critical thinking and civic engagement and legal awareness amongst learners?

3 Materials and Methods

The study uses a triangulation of theoretical framework to articulate Instagram posts and voicing teenagers' reactions and opinions through mixed research method. It intersects a robust methodology by Utilizing the Framing Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior to explore how social media frames legal issues and influences students' attitudes and engagement. It also incorporates Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand teenagers' motivations for interacting with legal content, while the Civic Engagement Framework to assesses the impact on their civic participation.

The study is an attempt to answer its research questions based on single case i.e Romeo Juliet Law in India. This case study was selected as most of the teenagers have either experienced or can relate oneself to this legal content and secondly PIL was filed by Supreme Court wherein voices of teenagers the future citizens will be excluded as their civic engagement is considerably low. The methodology blends itself exploratory inquiries within the qualitative paradigm. The focus of study lies in unveiling how social media can encourage awareness on legal content and shape teenagers' perceptions or provoke discussions and actions. With this intent following triangulation was carried upon.

- Teenagers (Users and Gratification Theory): To enhance the gravity of the study, it thrives on Uses and Gratification theory framework, a communication theory that focuses on understanding why people use media and what they get out of it. It shifts the focus from the media itself to the audience, viewing them as active consumers rather than passive recipients. Thus, the study conducted surveys and interviews of the teenagers who were given a brief overview of the law in form of social media channels being shared and involving them in the study. The researchers using purposive sample conducting a survey and interviews to understand the perspectives of the teenagers in the age group of 15- 17 years with a sample size of 30 teenagers. Further these teenagers are used as sample to map out civic engagement practices that have the potential to transfer to other shared writing environments and social media tools.
- Social Media Posts: In tune to research conducted by Tanushree Basuroy, (Media Analyst, Statista India 2023) an average time a teen i.e. in age group of 13 years to 17 years spends on social media is more than one hour daily with Instagram topping the popularity charts. Therefore, the study utilizes this platform to explore its research questions. In the present research intersects framing theory which examines how media shapes perceptions and interpretations of events, used episodic framing in the context of social media discussions about the Romeo and Juliet law in India (Frame of the study). Instagram posts with # Romeo Juliet law, # Teenage love # Supreme Court # Love relationships were evaluated in detail. Using Content analysis it evaluated the posts between August 2023- December 2023 as PIL was filed on 19th August 2023 drawing the attention of citizens of the country. Considering the life span of the Instagram that tends to be 48 hours, the selected period suffices the requirement.
- Theoretical Framework and Literature Review: To ensure a holistic framework to study theoretical framework of selected theories along with its operational definitions are provided below:

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) : This theory posits that individuals' intentions to perform a behavior are influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Attitudes: How students' attitudes towards the Romeo and Juliet law are shaped by social media.

Subjective Norms: How students perceive societal norms and legal issues based on their social media interactions.

Perceived Behavioral Control: How students feel about their ability to influence or engage in discussions about the law.

Framing Theory: Framing theory examines how media and other sources present and interpret information, which affects how people perceive and understand issues.

Framing of Legal Issues: How social media frames the Romeo and Juliet law and influences students' perceptions and opinions.

Controversial Issues: Analysis of how controversial aspects of the law are highlighted or downplayed on social media.

Uses and Gratifications Theory This theory focuses on how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs and gratifications.

Information Seeking: How Mumbai students use social media to gain information about the Romeo and Juliet law.
 Social Interaction: How social media serves as a platform for students to discuss and engage with legal issues.

Civic Engagement Framework: This framework looks at how various factors contribute to individuals' participation in civic activities and discussions.

Civic Discourse: How social media enables Mumbai students to participate in discussions about legal issues and civic matters?

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Social Media Analysis

The content analysis of the selected media posts was carried upon to chart the legal content and its interactions. Along with coding and counting, the context and legal terms it used were studied. The comments to various selected media posts is analyzed to draw the broad themes.

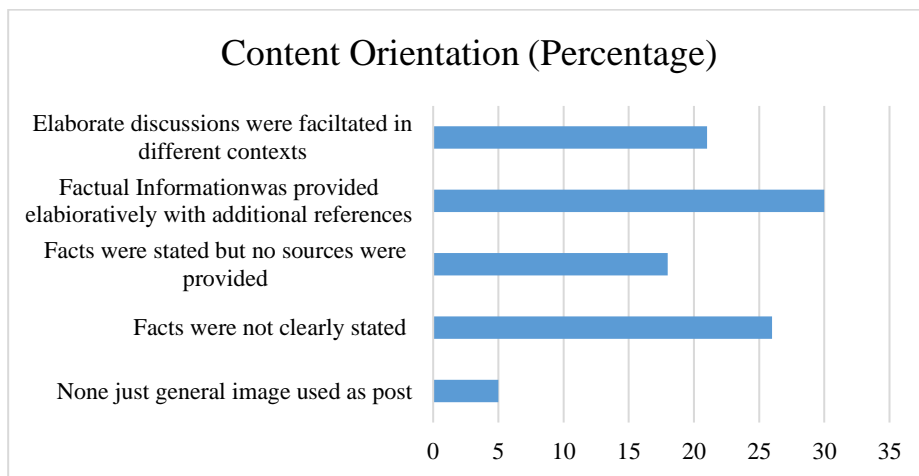


Fig 2: Verbosity Analysis of the social posts pertaining to R& J law on Instagram.

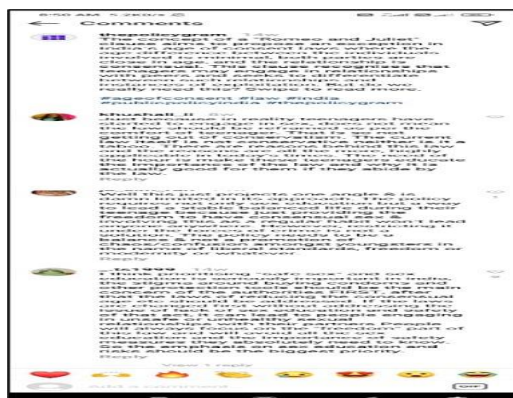


Image 1: Artifacts of the study comment section.

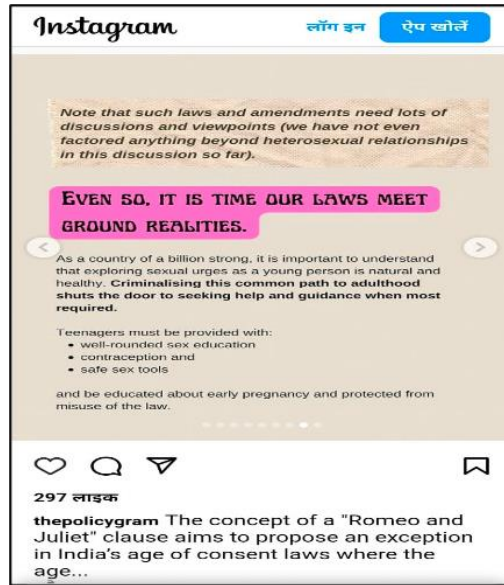


Image 2: Artifacts of the study post section

The average comments range from 0-23 per posts while the posts from i.e. media channel had maximum likes of 1217 followed by posts of law counsel while other had fewer than 100 likes which directs that authenticity in terms of legal content matters the most. The followers crafted narratives that either support the need for nuanced legal reforms to protect consensual teenage relationships or emphasize the potential risks of exploitation and abuse. These posts, framed through various lenses, influence public sentiment and potentially impact the legislative process, reflecting the power of framing in shaping societal attitudes and policy directions.

The two broad themes drawn were in two opposite directions where in set of commentators believe it's a cultural taboo and would normalize sex amongst teenagers while others strongly feel it should be implemented and sex education should be part of curriculum mandatorily rather an optional subject that still finds no place in Indian education ecosystem.

Further the analysis reveals that there were fewer than 100 posts in this arena, that put forth either the awareness is low, following is meagre or the appropriate hashtags # are not used to gain attention of the users. However, the verbosity of content reveals that need for factual information and posts that facilitate discussions are looked upon thereby indicating the potential to use well-crafted social media posts for legal awareness and civic engagement.

4.2 Human Intervention and Impact on Teenagers

The researcher with its group of selected participants before experimenting of using social media for legal awareness carried upon an informal discussion on their awareness and whereabouts about Romeo Juliet law. It revealed that only 5% of the teenagers had heard about it but the context was unknown and assumed it to be romantic story or betrayal. The visual representation is as below:

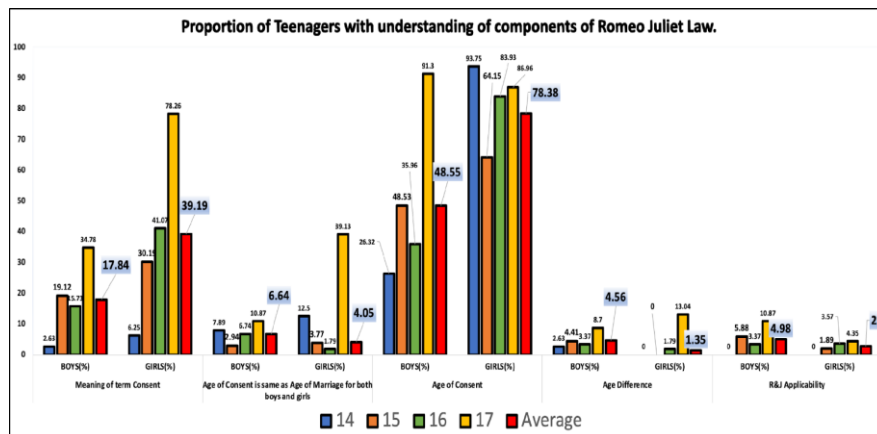


Fig 3: Proportion of teenagers with understanding of ley components on R&J law

Prior to intervention.

The above data reveals that knowledge with regards to legal terminologies of Romeo Juliet law is significantly low (P-value being 0.001). Thus, instead of opting for creating legal awareness in traditional teaching learning ecosystem choose to experiment with the usage of Social media as tool to leverage educational awareness.

In this context the researcher asked them to look for information on Romeo Juliet Law. The first preference was using a search engine but the content being too lengthy failed to keep learners glued however when they experimented with Instagram and Twitter it initiated a sense probing deeper. The teens being well versed with social media handling-initiated discussions and revealed their personal experiences and takes on the law. The visual analysis is represented diagrammatically in tune to Theory of Planned behavior:

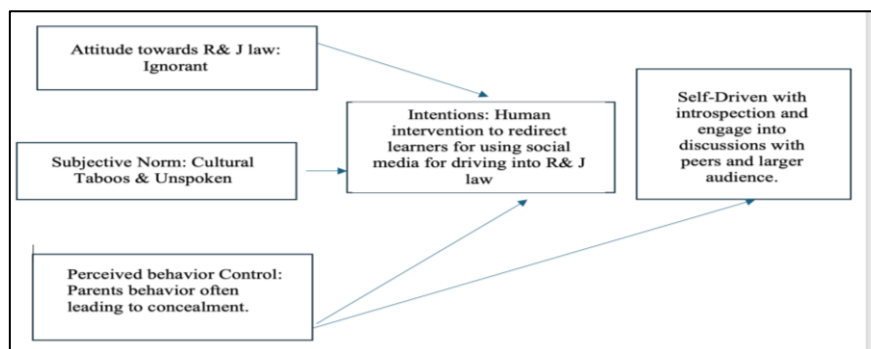


Fig 4: Application of Theory of Planned behavior in the research context

Teenagers in the initial context were reluctant to put across their views on topic with little or misleading information about Romeo & Juliet Law. Moreover, the issue being culturally sensitive in the Indian families, the exchange of dialogues on love relationships and sex is negligible and half known. Further even in school though biology forms an indispensable part of the curriculum, sex education even after implementation of NEP 2020 finds no or little place. Therefore, an informal way of learning that is accessible and popular is required.

The research study therefore facilitated the participation of the learners by redirecting them to social media posts and carried upon focused group discussions. The narratives brought forward the various incidences that was witnessed in light sexual teenage relationships turning into statutory rapes and boy though juvenile was subject to mental harassment and torture. These sharing of experiences led them probe into the legalities of Romeo Juliet law in India, its existence across the globe. Thus, the group that initially was reluctant to even speak on this topic now dwelled into creating awareness amongst the peers. They infact now browsed the search engine to know more about it, creating of Instagram posts but anonymously as threat of parents and societal pressures remained dominant.

In other words, social media posts led them to introspect and participate in the discussions and place their view point i.e. civic discourse. The key points of discussions put forth by them are:

- **Age Difference:** The law typically applies to individuals who are close in age, usually within a specified number of years. The age difference varies by various countries, but accepted age difference is 4 years only. Age of Consent: The age of consent to be revised at 16 years for both boys and girls.
- **Non-exploitative Relationship:** The relationship should not involve any power imbalances or manipulative behavior.
- **Withdrawal of cases by complainant need to be penalized.**
- **The accused must be first time offender under similar laws, in case repeated offense trial under this law shouldn't be permitted.**

Thus, learners for whom knowledge and motivation to engage on legal content was low, were now capable and motivated to engage themselves in discussions and suggestions.



Image3: Artifact illustrating Teenagers involving in engagement and peer discussion. (Passive to Active inhibitors)

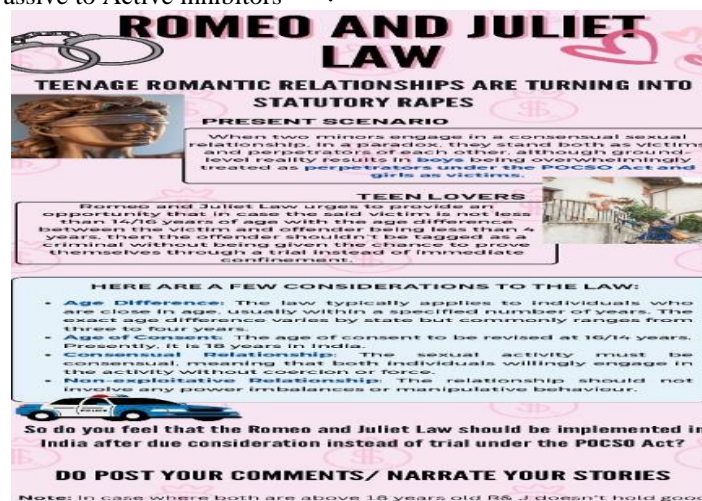


Image4: Artifact Posts created by Teenagers illustrating engagement

5 Conclusion

India being the largest democracy and highest youth population this year witnesses a registration of only 39% [Electoral Summary Report 2024] of its young population for casting vote despite campaigns running across the country. This lays an indication of low civic engagement of Generation Z especially in urban areas. The present experiment paves way for the potentialities of harnessing this social media platform for civic engagement amongst the generation Z and Alpha paving way for good democracy. The experiment significantly demonstrated a transformation in the behavior of the teenagers from being passive in terms of legal discussions to active inhibitors. However similar engagements need to be probed into to gain deeper insights and hold it pervasive as well the scope of misinformation and selection of posts need intervention calling for improved policies on usage of platform. In the educational contexts the social media can be used as prompt on various forums to engage learners into discussions and widening one's horizon sou moto.

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