

Digital Vigilantism in Sexual Violence Cases: Implications for Rule of Law and State Legitimacy

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Abstract

The rise of digital technologies has significantly transformed the dynamics of sexual violence cases, particularly through the emergence of digital vigilantism as a form of public-driven justice. This study aims to analyze how digital vigilantism influences the rule of law and state legitimacy. Employing a normative juridical approach with a qualitative design, this research utilizes secondary data derived from scholarly literature, legal documents, and comparative case studies across multiple jurisdictions. Data were collected through a systematic literature review and analyzed using doctrinal and thematic analysis to identify patterns, tensions, and implications of digital vigilantism practices. The findings reveal that digital vigilantism functions as a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, it accelerates accountability, amplifies victims' voices, and pressures law enforcement to act more responsively. On the other hand, it undermines fundamental legal principles such as due process, presumption of innocence, and legal certainty, while fostering parallel systems of "trial by social media." Furthermore, the widespread reliance on digital vigilantism reflects a broader crisis of trust in formal legal institutions, thereby weakening state legitimacy. In conclusion, digital vigilantism both challenges and reinforces the authority of the state. Without balanced regulatory frameworks and institutional reforms, its expansion risks eroding the rule of law while simultaneously emerging as a response to institutional deficiencies in addressing sexual violence.

Keywords: Digital Vigilantism, Sexual Violence, Rule Of Law, State Legitimacy, Cyber Justice

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of sexual violence, not only in terms of how such violence is perpetrated but also in how it is exposed, contested, and adjudicated within the public sphere. The proliferation of social media platforms has enabled the emergence of new forms of collective action, including what is increasingly referred to as *digital vigilantism*. This phenomenon involves ordinary citizens leveraging digital tools to identify, expose, and punish alleged perpetrators outside formal legal frameworks. In cases of sexual violence, digital vigilantism has gained particular prominence, often framed as a form of moral intervention or community-driven justice in response to perceived institutional failure. While these practices may amplify victims' voices and accelerate public awareness, they simultaneously challenge foundational legal principles such as due process, presumption of innocence, and the authority of the state as the sole arbiter of justice. Consequently, digital vigilantism occupies a complex and contested space at the intersection of technological empowerment, social justice advocacy, and the rule of law.



Empirically, the escalation of digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases can be observed across diverse socio-legal contexts. In the United Kingdom, for instance, cyber vigilante groups such as “paedophile hunters” have actively targeted suspected child sex offenders through tactics including doxing, entrapment, and public shaming. These actions are often justified as forms of community policing aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, particularly children, yet they raise serious concerns regarding procedural fairness and evidentiary integrity (Tippett, 2022). Similarly, in China, digital feminist movements have mobilized platforms such as Douban and Weibo to expose cases of sexual harassment, notably in the Shi Hang case, where collective testimony and online pressure played a decisive role in demanding accountability. While such practices have empowered survivors and challenged entrenched gender norms, they have also generated anxieties related to misinformation, reputational harm, and the absence of formal adjudication mechanisms (Wang & Whyke, 2025). In Pakistan, high-profile cases such as the “Justice for Zainab” campaign and the Noor Mukadam murder case illustrate how viral social media mobilization can influence legal processes by accelerating arrests and prompting more punitive responses from the state (Imran & Kazmi, 2025).

These developments occur within a broader context of digitally mediated sexual violence, which has become increasingly pervasive across both developed and developing countries. Technology-facilitated sexual violence and abuse (TFSVA) encompasses a wide range of harmful practices, including image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, online harassment, and non-consensual dissemination of intimate content. Such forms of violence disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where legal protections and digital literacy may be limited (Sheikh & Rogers, 2023; Benítez-Hidalgo et al., 2024). Furthermore, among adolescents, cyber violence is often deeply intertwined with offline sexual violence, creating compounded psychological, social, and developmental harms. Practices such as non-consensual image sharing and sextortion not only violate individual autonomy but also contribute to long-term trauma and stigmatization (Bouchalta et al., 2026; Huber, 2022; Soroichinski & Borukhov, 2024). The normalization of such behaviors within digital environments has intensified public outrage and heightened demands for immediate accountability, thereby creating fertile ground for the rise of digital vigilantism.

In this context, digital vigilantism emerges as both a symptom and a response to systemic deficiencies in formal justice systems. In many jurisdictions, including Indonesia, public dissatisfaction with the handling of sexual violence cases has led to increased reliance on social media as an alternative forum for justice. Online platforms function as spaces for “public trials,” where allegations are disseminated, evidence is crowdsourced, and judgments are rendered by the collective audience. Such practices often bypass fundamental legal safeguards, including the presumption of innocence, the right to a fair trial, and the requirement of evidentiary verification (Ayu, 2025; Wahid et al., 2025). While proponents argue that digital vigilantism serves as a necessary corrective to institutional inertia and bias, critics contend that it undermines legal certainty and exposes individuals to arbitrary and potentially irreversible harm. The tension between public justice and the rule of law is thus a central dilemma in contemporary discussions of digital governance and criminal justice.

Moreover, public support for digital vigilantism is frequently rooted in a broader crisis of trust in legal institutions. When formal justice systems are perceived as ineffective,

corrupt, or insensitive to victims—particularly in cases of sexual violence—citizens may feel compelled to take matters into their own hands. Doxing and online exposure are often rationalized as tools of protection and deterrence, despite their potential to violate fundamental human rights, including privacy and due process (Tippett, 2022; Ireland, 2023). In Pakistan, for example, viral justice campaigns not only demand accountability but also legitimize exceptional state measures, such as expanded surveillance and restrictive cyber laws. This dynamic creates a paradox in which digital vigilantism simultaneously challenges and reinforces state power, blurring the boundaries between protection and repression (Imran & Kazmi, 2025). Such complexities highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how digital practices reshape the relationship between citizens and the state.

The implications of digital vigilantism for state legitimacy and legal authority are profound. The proliferation of vigilante practices is often interpreted as an indicator of institutional failure, signaling declining public confidence in the capacity of the state to deliver justice. When citizens resort to self-administered forms of punishment, it reflects not only dissatisfaction with legal outcomes but also a broader erosion of the state's normative authority. As noted by Kulakova and Volkova (2022), the rise of vigilante movements is closely linked to perceptions of injustice and inefficiency within formal systems, prompting individuals to adopt alternative modes of justice-seeking. This trend is further corroborated by studies demonstrating that citizens are more likely to engage in or support vigilantism when they perceive legal institutions as unresponsive or biased (Kulakova & Volkova, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the growing influence of digital vigilantism has begun to shape law enforcement priorities and practices. Viral cases of sexual violence often attract intense public scrutiny, compelling authorities to act swiftly in response to online pressure. While such responsiveness may enhance short-term accountability, it also risks undermining core legal principles, including equality before the law and procedural fairness. Decisions driven by public opinion rather than legal standards can lead to inconsistent and potentially unjust outcomes, thereby eroding the integrity of the legal system (Ayu, 2025; Wahid et al., 2025; Muhammad et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is a growing concern that states may seek to institutionalize elements of digital vigilantism by encouraging citizen reporting and online surveillance, effectively co-opting public participation as a tool of governance. Such practices can blur the line between civic engagement and state control, raising questions about accountability, transparency, and the protection of civil liberties (Abhishek, 2022; MacDonald, 2025).

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to digital vigilantism and technology-facilitated sexual violence, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the intersection between these phenomena and their implications for the rule of law and state legitimacy. Existing studies tend to focus either on the sociological dimensions of vigilantism, the technological aspects of online abuse, or the legal challenges posed by digital evidence. However, few studies adopt an integrative approach that examines how digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases simultaneously affects legal norms, institutional authority, and public perceptions of justice. Moreover, comparative analyses across different jurisdictions are still limited, particularly in relation to how cultural, political, and legal contexts shape the dynamics of digital vigilantism. This gap is especially pronounced

in the Global South, including Indonesia, where rapid digitalization intersects with evolving legal frameworks and persistent challenges in addressing sexual violence.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive and interdisciplinary examination of digital vigilantism within the specific context of sexual violence, with a particular focus on its implications for the rule of law and state legitimacy. By synthesizing insights from legal studies, criminology, and digital sociology, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of online behavior to critically analyze the normative and institutional consequences of digital vigilantism. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a more nuanced theoretical framework for understanding the evolving relationship between digital technologies, public justice, and state authority in contemporary societies.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the primary objective of this study is to analyze how digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases influences the principles of the rule of law and the legitimacy of the state, particularly within the context of digitally mediated justice practices. This objective is pursued by examining empirical cases, legal frameworks, and theoretical perspectives to identify the opportunities and risks associated with digital vigilantism, as well as to propose normative and policy-oriented recommendations for balancing public demands for justice with the preservation of fundamental legal principles.

2. Methods

This study employs a **normative juridical approach** integrated with a qualitative analytical design to examine the implications of digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases on the rule of law and state legitimacy. The research primarily relies on **secondary data sources**, consisting of legal materials and scholarly literature. These include primary legal sources such as statutory regulations related to criminal law, cyber law, and sexual violence protection, as well as secondary sources in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy reports discussing digital vigilantism, technology-facilitated sexual violence, and justice systems. Data collection is conducted through a **systematic literature review**, where relevant publications are identified, classified, and critically selected based on their relevance, credibility, and recency. In addition, **comparative case documentation** is employed to analyze selected cases from different jurisdictions (e.g., the United Kingdom, China, Pakistan, and Indonesia) to capture variations in legal responses and socio-digital dynamics. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how digital vigilantism manifests across contexts and how it interacts with formal legal institutions.

The data analysis technique adopts a **qualitative doctrinal and thematic analysis**. Doctrinal analysis is used to interpret legal principles such as due process of law, presumption of innocence, and legal certainty, and to assess how these principles are challenged or transformed by digital vigilantism practices. Meanwhile, thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns, narratives, and tensions emerging from the literature and case studies, particularly regarding public perceptions of justice, institutional trust, and state authority. The analysis follows a structured process of data reduction, categorization, and interpretation, allowing the researcher to synthesize findings into coherent arguments. Furthermore, a **comparative analytical framework** is utilized to evaluate differences and similarities across jurisdictions, highlighting how socio-legal contexts influence the

relationship between digital vigilantism and the rule of law. Through this combined analytical strategy, the study aims to generate a critical and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon while providing theoretically grounded and policy-relevant insights.

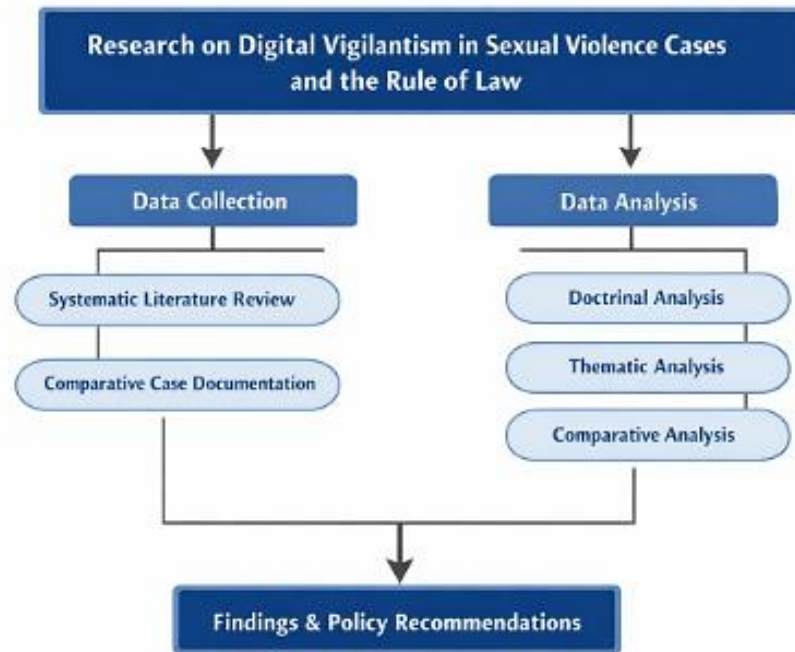


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the qualitative analysis of cross-country literature and case studies, this research identifies key patterns of *digital vigilantism* in sexual violence cases and examines their implications for the rule of law and state legitimacy. The findings are systematically organized to demonstrate the relationship between socio-legal contexts, forms of digital practices, their impact on legal processes, and their broader institutional consequences.

Table 1. Patterns of Digital Vigilantism in Sexual Violence Cases and Its Implications for the Rule of Law and State Legitimacy

No	Context / Country	Form of Digital Vigilantism	Impact on Legal Process	Implications for Rule of Law	Implications for State Legitimacy
1	United Kingdom	Paedophile hunters, doxing, public shaming	Accelerates exposure of suspects but risks evidentiary contamination	Undermines due process and presumption of innocence	Signals distrust in formal justice institutions
2	China	Digital feminist campaigns (e.g., Shi Hang case), online testimonies	Empowers victims and increases accountability pressure	Risks misinformation and absence of formal verification	Enhances participatory justice but challenges state control

3	Pakistan	Viral justice campaigns (e.g., Zainab, Noor Mukadam cases)	Speeds up arrests and legal response	Encourages exceptional legal measures and securitization	Strengthens state response but risks authoritarian tendencies
4	Indonesia	Social media trials, doxing, viral accusations	Influences law enforcement priorities through public pressure	Bypasses legal certainty and fair trial principles	Indicates erosion of trust and dependence on public opinion
5	Global (General)	Exposure of perpetrators, online naming and shaming	Increases awareness but creates parallel justice systems	Weakens procedural justice and legal neutrality	Reflects declining legitimacy and institutional inefficiency

The interpretation of the table demonstrates that digital vigilantism exhibits an inherently ambivalent character within contemporary legal systems. On the one hand, it functions as a catalyst for justice by accelerating responses to sexual violence cases and amplifying victims’ voices in the public sphere. On the other hand, it significantly threatens fundamental principles of the rule of law, including due process, the presumption of innocence, and legal certainty. Furthermore, the rise of “digital public trials” reflects a broader crisis of trust in formal legal institutions, where public opinion increasingly competes with state authority in determining justice outcomes. This dynamic ultimately affects state legitimacy, as the state is no longer perceived as the sole and authoritative source of justice. Therefore, a balanced regulatory and institutional approach is required to reconcile public participation with the preservation of fundamental legal principles.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *digital vigilantism* in sexual violence cases operates as a complex socio-legal phenomenon that simultaneously challenges and reinforces the principles of the rule of law and state legitimacy. In line with the research objective—to analyze how digital vigilantism influences the rule of law and state legitimacy—the discussion reveals that this phenomenon cannot be understood in binary terms as either purely beneficial or harmful. Instead, it represents a “double-edged sword” that reflects both the failures of formal legal systems and the transformative potential of digital public participation in justice processes.

At a fundamental level, the emergence of digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases is closely linked to widespread public dissatisfaction with the performance of state institutions, particularly in delivering timely and fair justice. Across jurisdictions, citizens increasingly turn to digital platforms to expose perpetrators, mobilize public opinion, and demand accountability when formal mechanisms are perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. Practices such as *naming and shaming*, doxing, and the viral dissemination of allegations have become common strategies in cases of sexual harassment and abuse. Empirical evidence from multiple

contexts—including the Shi Hang case in China, the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) in India, feminist *funa* practices in Chile, and “paedophile hunters” in the United Kingdom—demonstrates the global proliferation of such practices (Wang & Whyke, 2025; Tippett, 2022; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022; Larrain, 2023). These forms of digital vigilantism are often framed as necessary interventions to counter institutional inertia, gender bias, and systemic impunity in handling sexual violence cases.

In many instances, digital vigilantism has produced tangible and immediate impacts on legal processes. As illustrated in the case of Pakistan’s #Justice campaigns, viral social media mobilization has accelerated police investigations, prompted arrests, and increased pressure for harsher sentencing (Imran & Kazmi, 2025). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, “paedophile hunters” have collaborated—albeit controversially—with law enforcement by collecting and submitting evidence against suspected offenders (Tippett, 2022). In India, the LoSHA movement sparked widespread public debate about sexual harassment in academic institutions, compelling organizations to address allegations that had long been ignored (Subramanian & Sharma, 2022). These examples suggest that digital vigilantism can function as an informal accountability mechanism, particularly in contexts where formal institutions fail to adequately protect victims or respond to their claims. From this perspective, digital vigilantism may be interpreted as a form of *counter-power*, enabling marginalized voices to challenge entrenched structures of authority.

However, despite its potential to enhance visibility and responsiveness, digital vigilantism poses significant risks to the integrity of legal systems. One of the most critical concerns is its tendency to bypass fundamental principles of the rule of law, particularly due process and the presumption of innocence. In many cases, individuals accused of sexual violence are subjected to public condemnation and reputational damage before any formal investigation or adjudication takes place. This phenomenon has been described as the emergence of “trial by social media,” where public opinion effectively substitutes for judicial processes (Ayu, 2025). In Indonesia, for example, digital vigilantism has been shown to undermine key principles of criminal justice, including fairness, legal certainty, and procedural safeguards, resulting in forms of collective punishment driven by emotional and viral dynamics rather than legal reasoning (Ayu, 2025; Wahid et al., 2025).

The transformation of social media into a quasi-judicial arena further complicates the relationship between public justice and formal legal institutions. Across different contexts, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Weibo have become spaces where evidence is presented, narratives are constructed, and judgments are rendered in real time. This dynamic not only challenges the authority of courts but also creates parallel systems of justice that operate outside institutional oversight. Studies indicate that such practices can erode the legitimacy of legal institutions by fostering the perception that formal processes are either unnecessary or inferior to collective digital action (Kulakova & Volkova, 2022; Wang & Whyke, 2025). Moreover, the absence of procedural safeguards in digital environments increases the risk of misinformation, false accusations, and disproportionate punishment, thereby undermining the principles of legal neutrality and proportionality (Larrain, 2023; Tippett, 2022).

The implications of digital vigilantism for the rule of law are therefore deeply ambivalent. On one hand, it exposes systemic weaknesses in legal systems, particularly in addressing gender-based violence, and pressures authorities to act more decisively. On the

other hand, it risks normalizing extrajudicial practices that compromise the very foundations of legal order. This tension is particularly evident in contexts where state institutions appear to rely on digital pressure as a trigger for action. As noted in previous studies, the increasing responsiveness of law enforcement to viral cases may create a precedent in which legal action is contingent upon public visibility rather than objective legal criteria (Ayu, 2025; Kulakova & Volkova, 2022; Imran & Kazmi, 2025). Such a shift not only undermines the consistency and predictability of legal processes but also raises concerns about inequality, as cases that fail to gain public attention may be neglected.

Beyond its impact on legal principles, digital vigilantism has profound implications for state legitimacy. The rise of vigilante practices is widely interpreted as a symptom of declining public trust in state institutions. When citizens feel compelled to seek justice outside formal channels, it indicates a perceived failure of the state to fulfill its fundamental obligation to protect rights and enforce the law. Empirical studies across multiple countries, including Indonesia, Russia, and Pakistan, suggest that the proliferation of digital vigilantism is closely associated with perceptions of institutional inefficiency, corruption, and bias (Kulakova & Volkova, 2022; Imran & Kazmi, 2025; Ayu, 2025). In this sense, digital vigilantism can be seen as both a consequence and a driver of legitimacy crises, creating a feedback loop in which declining trust leads to increased reliance on informal justice mechanisms, which in turn further undermines institutional authority.

In some cases, the impact of digital vigilantism on state legitimacy extends beyond perceptions to affect the functional capacity of governance. For example, the widespread use of online campaigns and vigilante practices in Pakistan and Russia has been linked to concerns about “loss of governability,” where the state’s ability to maintain order and enforce laws is weakened by competing sources of authority (Kulakova & Volkova, 2022; Imran & Kazmi, 2025). This phenomenon is particularly problematic in the context of sexual violence, where the need for sensitive, evidence-based, and victim-centered approaches may be compromised by the reactive and often punitive nature of digital activism.

At the same time, state responses to digital vigilantism can further complicate issues of legitimacy. In an effort to regain control over digital spaces, some governments have adopted securitization strategies, including increased surveillance, content regulation, and the enactment of restrictive cyber laws. While such measures are often justified as necessary to prevent misinformation and protect public order, they may also be perceived as attempts to suppress dissent and control public discourse. In China and Pakistan, for instance, the regulation of digital platforms has raised concerns about censorship and the erosion of freedom of expression, particularly when such measures appear to prioritize state authority over victims’ rights (Huang, 2021; Imran & Kazmi, 2025). This creates a paradox in which efforts to restore legal order may inadvertently deepen public distrust, thereby exacerbating the very legitimacy crisis they seek to address.

Another critical dimension of this discussion relates to the intersection of digital vigilantism with gender justice and feminist activism. Practices such as feminist *funa*, LoSHA, and the Shi Hang case illustrate how digital platforms can serve as powerful tools for amplifying survivors’ voices and challenging patriarchal norms that perpetuate sexual violence. These movements have been instrumental in breaking the silence surrounding sexual harassment and in holding powerful individuals accountable in ways that formal institutions have often failed to do (Wang & Whyke, 2025; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022; Larrain, 2023).

From this perspective, digital vigilantism can be seen as a form of *transformative justice*, seeking not only to punish perpetrators but also to reshape social norms and power relations.

However, the reliance on digital vigilantism as a primary mechanism for achieving gender justice raises important ethical and practical concerns. Critics argue that such practices may reproduce forms of injustice by exposing individuals to disproportionate punishment, including permanent reputational damage and social exclusion, without the safeguards of due process. Moreover, the focus on individual accountability through public shaming may obscure the structural and systemic dimensions of sexual violence, such as gender inequality, institutional bias, and cultural norms (Subramanian & Sharma, 2022; Larrain, 2023). In this regard, digital vigilantism risks reinforcing a punitive approach to justice that aligns with carceral logics rather than promoting holistic and restorative solutions.

Scholars advocating for *transformative justice* emphasize the need to balance the empowering aspects of digital activism with the preservation of legal principles and human rights. Rather than replacing formal legal processes, digital engagement should be integrated into a broader framework that enhances accountability while ensuring fairness and proportionality. This approach involves recognizing the legitimacy of victims' demands for justice and the role of digital platforms in facilitating collective action, while also addressing the risks associated with unregulated and emotionally driven forms of punishment (Rackley et al., 2021; Subramanian & Sharma, 2022). In practical terms, this may require the development of hybrid models that combine digital reporting mechanisms with institutional oversight, as well as reforms aimed at improving the responsiveness and credibility of formal justice systems.

In conclusion, the discussion underscores that digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases is a multifaceted phenomenon with significant implications for both the rule of law and state legitimacy. While it can serve as a powerful tool for exposing wrongdoing and mobilizing public support, it also poses serious challenges to legal principles and institutional authority. The findings suggest that the rise of digital vigilantism is not merely a technological development but a reflection of deeper structural issues within legal systems and governance. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced and context-sensitive approach that strengthens formal institutions, protects fundamental rights, and harnesses the positive potential of digital participation without undermining the rule of law.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that digital vigilantism in sexual violence cases exerts a paradoxical influence on both the rule of law and state legitimacy. On the one hand, it functions as an alternative mechanism of accountability that amplifies victims' voices, accelerates legal responses, and exposes institutional shortcomings in addressing sexual violence. On the other hand, it fundamentally challenges core legal principles such as due process, the presumption of innocence, and legal certainty by fostering "trial by social media" and extra-judicial forms of punishment. This duality reflects a broader crisis of trust in formal legal institutions, where the rise of digital vigilantism signals declining state legitimacy while simultaneously pressuring the state to act more responsively. Ultimately, the study concludes that without effective institutional reform and balanced regulatory frameworks, digital vigilantism risks undermining the authority of the state and eroding the integrity of the legal system, even as it seeks to advance justice for victims.

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