

Viral Culture as a Court of Public Opinion: A Socio-Technical Analysis of Digital Vigilantism and Institutional Pressures

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ABSTRACT

The rise of viral culture on social media has fundamentally reshaped the formation of public opinion, creating what can be conceptualized as a “court of public opinion” in which individuals and institutions are collectively judged outside formal legal frameworks. This study aims to analyze how viral culture constructs public judgment through the interaction of algorithmic systems, emotional engagement, and participatory digital behavior. This research employs a qualitative approach using a systematic literature review (SLR) of peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026. Data were analyzed through thematic synthesis focusing on algorithmic amplification, emotional contagion, user participation, and institutional responses to viral events. The findings reveal that viral culture operates through interconnected mechanisms in which algorithmic visibility determines content exposure, emotional reactions accelerate diffusion, and participatory audiences reinforce collective moral evaluation. These processes produce significant consequences such as digital vigilantism, public shaming, cancel culture, and institutional pressure, where legal and political systems often respond reactively to viral public opinion. The study concludes that viral culture functions as a socio-technical judicial system that transforms social media into an informal court of public opinion, where visibility and emotional intensity often outweigh procedural justice. This phenomenon highlights the growing tension between digital publics and formal institutions in contemporary society.

Keyword : Viral Culture, Public Opinion, Social Media, Digital Vigilantism, Algorithmic Governance



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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which public opinion is formed, circulated, and legitimized within contemporary society. In the last decade, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have enabled unprecedented speed and scale of information dissemination, giving rise to “viral culture,” where content spreads rapidly through algorithmic amplification and user engagement dynamics. Viral culture is characterized by the circulation of emotionally charged and socially salient content across networked publics, where visibility and engagement determine informational relevance. In this context, public opinion is increasingly shaped by platform algorithms rather than traditional institutional gatekeepers such as media organizations or governmental institutions. This shift has contributed to the emergence of a “court of public opinion,” where individuals and institutions are collectively evaluated outside formal legal frameworks.

Recent studies show that social media platforms function as powerful infrastructures for shaping public discourse through participatory interaction and algorithmic curation. Viral exposure significantly influences opinion dynamics in online networks, often increasing polarization and accelerating opinion formation. Similarly, studies on hate speech and virality show that algorithmic amplification disproportionately increases the visibility of emotionally charged and morally framed content.

One of the most prominent consequences of viral culture is the rise of “trial by social media,” where individuals or institutions are publicly judged through collective online discourse before formal legal processes occur. This phenomenon is closely linked to online shaming, cancel culture, and digital vigilantism. Moral emotions such as outrage and indignation play a central role in triggering online public shaming, where users act as informal moral regulators in digital environments.

The rise of digital vigilantism is also associated with institutional distrust and perceived failures of formal justice systems. In many cases, viral exposure becomes a prerequisite for institutional response, reinforcing the idea that “visibility equals justice” in digital society. This condition reflects the growing dependence of legal and political institutions on social media-driven public pressure. Furthermore, algorithmic systems exert structural pressure on institutional decision-making by prioritizing engagement-driven visibility over factual accuracy or procedural verification. As a result, public judgment is increasingly shaped by emotional resonance and algorithmic ranking rather than deliberative rationality.

Despite growing attention to viral culture, cancel culture, and digital vigilantism, existing literature remains fragmented across communication studies, computational modeling, and legal sociology. While some studies focus on opinion dynamics, others examine content virality and misinformation diffusion, and others address moral panic and online shaming. However, there remains a critical gap in providing an integrated framework that explains how algorithmic amplification, emotional contagion, and participatory engagement collectively produce structured forms of collective judgment resembling a “digital court”.

The novelty of this research lies in conceptualizing viral culture as a socio-technical system of judgment, where algorithmic visibility, emotional engagement, and participatory behavior converge to produce quasi-judicial outcomes in digital environments. Unlike previous studies that treat viral content as either communication artifacts or behavioral outcomes, this study frames viral culture as an emergent institutional structure that organizes public judgment in the digital age. To contextualize this shift, this study introduces an integrated framework operating across three key variables: (i) institutional strength, (ii) power asymmetry, and (iii) platform architecture. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how viral culture constructs the “court of public opinion” through the interaction of social media dynamics, algorithmic systems, and collective moral evaluation, reshaping the boundaries between legality, morality, and public accountability.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a sociological-interpretive approach to examine the phenomenon of viral culture as a form of “court of public opinion” in digital society. The study is grounded in media sociology and digital communication theory, focusing on how social media platforms construct collective judgment through the interaction of algorithmic systems, user participation, and emotional discourse. Rather than treating viral content as isolated events, this research conceptualizes it as a social process that transforms individual expressions into collective moral evaluation within networked publics.

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of peer-reviewed academic journals published between 2021 and 2026. To ensure methodological rigor and replicability, a rigorous three-stage selection process was implemented:

- **Identification:** Database searches were conducted on Google Scholar, SAGE, Wiley, and arXiv using predefined keywords including "viral culture", "digital vigilantism", "algorithmic governance", and "no viral no justice".

- **Screening:** Articles were filtered based on strict inclusion criteria: relevance to viral public opinion, publication recency (2021–2026), and publication in indexed academic journals or peer-reviewed scholarly outlets.
- **Inclusion:** This filtering process resulted in a finalized corpus of twenty-five core studies—including seminal works such as Brady et al. (2023), Avalor et al. (2024), Muhammad et al. (2025), and Wang & Whyke (2025)—which provided sufficient depth for theoretical triangulation.

Data extraction concentrated on harvesting core concepts: virality mechanisms, emotional amplification, algorithmic visibility, and social judgment practices. The data analysis follows an interactive model consisting of data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretive synthesis. In the data reduction stage, irrelevant or redundant findings were eliminated while retaining core sociological themes. In the thematic analysis stage, patterns were categorized into four main analytical dimensions: (1) algorithmic amplification and visibility control, (2) emotional and moral framing of viral content, (3) participatory dynamics of social media users, and (4) institutional responses to viral public pressure. Finally, in the interpretive synthesis stage, these themes were integrated into a coherent sociological explanation of how viral culture functions as an informal judicial mechanism in digital society.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Thematic Mapping of the Corpus

Thematic coding of the twenty-five-source corpus produced five interlocking themes, summarized in Table 1: virality and moral panic, digital vigilantism, erosion of judicial independence, algorithmic manipulation of public opinion, and gendered power dynamics. These themes represent overlapping dimensions of a single sociological phenomenon viewed through different disciplinary lenses, ranging from social psychology to comparative law to computational communication science. Their co-occurrence suggests that trial by social media is a structural feature of contemporary networked society.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Results of the Literature Corpus

Theme	Key Concept	Indicators in the Data (Example Sources)
Virality & Moral Panic	Virality signals trigger collective moral panic; moral emotion fuels diffusion	Puryear et al. (2024); Blitvich (2022); Maarouf et al. (2022); Brady et al. (2023); Mesler et al. (2024)
Digital Vigilantism	Netizens acting as informal law enforcers; the “no viral, no justice” phenomenon	Angela et al. (2024); Wahid et al. (2025); Azkiya et al. (2025); Gainford (2021)
Pressure on Judicial Independence	Viral algorithms pressure formal legal processes; presumption of innocence threatened	Alladuniah (2025); Murtadlo & Saputra (2025); Sandiya et al. (2025); Wahyudi et al. (2022)

Theme	Key Concept	Indicators in the Data (Example Sources)
Manipulation & Polarization of Public Opinion	Algorithmic engineering and bot networks shape public perception	Chen et al. (2022); Tu et al. (2022); Avalle et al. (2024); Marwick (2021); Dong & Lian (2021)
Gender and Power Dimensions	Trial by social media as an arena of gendered and discursive power contestation	Huang (2023); Wang & Whyke (2025); Shuchy & Uddin (2026)

As Table 1 illustrates, the corpus converges on a consistent narrative: virality is not a neutral amplifier of pre-existing facts but an active force that generates and intensifies moral judgment. Perceived virality, independent of the actual content's veracity, is sufficient to trigger moral-panic-like responses. This is corroborated by findings showing that social media users systematically overestimate the moral outrage of their peers. This creates a feedback loop in which perceived consensus manufactures actual consensus—a mechanism particularly pronounced for hate-speech-adjacent content, which spreads measurably faster and farther than neutral discourse.

Furthermore, the centrality of political identity to a person's self-concept significantly predicts their proclivity to participate in cancelling or shaming a target. This suggests that the feedback loop is amplified among individuals for whom moral and political identity are closely fused. Together, these sources establish a coherent causal chain: a virality signal is perceived, misread as a proxy for genuine moral consensus, and the resulting inflated sense of collective outrage motivates further sharing, generating new virality signals. This self-reinforcing loop explains why viral justice episodes accelerate within hours rather than building gradually.

B. Digital Vigilantism and the “No Viral, No Justice” Paradox

The Indonesian-derived theme of digital vigilantism reveals a striking paradox documented across multiple sources. On one hand, studies document numerous instances in which viral exposure compelled law enforcement to act on cases previously stalled due to institutional inertia, under-resourcing, or outright neglect. This suggests that in contexts of weak institutional capacity, virality can function as a genuine accountability mechanism. Horizontally organized publics monitor, document, and circulate evidence of wrongdoing in ways that supplement, and at times substitute for, the investigatory functions of formal institutions.

On the other hand, researchers caution that this same mechanism risks becoming the de facto trigger for justice, such that ordinary citizens whose grievances fail to achieve virality are systematically disadvantaged. This produces an “attention lottery” model of justice access, fundamentally at odds with the principle of equal protection under law, since the probability of achieving visibility depends on production values, emotional framing, timing, and pre-existing follower networks rather than legal merit. This dynamic represents a contest between two parallel courts the formal justice court and the social media court—where the latter increasingly sets the agenda for the former. To address this paradox, "democratic policing"

reforms have been proposed to proactively incorporate digital accountability mechanisms into formal institutional design, ensuring institutional responsiveness is no longer contingent upon achieving viral scale.

It is worth emphasizing that this paradox is not symmetrical in its consequences. The accountability-enhancing function of viral pressure tends to benefit relatively powerless complainants pursuing relatively powerful or institutionally protected wrongdoers. The attention-lottery distortion, by contrast, more often disadvantages complainants who lack the digital literacy, platform access, or rhetorical packaging skills required to manufacture virality a population that frequently overlaps with rural, elderly, or economically marginalized communities. The net distributive effect of trial by social media on access to justice therefore must be disaggregated by the relative digital capital of the parties involved.

C. Erosion of the Presumption of Innocence

A major finding concerns the systematic tension between viral justice and the presumption of innocence. Public opinion, once mobilized at scale, frequently precedes and substantively influences formal judicial outcomes, effectively inverting the traditional sequence in which evidence determines verdict. In the viral model, public perception forms first, within hours of an allegation surfacing, and subsequent legal proceedings unfold under conditions in which acquittal itself becomes socially costly for the institutions involved, regardless of the underlying evidentiary record. Even professional journalists, nominally bound by codes of ethics requiring the presumption of innocence, face structural pressures from publication speed and platform competition that lead to partial or inconsistent application of this principle.

This dynamic can be described as “law under algorithmic pressure,” where judicial and prosecutorial decision-making increasingly occurs within a discursive environment pre-structured by viral narrative framing. The pressure operates not only through overt threats but through a subtler anticipatory mechanism, in which legal officials pre-emptively adjust conduct, charging decisions, or sentencing recommendations based on a forecast of probable public reaction a phenomenon termed “anticipatory compliance”.

But social-media-based public opinion analyses face persistent challenges in establishing reliable causal inference between the intensity of online discourse and offline institutional outcomes, since observed correlations may reflect confounding factors such as case severity. While this caveat tempers any claim of strict causality, the qualitative pattern documented across the corpus indicates that the erosion of the presumption of innocence under viral conditions is a structural feedback mechanism that alters the behavior of legal institutions.

D. Comparative Jurisdictional Patterns

To understand how the phenomenon of virality transforms into a space for mass social judgment, this study develops a conceptual framework that integrates technological dynamics and social behavior. The causal relationships and process flows of this phenomenon are systematically illustrated in Figure 1 below. This model outlines how algorithmic stimulation interacts with the escalation of public emotion to produce specific structural consequences.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Viral Culture as a Court of Public Opinion

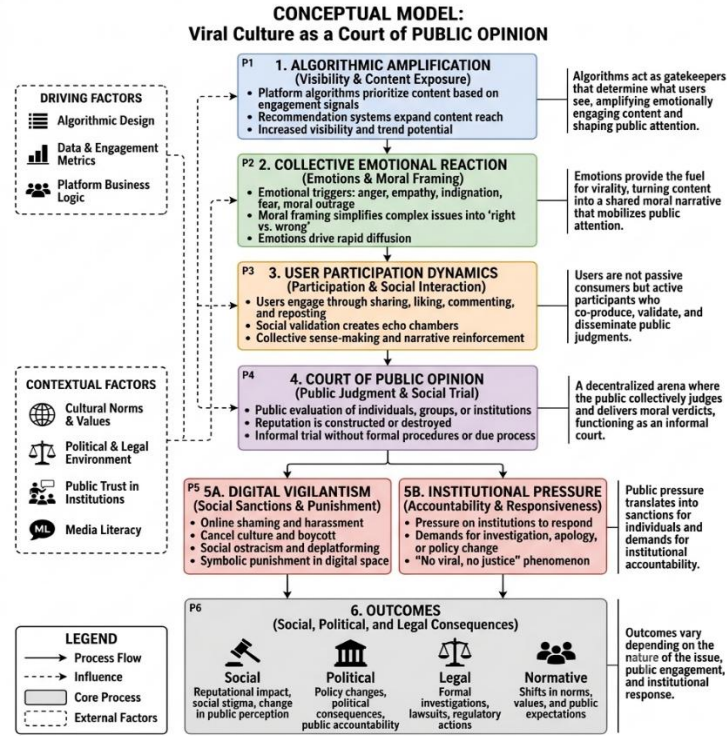


Table 2 synthesizes comparative findings across the four jurisdictional contexts, illustrating how the same underlying mechanism of viral justice produces divergent institutional consequences depending on local legal-political conditions. This comparison reveals that the normative valence of trial by social media is highly contingent upon the surrounding institutional ecology.

Table 2. Cross-Jurisdictional Comparison of Virality Mechanisms, Institutional Responses, and Digital Vigilantism

Jurisdictional Context	Virality Mechanism	Institutional Response	Reference Sources
Indonesia	The “no viral no justice” hashtag accelerates investigation of previously stalled cases	Reactive policy reform; risk of reducing formal justice procedure; proposed democratic policing reforms	Muhammad et al. (2025); Akbar et al. (2024); Syarofi (2025); Sandiya et al. (2025)

China	Nationalist-populist digital vigilantism targeting intellectual women	Algorithmic censorship alternating with selective state tolerance	Huang (2023); Wang & Whyke (2025)
Jurisdictional Context	Virality Mechanism	Institutional Response	Reference Sources
Bangladesh	Gendered disinformation targeting women human rights defenders	Community-based digital resilience; minimal formal legal protection	Shuchy & Uddin (2026)
Europe & North America	#MeToo movement, cancel culture, and platform-based public shaming	Privatization of the justice function by platforms; regulatory debate remains unsettled	Danesi et al. (2021); Lewis & Christin (2022); Forestal (2023)

In Indonesia, where formal law enforcement capacity is often constrained by resource limitations and entrenched bureaucratic inertia, viral pressure functions as a corrective mechanism. However, unauthorized viralization frequently escalates underlying disputes into broader structural conflicts that outlast the original grievance, generating secondary harms. In China, by contrast, digital vigilantism has been selectively weaponized along nationalist and patriarchal lines, with state and platform actors alternately permitting and suppressing viral campaigns depending on alignment with official narratives. This indicates that virality here is less an autonomous social force than a selectively tolerated instrument of state-aligned social discipline.

In Bangladesh, a context exists where gendered disinformation exploits viral mechanisms with minimal institutional counterbalance, leaving women human rights defenders to rely primarily on informal digital resilience strategies in the near-total absence of effective legal protection. In Euro-American contexts, a more institutionally mature but still contested environment exists where platform companies themselves, rather than the state, have become key arbiters of viral accountability disputes through content moderation, demonetization, and account suspension. Platform governance decisions now frequently determine the practical consequences of viral accusation, a privatization of the justice function that raises its own accountability concerns. The #MeToo movement occupies an instructive middle position: it demonstrates genuine accountability-enhancing potential where formal systems had long failed survivors, while simultaneously generating due-process concerns regarding individuals named publicly without judicial adjudication.

E. Algorithmic Architecture and the Mechanics of Viral Judgment

The technical infrastructure underlying viral justice is constitutive of the phenomenon's character rather than incidental to it. Social network behavior can be deliberately manipulated, through coordinated

inauthentic accounts and engagement farming, to engineer particular public opinion outcomes around a target case. This demonstrates that not all viral justice episodes arise organically from genuine grassroots moral concern; some are manufactured or substantially amplified by interested third parties pursuing reputational, commercial, or political advantage.

Even modest seed investment in early-stage promotion can disproportionately determine which narratives achieve viral status, independent of their underlying truth value or moral weight. Persistent cross-platform interaction patterns suggest that the algorithmic amplification of outrage is a structural feature of contemporary digital ecosystems, replicating consistently across platforms with different design philosophies. This cross-platform consistency suggests the underlying driver is an emergent property of engagement-optimized recommendation architecture as such. What appears externally as chaotic, spontaneous moral outrage is often better understood as “morally motivated networked harassment” functioning as normative reinforcement within tightly bonded online communities, wherein participation in a viral pile-on signals and consolidates shared values.

F. Theoretical Synthesis: Virality as Hybrid Social Control

Synthesizing these findings, this study proposes that trial by social media is best theorized not as either a purely emancipatory or purely repressive force, but as a hybrid mechanism of social control whose effects depend on three variables: institutional strength, power asymmetry, and platform architecture.

- *Where formal institutions are weak*, virality can supplement accountability that would otherwise fail to materialize.
- *Where power asymmetries are pronounced*, virality can be selectively weaponized against marginalized groups, particularly women, often with tacit or active institutional complicity.
- *Where platform architectures reward outrage over accuracy*, virality systematically degrades procedural fairness regardless of jurisdiction, acting as a universal background condition.

The distinction between “good” moral panics, which perform legitimate social regulation by surfacing genuine wrongdoing, and disproportionate public shaming episodes offers a useful normative anchor. The same self-reinforcing virality-outrage loop can produce outcomes ranging from genuinely emancipatory accountability to genuinely oppressive harassment, depending almost entirely on these contextual variables rather than on differences in the underlying viral mechanism itself. Algorithmic-level interventions (e.g., friction-based design changes) moderate both emancipatory and oppressive viral episodes simultaneously, whereas institutional-level interventions (e.g., democratic policing reforms) could be calibrated to preserve the accountability-enhancing function of virality while specifically dampening its capacity to erode due process. A comprehensive regulatory response will therefore require both interventions operating in tandem.

4. CONCLUSION

This study elucidates that viral culture in the digital era operates fundamentally as a decentralized “court of public opinion,” driven by the intricate interplay between platform algorithmic designs and collective emotional framing. Rather than functioning as a monolith, the institutional and social outcomes of digital vigilantism are highly contingent upon the country's jurisdictional and political context. In contexts like Indonesia, the “no viral, no justice” phenomenon serves as a powerful, albeit reactive, catalyst to bypass institutional inertia and accelerate legal responsiveness. However, cross-jurisdictional evidence from China, Bangladesh, and Western societies highlights the inherent risks of this mechanism, including the rise of gendered disinformation, nationalist-populist harassment, and the privatization of justice by digital platforms. Ultimately, while virality can democratize access to public attention, it simultaneously

challenges the foundational principles of formal due process of law. Future policy and legal reforms must reconcile this digital public pressure with institutionalized democratic policing to ensure systematic, rather than selective, justice.

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