

RESEARCH REPORTS

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION ON HUMAN PERCEPTION CREATIONS: CASE STUDY OF THE 2022 MASS RIOT IN SRI LANKA

DASUNI JAYARATHNE

Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal University

ABSTRACT *This study was conducted in order to identify the impact of social media communication on the mass riot that happened in Sri Lanka in 2022. The primary objective of the research was to identify the factors influencing the audience's perception of struggle. This quantitative research utilized a questionnaire method for data collection, with a sample size of 200 participants selected through random sampling. The majority of respondents were females aged between 18 and 28 from the western province. Most of the participants (74.5%) indicated daily engagement with social media information during the protest was online news, especially through Facebook posts and comments related to the events. Interestingly, 66.5% of respondents expressed a neutral stance on the trustworthiness of the facts shared on Facebook, suggesting that, despite frequent use of social media, users were cautious about the credibility of its content. Further, the study focused on three key dimensions: the impact of hate messages on the audience, incitement, and online chatter. Regression analysis revealed that hate messages, incitements, and online chatter had a significant influence on mass perceptions during the riot, as indicated by a p-value of 0.00. Among these factors, incitement showed the strongest effect on perception changes, as demonstrated by the beta value. Further, it was notable that 78.2% of the sample received information primarily through Facebook compared to all other media. Additionally, 59.5% of respondents expressed positive views about social media behavior during the post-crisis period in Sri Lanka. This quantitative research utilized a questionnaire method for data collection, with a sample size of 200 participants selected through random sampling.*

Keywords: *Social media, Perception Creation, Online chatter, Incitements, Hate messages*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and its strategic location is of significant importance. According to the research findings of "Datareportal," Sri Lanka's total population was 21.54 million as of January 2022, with 52.1% being female and 47.9% male. Out of this population, 11.34 million were Internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 52.6%. Furthermore, data published in Meta's advertising resources indicated that Facebook had 7.15 million users in 2022. However, since Facebook permits the use of its platform to people aged 13 and above, Facebook permits the use of its platform to people aged 13 and above. This indicates that it is the most used social site in Sri Lanka as of now.

Communication is the process of delivering intended messages and information to a target audience, and it follows a structured framework. Political communication, as a specialised area of study, involves various elements such as sources, messages, channels, recipients, and impacts (Cap and Okulska, 2013). If any of these communication elements fail to function effectively, the intended objectives of political communication may not be achieved. Political Communication channels are typically divided into three types interpersonal communication, organisation, and mass communication. These channels serve five primary functions: (1) providing the public with information about ongoing events (Davis, 2010), (2) educating the public on the meaning and significance of these events, (3) creating platforms to discuss political issues, (4) producing publications, and (5) disseminating policies and programs to the news media (Alhassan, 2018).

The evolution of media in recent years has significantly transformed audience behaviour worldwide. With the advent of digital media, audiences have adapted their media habits to align with convergent media. Social media, a dominant tool within this new context, is often referred to as Web 2.0—internet-based applications that facilitate the sharing of different information and building relationships with each other in a virtual community. In mid-2022, Sri Lanka experienced a mass riot directed at the former president of the country. The public's dissatisfaction stemmed from the economic crisis, high inflation and government policies that failed to address their basic needs, such as domestic gas and petroleum shortages. These issues disrupted daily life, prompting citizens to rise against the national government. The mass riot was symbolized by the slogan “Go Gota” (a call for the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa). This slogan went viral across the country, with social media—especially Facebook—playing a central role.

During this period, Facebook usage surged, and the platform became a hub for posts about the riot and critiques of government policies. Social media hashtags related to the protest became viral, creating a trend of sharing riot-related information Facebook.

This research aims to examine the impact of Facebook as a platform for citizen journalism and its role in influencing public sentiment and political change during the mass riot in Sri Lanka. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the broader impact of social media on the events that unfolded during this critical period in the country's history.

Literature Review

According to research conducted by Bhat (2024), the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the effects of social media on society, businesses, and adolescents. The study highlights the rapid advancement and widespread adoption of social media technologies, with Facebook alone reporting 3.03 billion users in 2023. Teenagers were found to be particularly engaged with social networking platforms, with 22% accessing these platforms approximately 10 times daily. Additionally, the study noted that over half of teenagers check social media more than once a day using their mobile phones, and 75% possess personal devices. Nevertheless, the study also underlines the growing threat of cybercrime via mobile phones, as RSA documented a 173% surge in such incidents between 2020

and 2023. The research demonstrated the significant influence of social media on shaping public opinion and consumer behavior, indicating that social media has a profound impact on behavioral changes within the community in India.

Further research on the impact of social media on society by Wike (2023) revealed varied perceptions of social media's effect on democracy. When asked whether social media is beneficial or detrimental to democracy, a median of 57% across 19 countries viewed it as positive. This sentiment was particularly prevalent in Singapore, where approximately three-quarters of respondents agreed, while in the Netherlands and France, only about four-in-ten shared this view. The U.S. reported the smallest share of positive sentiment, with just around one-third perceiving social media as beneficial for democracy. In eight countries, those who felt their political system allowed them to have an influence on politics were more likely to view social media as a positive force for democracy. This gap was most pronounced in Belgium, where 62% of individuals with political influence viewed social media positively, compared to 44% among those who felt they had little influence. Research by Manuk in year 2024 explored public perception of how the internet and social media are affecting societies. Across six issues tested, few respondents believe there were no changes due to increased connectivity. Instead, most reported both positive and negative changes occurring simultaneously.

A median of 84% believed technological connectivity has made people more susceptible to manipulation with false information and rumors, the highest among the issues examined. Despite this, a median of 73% noted that connectivity has made people more informed about current events both locally and globally. In most countries, those who believed social media facilitates manipulation, with misinformation and rumours, also are more likely acknowledge social media's role in informing people.

Regarding politics, the internet and social media are generally viewed as disruptive, with a median of 65% stating that people are now more divided in their political opinions. The research demonstrated the significant influence of social media on shaping public opinion and consumer behavior, indicating that social media has a profound impact on behavioral changes within the community in India. Despite this, slightly more respondents (a median of 45%) believed connectivity has made people more accepting of diverse ethnic groups, religions, and races compared to those who felt it has made people less accepting (22%) or had no effect (29%). All the research collectively indicates that social media significantly impacts human perceptions across various domains. As a collection of interactive websites and applications centered on sharing content within online communities, social media is reshaping how conflicts manifest and resolve in the physical world (Proctor, 2021; Brown & Livingston, 2019). Mis- and disinformation campaigns often thrive in social networks, particularly in restricted mainstream media environments where opposing views are censored (Byman, 2022). These campaigns are often linked to emerging or ongoing conflicts (Proctor, 2021).

Despite of the risk of radicalization, violence, and mis/disinformation, social media embodies a strong potential for fostering peace and understanding conflict dynamics (Bunse, 2021). Practical implementations of social media including raising awareness and coordination efforts, such as the global #BringBackOurGirls campaign addressing the kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram (Konnolly, 2015) and digital consultations on on peace processes in Colombia and Libya (Lanz &

Eleiba, 2018). Digital tools provide opportunities for youth involvement in conflict resolution and broader peace-building processes, enabling digitally informed demographics to tackle misinformation and its effects in fragile settings. Social media can thus be a powerful tool for youth-led conflict resolution and addressing the growing influence of disinformation campaigns in vulnerable regions.

Research Methodology

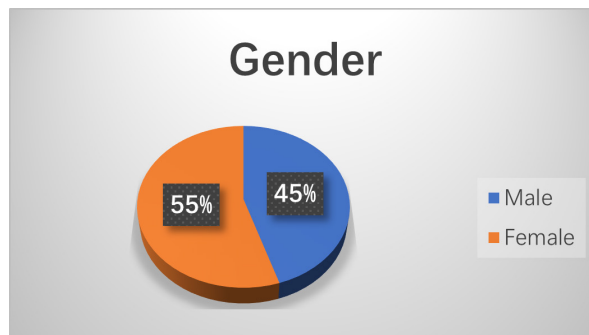
This research is quantitative in nature. Data were collected using a questionnaire, with a sample size of 200 participants. The study used random sampling techniques to select the sample, with 20 participants randomly chosen from 10 universities in Sri Lanka. The collected data from the online survey were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The primary source of the sample was universities, as the majority of participants in the mass riot were educated young individuals in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the research is predominantly focuses on university students and staff in the country. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section covered the demographic factors of the sample. The second section consisted of closed-ended multiple-choice questions, while the third section included Likert scale questions. Accordingly, the questionnaire incorporated all three types of questions, enabling respondents to provide insights regarding the mass riot that occurred in Sri Lanka.

Major Findings and Discussion

This section will explain the data analysis of the survey questionnaire.

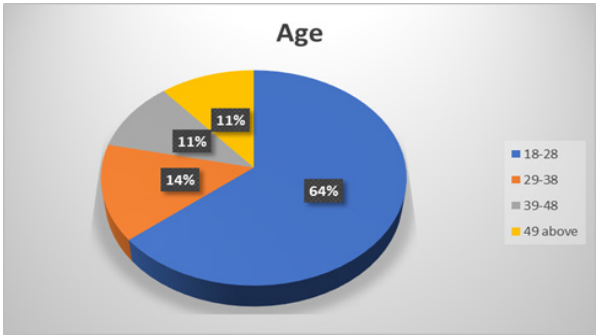
Discussion of findings

Figure 1 Gender of the respondents



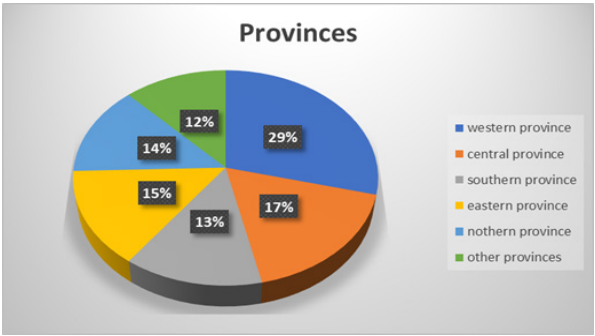
The study reveals that female participation was higher at 55.5%, while male participation was 44.5%, resulting in a 10% gender difference among the respondents.

Figure 2 Age of the audience



A majority of participants (64%) were aged between 18 and 28, followed by 14% from the 29–38 age group. The age groups 39–48 and 49+ had equal representation.

Figure 3 Provinces of the audience



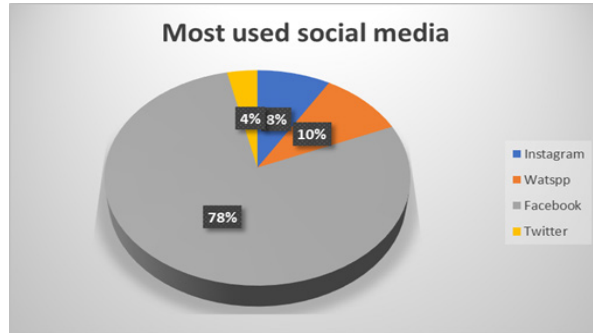
In terms of geographical distribution, 29% of respondents were from the Western Province, followed by 17% from the Central Province, 15% from the Eastern Province, 14% from the Northern Province, 13% from the Southern Province, and 12% from other provinces. Despite the higher representation from the Western Province, the participation from other provinces was above 10%.

In summary, the majority of participants were young females aged 18–28 from the Western Province. This aligns with the demographic structure of Sri Lankan universities, where female students dominate, and many institutions are located in the Western Province.

Social Media Usage During the Mass Riot

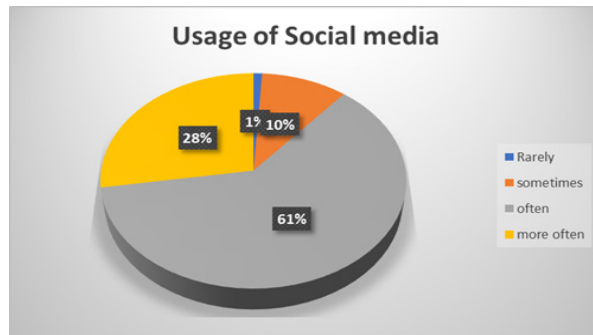
The study highlights the significant use of social media during the mass riot.

Figure 4 Most used social media



Facebook emerged as the most popular platform for sharing information, with nearly 78% of respondents using it, while WhatsApp (10%), Instagram (8%), and Twitter (4%) had lower usage levels.

Figure 5 Usage of social media



More than half of the audience used social media frequently to access information during the riot, and 28% reported using it more often than usual. This suggests heightened interest in social media updates during the crisis.

Political Information Exchange on Social Media During the Riot

During the riot, the public widely demanded the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Figure 6 Share the political information on SM during the riot

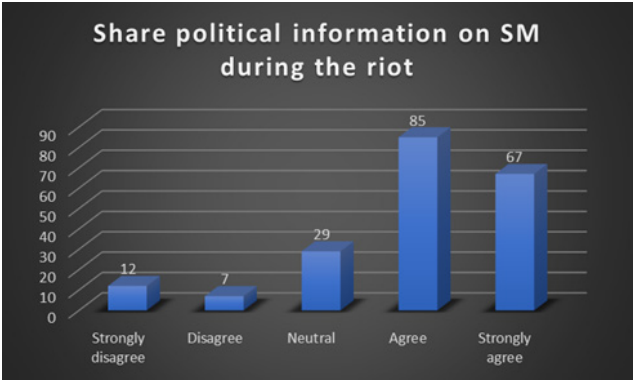
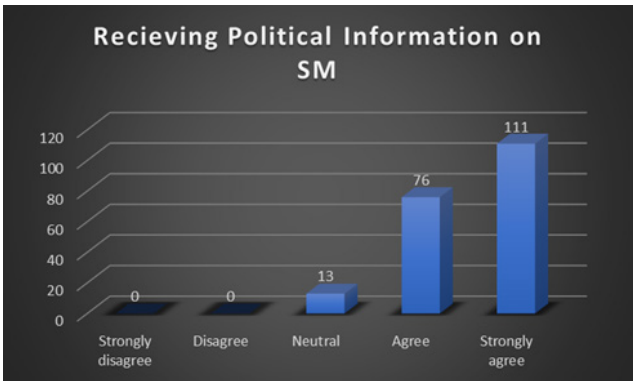


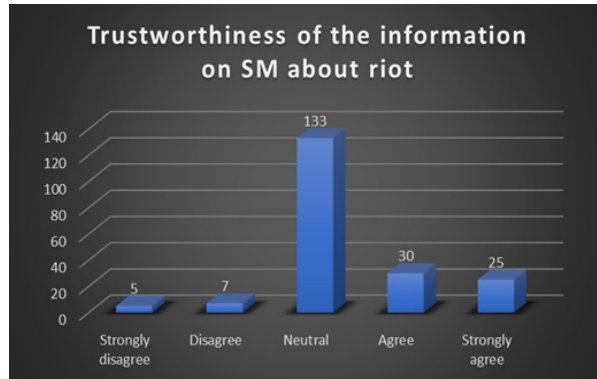
Figure 6 outlines the respondents’ involvement in sharing political information on social media during the riot. Social media became a platform for sharing political views, with 42.5% of respondents agreeing and 33.5% strongly agreeing that they shared political information during this period.

Figure 7 Receiving political information on social media during the mass riot



Mainstream media’s role in information dissemination was limited compared to social media. Data analysis revealed that 55.5% of respondents strongly agreed they received political information through social media. More than half of the sample agreed that they are receiving information on social media. It’s clear that during the rioting period, the audience received lots of information, which can be correct or not. It’s interesting to see that no respondent marked as disagreeing with the given statement.

Figure 8 Receiving political information on social media during the mass riot

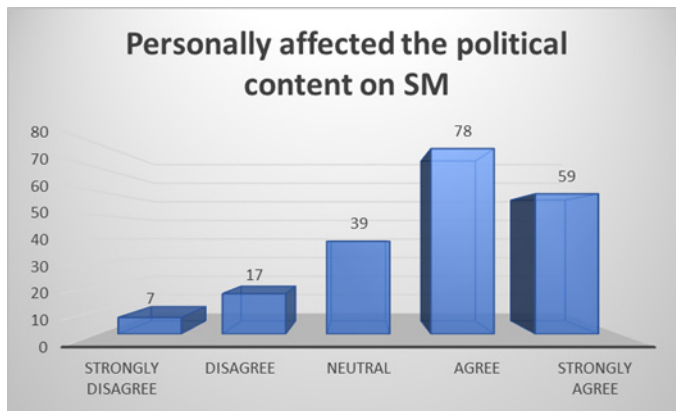


Despite the active engagement, the trustworthiness of this information remained neutral, reflecting scepticism about the accuracy of social media content.

The findings highlight the active participation of the audience in exchanging political ideas through social media, enabling collective action. However, the neutrality in trustworthiness indicates a cautious approach to the credibility of shared information.

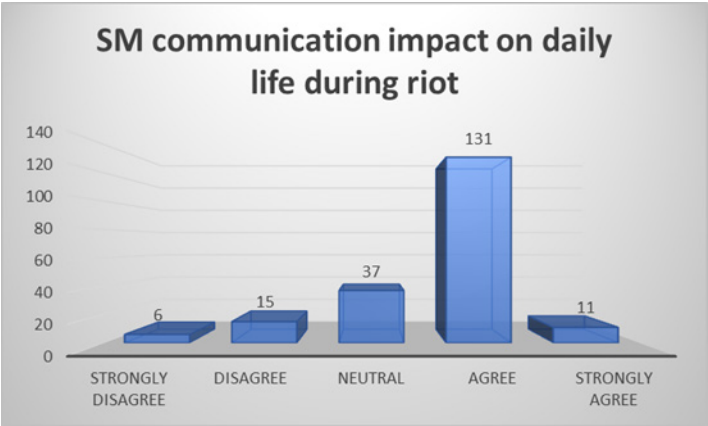
Impact of Social Media on Human Relations and Behaviour During the Mass Riot

Figure 9 Political content impact on personal thoughts



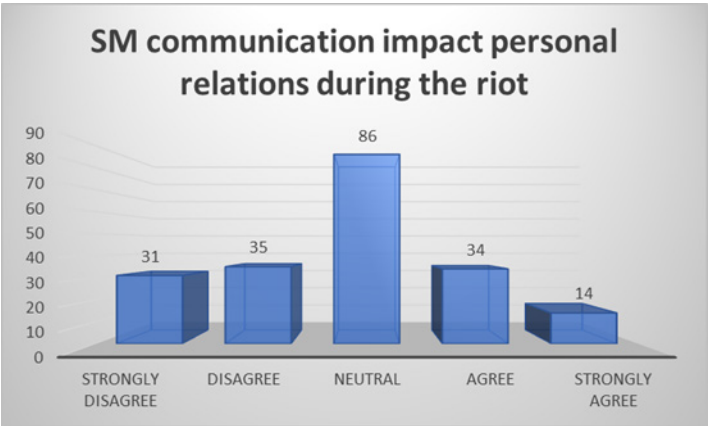
Social media content, especially political information, influenced personal thoughts and behaviours during the riot. Of the respondents, 39% agreed, and 29.5% strongly agreed that political content on social media impacted their thoughts about the riot and the Sri Lankan government.

Figure 10 Social media communication impact on daily life during the riot



As seen in Figure 10, it is clear that social media communication has impacted human daily life. Additionally, 65.5% of participants stated that information shared through Facebook affected their daily lives and routines, often leading to confusion and disruption due to the overwhelming flow of information.

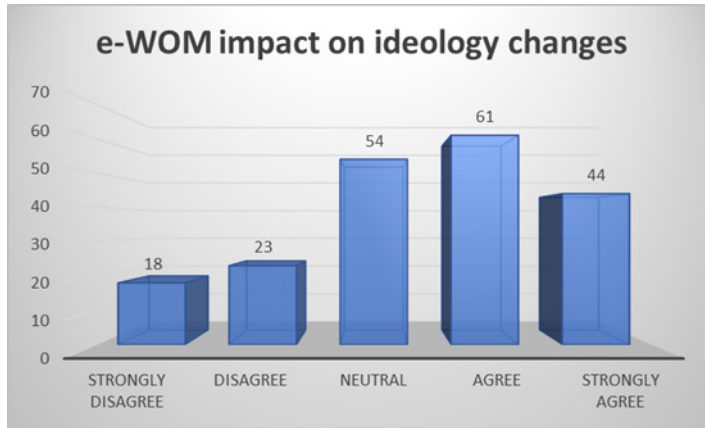
Figure 11 Social media communication impact on personal relations during the riot.



Regarding personal relationships, 43% of respondents held a neutral view of social media's impact. Meanwhile, 17.5% disagreed, and 15.5% strongly disagreed, suggesting that social media had minimal influence on personal relationships during the riot.

Impact of Social Media Communication on Daily Life and Ideology Changes

Figure 12 e-WOM impact on ideology



The study underscores the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), including social media posts, memes, comments, and feedback, on ideology shifts. Of the respondents, 30.5% agreed that e-WOM affected ideological changes, while 22% were neutral, and 22% strongly agreed.

Figure 13: Social media persuasion

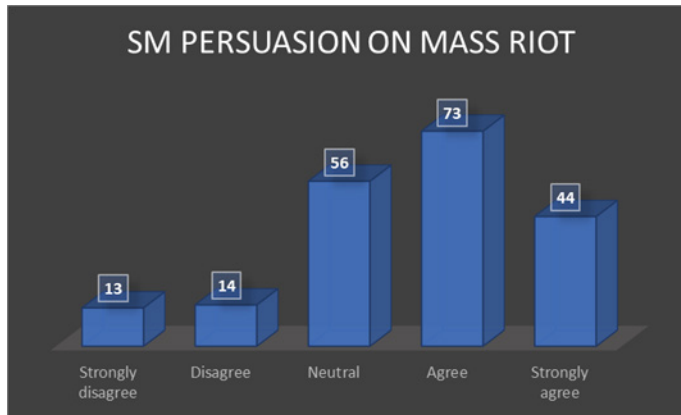


Figure 13 shows the perception on on the persuasive power of social media posts during the riot in Sri Lanka. The findings indicate social media posts played a significant role in persuading the audience to support the riot, with 36.5% agreeing, 28% remaining neutral, and 22% strongly agreeing.

Figure 14: Social media impact on changing the ideas about the government

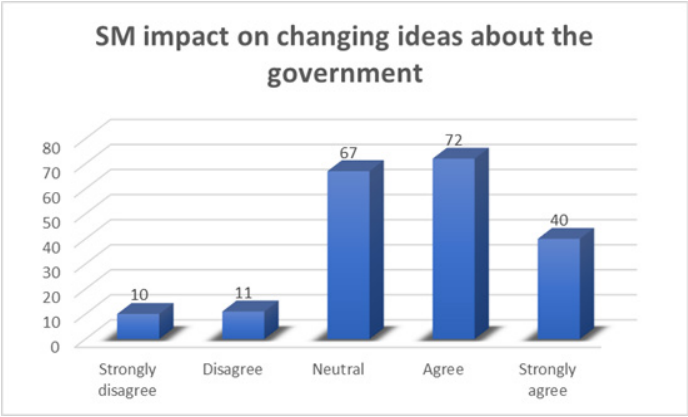


Figure 14 summarises the perception of the impact of social media on changing how the survey respondents view the government. Regarding changes in perceptions of the government, 36% agreed that social media communication influenced their opinions, 33.5% were neutral, and 20% strongly agreed. These findings indicate that social media played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and encouraging collective action during the crisis.

Regression Analysis

Table 1: Coefficient of human perception changes

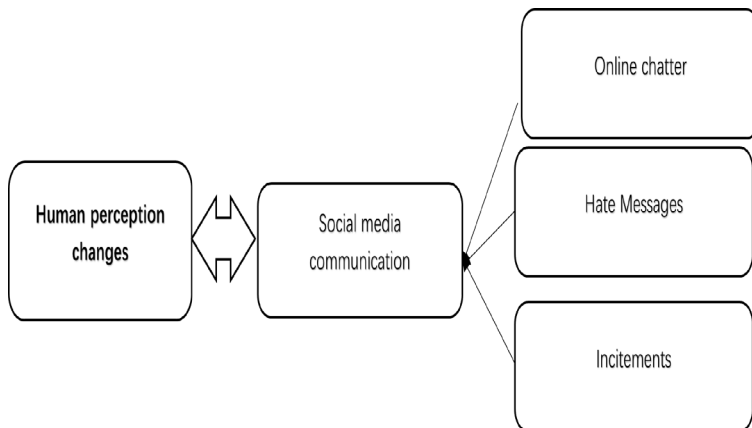
Coefficients					
		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.497	.230		10.873 .001
	COM_OnlineChatter	.810	.049	.746	16.654 .001
	COM_Incitemnt	.230	.041	.269	5.557 .001
	COM_Hatespeech	.092	.040	.102	2.274 .004
a. Dependent Variable: Human Perception creation					

Table 1 presents the regression analysis of the study, which examines the impact of three selected independent variables on a dependent variable. The independent variables—online chatter, incitement, and hate speech—were derived from the literature of previous research studies, while the dependent variable is human perception change. **Social Media as a Global Phenomenon**

The results indicate that all three independent variables are statistically significant predictors of the dependent variable, as the p-value is $P < .001$. The relationship between these variables can be expressed with the following equation: Human perception changes through social media communication = $2.497 + 0.746$ (online chatter) + 0.269 (incitement) + 0.102 (hate messages).

This demonstrates that online chatter, hate messages, and incitement significantly influenced human perception and persuasion during the mass riot. The regression analysis shows a strong and positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Figure 15 The conclusion of the regression analysis



The findings highlight the influence of social media on human perceptions. Facebook was the most commonly used platform to access information about the riot, and political content was frequently shared and exchanged among users. Despite widespread sharing, respondents reported a lack of trust in the accuracy of social media information.

The study underscores how social media communication directly impacted the mass riot in Sri Lanka, influencing public action and facilitating a movement to demand governmental change. Social media significantly affected personal and daily routines but had a minimal effect on interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) strongly influenced ideology and perception changes during the riot. The findings confirm that social media communication had a significant impact on human perceptions during the mass riot of Sri Lanka in 2022, with the regression analysis highlighting the direct influence of the three selected independent variables.

Social Media as a Global Phenomenon

Social media has become a global phenomenon, transforming communication, interaction, and information sharing (Amin, 2023). Recent years have seen rapid growth in social media usage, drawing research attention to its effects on social interactions, psychological well-being, and societal change.

According to Cahya et al. (2023), social media's rise has created several challenges, including its direct and indirect impact on social interactions, its influence on individual psychological well-being, and its role in driving social change. Fatmawati and Sholikin (2019) define social media as a digital platform enabling users to participate, share, and interact with content online. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn exemplify the exponential growth in social media usage (Felita et al., 2016). Social media not only facilitates information sharing but also significantly influences social interactions (Uki, 2023).

Drawing from the literature and data from this study, the findings demonstrate how social media influenced human perceptions during the mass riot in Sri Lanka in 2022.

Conclusion

The internet's expansion has popularized new and social media among civilians, enabling users to act as reporters, receivers, mediators, and responders. This participatory nature of social media has given rise to the concept of "citizen journalism." However, while many countries enforce social media regulations through ethics or laws, Sri Lanka lacks formalized social media censorship, relying on freedom of expression. This freedom, while valued, allows for misinformation, disinformation, and null information to spread. Therefore, the study recommends establishing a national social media law and ethical code in Sri Lanka. An expert panel could develop this framework to monitor and address the spread of false information, ensuring that users can share accurate and truthful content. The study confirms that social media communication influenced human perceptions during the mass riot. Online chatter, incitement, and hate messages were identified as significant factors. To mitigate the spread of misinformation, the study suggests improving media literacy to help users distinguish between credible and inaccurate content. While mainstream media adheres to editorial standards for accuracy, social media lacks such filters, necessitating greater audience awareness.

The study has several limitations. It focused primarily on social media behavior during the riot, excluding pre- and post-riot behavior. Future research could explore these aspects to understand the role of political information sharing before and after riots. The methodology was limited to a quantitative approach using a questionnaire. Future studies could adopt mixed methodologies and larger sample sizes to enhance reliability. Additionally, the study focused solely on Facebook, leaving room to explore patterns of social media usage across other platforms. Future research could include new independent variables, diverse samples, and improved methodologies to deepen understanding of social media's impact on societal change.

References

- Cahya, M. N., Ningsih, W., & Lestari, A. (2023). The Impact of social media on Adolescents' Psychological Well-Being: A Review of the Effects of Social Media Use on Adolescents' Anxiety and Depression. *Journal of Social Technology* , 3 (8), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.59188/jurnalsostech.v3i8.917>
- Felita, P., Siahaja, C., Wijaya, V., Melisa, G., Chandra, M., & Dahesihsari, R. (2016). Social media use and self-concept in teenagers. *Manasa*, 5(1), Article 1.
- Isni, K., Yulia Nurfatona, W., & Nisa, K. (2021). Communication patterns and social skills of teenagers in the digital era. *Panrita Abdi: Journal of Community Service* . <http://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/panritaabdi/article/view/11939>
- Kundari, NF, Hanifah, W., Azzahra, GA, Islam, NRQ, & Nisa, H. (2020). The Relationship between Social Support and Social Media Exposure on COVID-19 Prevention Behavior in the Jabodetabek Area Community in 2020. <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/handle/123456789/69532>
- Lin, C.-Y., Li, T.-Y., & Chen, P. (2016, July). An Information Visualization System to Assist News Topics Exploration with Social Media. *ACMDL*
- Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R. & Sinanan, J. (2016). *How the World Changed Social Media*. UCL Press.
- Nissa, RNF, & Hatta, MI (2022). The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Cyberbullying Behavior among Adolescent Twitter Social Media Users. *Bandung Conference Series: Psychology Science* , 2 (1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.29313/bcsps.v2i1.886>
- Triyaningsih, H. (2020). The Effect of Mass Media Reporting on Public Perceptions About the Corona Virus (Case Study; Community in Pamekasan). *Meyarsa: Journal of Communication Science and Da'wah* , 1 (1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.19105/meyarsa.v1i1.3222>