

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION ON MOB JUSTICE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN KWARA STATE

BABATUNDE, Victor Olusegun

Department of Mass Communication
Kwara State University, Malete
babatundev@gmail.com

&

AYENI, Adegbola Cornelius

Department of Mass Communication
Kwara State University, Malete
adegbolaayeni1@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This study examined the influence of social media misinformation on mob justice among undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria. Despite growing scholarship on digital misinformation and extrajudicial violence, empirical evidence on how exposure shapes moral cognition among younger, digitally native populations in northern Nigerian contexts remained sparse. Anchored in Social Cognitive Theory, the study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 398 undergraduates across three universities using a structured questionnaire measuring exposure to misinformation and perceptions of moral justification. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed for analysis. Findings revealed substantial exposure to multimodal misinformation portraying suspects as deserving immediate punishment. Respondents concurrently endorsed mob justice as morally wrong whilst acknowledging that misinformation influenced their moral judgement. Exposure to social media misinformation significantly predicted perceptions of moral justification, though the effect size was modest, indicating that institutional trust and personal ethics also shape moral cognition. The study concluded that whilst digital exposure incrementally shifts evaluative frameworks through observational learning, it does not fully determine moral outcomes. These findings extend Social Cognitive Theory by demonstrating its probabilistic operation in a digitally saturated, institutionally fragile context. Targeted media literacy programmes and regulatory friction mechanisms are recommended to mitigate misinformation-driven moral disengagement among emerging civic leaders.

Keywords: social media misinformation, mob justice, moral justification, undergraduates, Social Cognitive Theory

Introduction

Mob justice, frequently termed jungle justice, constitutes one of the most disturbing manifestations of institutional failure in contemporary societies, signalling a profound collapse of public confidence in formal legal structures and reflecting widespread distrust in the state's capacity to guarantee security, due process, and equitable justice (Ikejiaku & Osabutey, 2022). Conceptually, it denotes the collective, often brutal, punishment of individuals suspected of criminal acts without formal investigation or trial, frequently culminating in severe injury or death, whilst historically emerging as a self-help mechanism in contexts where state authority was either weak or entirely absent (Ikejiaku & Osabutey, 2022). However, the advent of digital communication has fundamentally altered the architecture of this phenomenon, as social media ecosystems now accelerate the dissemination of misinformation, distort factual accounts, and amplify emotional responses to alleged crimes, thereby collapsing the boundary between online expression and physical violence (Tufekci, 2017).

Globally, the destructive nexus between social media misinformation and mob justice is well-documented. In South Asia, false WhatsApp messages and misleading Facebook posts have been directly implicated in numerous lynching incidents across India and Pakistan (Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Hussain, Khan, & Chandio, 2023). Banaji and Bhat (2019) documented how viral yet fabricated accusations of child abduction or cow slaughter, disseminated through WhatsApp, served as the primary mobilisation infrastructure for lethal mob violence in India. Hussain et al. (2023) similarly analysed how blasphemy allegations circulating through digital networks fuelled intense mob violence in Pakistan, with online narratives amplifying public outrage and legitimising vigilantism. These transnational patterns suggest that the link between misinformation and mob

justice is not a localised cultural anomaly but a global challenge deeply embedded in modern digital communication environments.

Within the African continent, this phenomenon assumes particularly alarming dimensions. In Ghana, empirical research indicates that mob lynchings are frequently sparked by unverified claims circulated online, as communities increasingly view mob action as a necessary alternative to perceived police inefficiency (Ikejiaku & Osabutey, 2022). Comparable patterns have emerged across Kenya, where viral videos and misleading narratives continue to normalise violent community justice as a standard response to perceived wrongdoing (Ikejiaku & Osabutey, 2022). Nigeria, however, represents one of the most alarming environments where social media misinformation and mob justice intersect, as mob killings have escalated in both frequency and brutality, driven largely by viral misinformation accusing individuals of theft, kidnapping, ritual crimes, or blasphemy (Salihu & Gholami, 2018; Tiwa, 2022). Academic research confirms that these misinformation-laden narratives frequently frame the accused as existential moral threats, thereby justifying extrajudicial punishment and mobilising broad public support for violent mob action (Bello, 2019; Shodunke, Oladipupo, Alabi, & Akindele, 2023).

Kwara State has emerged as a particularly compelling site for examining this intersection, situated within northern Nigeria where recent incidents demonstrate how rapidly digital misinformation translates into irreversible physical violence, particularly in urban centres where high concentrations of undergraduates are actively engaged in social media ecosystems (Uduma, Nwasum, Abaneme, & Icha-Ituma, 2021). In response, police commands have publicly condemned these actions and made arrests, whilst government authorities have pledged to prosecute participants. Civil society organisations have intensified efforts, mounting campaigns advocating legal accountability and public education to discourage vigilantism (Adegbite & Ilori,

2018; Amu, 2020). In Kwara State specifically, authorities have repeatedly warned citizens against taking the law into their own hands, urging them to report suspicious activities to the police (Uduma et al., 2021). Despite these institutional efforts, mob justice persists and, in several instances, appears to be intensifying, as false claims and emotionally charged misinformation continue to spread rapidly across social media platforms, largely escaping timely verification or correction (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Okafor & Emeka, 2022). From the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory, repeated exposure to misinformation that portrays mob justice as effective or morally justified may normalise such behaviour through observational learning and reinforcement (Bandura, 2001). This process systematically threatens human rights, weakens the rule of law, and destabilises the broader social order.

Previous empirical investigations have examined the general prevalence and causes of mob violence in Nigeria. Salihu and Gholami (2018) conducted a large-scale empirical analysis demonstrating that perceived corruption and inefficiency within the criminal justice system significantly predict public support for mob justice. Ilori (2020) examined the patterns and security implications of jungle justice in Lagos metropolis, identifying persistent neighbourhood crime and institutional mistrust as primary drivers. Bello (2019) specifically explored the emerging confluence between mob justice and social media in Nigeria, arguing that digital platforms have become critical amplifiers of extrajudicial violence. Whilst existing studies document the macro-level prevalence and general causes of mob violence, no empirical investigations specifically focus on undergraduates in Kwara State or interrogate how exposure to social media misinformation shapes their particular attitudes toward mob justice. Practically, it matters because undergraduates represent the next generation of civic leaders, and their perceptions will determine whether Nigeria's democratic institutions strengthen or further erode. Against this backdrop, this study

examines the influence of social media misinformation on mob justice among undergraduates in Kwara State.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the expanding body of scholarship on mob justice and social media misinformation, a critical empirical lacuna persists in the Nigerian literature. Existing studies have predominantly examined macro-level determinants of mob violence such as institutional distrust, perceived police corruption, and neighbourhood crime prevalence among general adult populations in southern Nigerian urban centres, particularly Lagos (Salihu & Gholami, 2018; Ilori, 2020; Bello, 2019). These investigations, whilst foundational, leave significant gaps in understanding how social media misinformation specifically shapes the attitudes of younger, digitally native populations in northern Nigerian contexts. The undergraduate demographic in Kwara State represents a particularly consequential yet understudied population, given their intensive engagement with social media platforms, their transitional status as emerging civic leaders, and their geographic location within a region experiencing escalating mob justice incidents (Uduma et al., 2021; Tiwa, 2022).

The absence of empirical evidence on this specific population is problematic for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, Social Cognitive Theory posits that repeated exposure to symbolic models in media environments shapes moral cognition through observational learning and vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 2001). However, this proposition has not been empirically tested among Nigerian undergraduates in the context of mob justice misinformation, leaving unclear whether the theory's predictive mechanisms hold in this specific cultural and digital environment. Practically, undergraduates constitute the demographic cohort most likely to

encounter, disseminate, and act upon crime-related misinformation by virtue of their high-volume social media usage and their position at the intersection of digital fluency and formative civic identity (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Okafor & Emeka, 2022). Without empirical evidence on how exposure to mob justice misinformation influences their moral reasoning, interventions targeting media literacy, regulatory policy, and campus security remain insufficiently grounded in population-specific evidence. This study therefore addresses the question: How does exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice influence moral justification perceptions among undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Assess the extent of undergraduates' exposure to social media misinformation related to mob justice in Kwara State; and
2. examine undergraduates' perceptions of the moral justifications embedded in social media misinformation that either legitimise or condemn mob justice.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of undergraduates' exposure to social media misinformation related to mob justice in Kwara State?
2. What is undergraduates' perception of moral justifications embedded in social media misinformation on mob justice?

Hypothesis

Based on the research questions above and Social Cognitive Theory's proposition that repeated symbolic exposure shapes moral cognition (Bandura, 2001), the following hypothesis is tested:

H₁: Undergraduates' level of exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice significantly predicts their perception of the moral justification of such misinformation.

Literature Review

Mob Justice

Mob justice denotes the collective, extrajudicial punishment of individuals suspected of criminal acts without formal investigation, trial, or legal representation, frequently culminating in severe injury or death (Essoh, Ukpong, & Mac-Leva, 2025; Kapae & Adishi, 2017). Within contemporary African criminology, the phenomenon has shifted from framings of spontaneous irrationality toward understandings of structured violence rooted in institutional failure and symbolic moral ordering (Essoh et al., 2025).

This reconceptualisation challenges earlier pathological accounts by revealing the systemic relationship between extrajudicial violence and perceived state incapacity, establishing that mob justice functions not as aberrant deviation but as a functional alternative that flourishes under conditions of institutional collapse (Salihu & Gholami, 2018; Shodunke, Oladipupo, Alabi, & Akindele, 2023). In Nigeria specifically, empirical evidence indicates that mob killings have escalated in both frequency and brutality, driven largely by viral misinformation accusing individuals of theft, kidnapping, ritual crimes, or blasphemy, with approximately 200 persons

reportedly killed through jungle justice between 2020 and 2022 (Daily Trust Editorial, 2022; Essoh et al., 2025).

Beyond its structural determinants, the terminological and moral-psychological dimensions of mob justice demand analytical precision. The distinction between "mob justice" and "jungle justice" carries significant conceptual consequences; whilst the latter term captures the lawlessness characterising Nigerian manifestations, its casual deployment risks normalising violence through linguistic desensitisation, thereby stripping these acts of their grave human rights implications (Shodunke et al., 2023; Tiwa, 2022). Mackintosh, Mackintosh, and Mazzi (2024) establish that underlying normative frameworks render mob justice socially intelligible, confirming that the phenomenon is rarely conceptualised by perpetrators as morally transgressive. Rather, mob justice is reconstructed through collective meaning-making as a morally necessary response to existential threat (Mackintosh et al., 2024).

Ruwan, Ogechukwu, Fadare, and Garba (2020) demonstrate that public support for jungle justice is significantly predicted by low perceptions of police effectiveness, fairness, and lawfulness, establishing that moral reconstruction of mob violence is contingent upon perceived legitimacy of formal justice institutions. Badiora (2020) extends this analysis through procedural justice theory, revealing that community support for vigilantism in Lagos is associated with basic communal values rather than instrumental crime-control effectiveness, thereby illuminating the normative foundations that render mob justice cognitively available. For this study, mob justice is operationally defined as collective extrajudicial punishment of suspected offenders by a group without formal trial, as encountered in social media narratives constructing such violence as morally necessary community defence (Bello, 2019; Essoh et al., 2025).

Exposure to Social Media Misinformation on Mob Justice

Exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice situates the construct within the discourse on information disorder and attitudinal formation toward extrajudicial violence. Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018) define misinformation as information that is false or misleading regardless of intent, whilst Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) empirically demonstrate that falsehoods diffuse significantly farther, faster, and deeper than truthful information on social media platforms. In the specific context of mob justice, Banaji and Bhat (2019) documented how viral yet fabricated accusations of child abduction, disseminated through WhatsApp and Facebook, served as the primary mobilisation infrastructure for lethal mob violence in India. Their framework positions exposure as repeated, emotionally charged encounters with unverified crime-related content that progressively erode critical faculties.

In the Nigerian context, Pate and Ibrahim (2019) argue that fake news flourishes due to fragile social structures and deepening poverty, which erode capacity for critical evaluation of crime-related claims. Apuke and Omar (2020) identify interpersonal trust and civil obligation as key motivators for sharing unverified crime alerts among Nigerian users, revealing that such information is often disseminated from a culturally ingrained desire to warn communities about perceived threats. This framing directly aligns with undergraduates' exposure to mob justice misinformation. Uwalaka, Nwala and Amadi (2021) conceptualise fake news in Nigeria as encompassing false remedies and distorted statistics, a framework particularly relevant to mob justice misinformation where false claims about kidnapping or ritual crimes catalyse collective violence. Salihu and Gholami (2018) provide empirical grounding by demonstrating that perceived corruption within the criminal justice system significantly predicts public support for mob justice,

establishing the environmental conditions under which misinformation about crime finds receptive audiences.

Omenugha, Eze and Ojike (2020) further demonstrate how digital health misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the broader vulnerability of Nigerian populations to unverified online content, a pattern generalisable to crime-related misinformation. However, contrasting perspectives caution against overstating direct effects. Ojebode (2018) argues that fake news in Nigeria operates within pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions, suggesting misinformation amplifies rather than creates violent dispositions. These neutralising perspectives establish that exposure to mob justice misinformation is a necessary but insufficient condition for punitive endorsement, operating through mediating mechanisms of moral justification.

Perception of Moral Justifications Embedded in Social Media Misinformation

Perceptions of moral justifications embedded in social media misinformation that either legitimise or condemn mob justice. Bandura (1999) conceptualises moral justification as the primary mechanism of moral disengagement, whereby detrimental conduct is reconstrued as serving valued moral purposes. Within mob justice narratives circulating on social media, alleged offenders are frequently constructed as existential threats to community safety, transforming extrajudicial violence into a morally necessary act of collective self-defence. This reconstrual is reinforced by dehumanising language that strips accused persons of human status, weakening empathic restraint (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016).

Udupa (2021) demonstrates that deceptive social media discourses morally frame alleged offenders by constructing them as existential moral threats, significantly increasing the likelihood of eliciting moral approval of violence. In the Nigerian context, Chilwa (2021) demonstrates that

moral justification of mob killings is constructed primarily through dehumanising language of criminality, labelling accused persons as ritualists, kidnappers, or thieves, thereby triggering emotionally charged consensus around punishment. Bello (2019) argues that digital platforms provide symbolic environments where moral disengagement is repeatedly modelled and socially validated, framing mob action as morally necessary community defence.

Ilori (2020) identifies persistent neighbourhood crime and institutional distrust as primary drivers of jungle justice in Lagos, demonstrating how environmental conditions shape cognitive appraisals preceding moral justification. Adinkrah (2005) notes that in West African contexts, vigilantism has historically been positioned as morally approved collective self-help, providing cultural scripts that contemporary misinformation readily activates.

However, contrasting perspectives caution against assuming universal endorsement. Kteily and Bruneau (2017) find that dehumanising language substantially boosts support for severe punishment, yet personal ethics and human rights values can resist moral justification. Tankebe (2009) demonstrates that procedural justice and institutional legitimacy independently influence public willingness to support extrajudicial violence, suggesting moral justification is mediated by macro-level institutional factors. For this study, perceptions of moral justifications are conceptualised as the primary evaluative mechanism through which undergraduates interpret misinformation narratives, determining whether such narratives are accepted as legitimate condemnation of criminality or rejected as unethical violations of due process.

Theoretical Review

Social Cognitive Theory

The theoretical review is anchored on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which posits that human behaviour is shaped through the dynamic interplay of personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioural tendencies (Bandura, 1986).

The construct of observational learning is directly relevant concerning exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice. Bandura (2001) argues that individuals acquire attitudes by observing symbolic models in media environments, particularly when such models are emotionally arousing or socially endorsed. In the context of mob justice misinformation, undergraduates encounter repeated symbolic representations that frame extrajudicial violence as effective or commendable. The attentional component is pertinent, as social media algorithms prioritise sensational content, increasing the salience of misinformation (Brady et al., 2017). Retention occurs through cognitive encoding, with misinformation presented in moralistic frames being more readily remembered (Martel, Pennycook and Rand, 2020). Vicarious reinforcement operates through peer validation; when misinformation-driven content receives likes and shares, observers internalise that such positions are socially approved (Brady et al., 2017).

Examining perceptions of moral justifications, aligns with SCT's construct of moral disengagement. Bandura (1999) identifies moral justification as the mechanism through which detrimental conduct is rendered acceptable by portraying it in service of valued purposes. Within mob justice narratives, alleged offenders are constructed as existential threats, transforming violence into morally necessary self-defence. The Nigerian context amplifies these mechanisms. Salihu and Gholami (2018) establish that perceived corruption within the criminal justice system

predicts public support for mob justice. Ilori (2020) identifies institutional distrust as a primary driver of jungle justice in Lagos. Bello (2019) argues that digital platforms have become critical amplifiers of extrajudicial violence. Tiwa (2022) documents how community-level security crises create fertile ground for misinformation-driven mob action. Shodunke et al. (2023) establish the nexus between mob justice, human rights violations, and state responsibility in Nigeria.

The relevance of SCT is underscored by its capacity to integrate social media affordances; unlike traditional media, social media enables immediate peer feedback and algorithmic amplification (Okafor and Emeka, 2022). However, critics note that SCT's emphasis on individual cognition may understate structural determinants. Tankebe (2009) argues that institutional legitimacy independently influences public willingness to support extrajudicial violence. These critiques necessitate contextual application of SCT as a probabilistic framework.

Review of Empirical Studies

Banaji and Bhat (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study in India examining how recurrent exposure to crime-related misinformation on WhatsApp and Facebook shapes public disposition toward mob punishment. Their survey and digital ethnography revealed that respondents regularly exposed to unverified crime alerts were significantly more likely to endorse communal punishment, particularly in environments characterised by deep institutional distrust. The study's methodological triangulation lends credibility, though its Indian context limits direct transferability to Nigeria. The present study extends this conversation by investigating a Nigerian undergraduate population where exposure is structurally unmediated by robust fact-checking institutions.

Udupa (2021) undertook a cross-national study employing computational text analysis and structured surveys to investigate how deceptive social media discourses morally frame alleged offenders. Her central finding was that posts constructing accused persons as existential moral threats were significantly more likely to elicit moral approval of violence. This evidence directly supports perceptions of moral justifications. However, the study's focus on ethno-religious conflict contexts differs from the Nigerian situation where mob justice triggers are more commonly rooted in accusations of theft, kidnapping, and ritualism. Chilwa (2021) addresses this gap by demonstrating that in Nigeria, moral justification is constructed through dehumanising language of criminality rather than ethno-religious othering.

In the Nigerian empirical literature, Salihu and Gholami (2018) provide the most robust large-scale analysis. Their survey of 904 respondents in Lagos demonstrated that perceived corruption within the criminal justice system significantly predicts public support for mob justice, with 61% viewing the Nigeria Police Force as corrupt. Bello (2019) fills the social media gap by exploring the confluence of mob justice and digital platforms in Nigeria, arguing that these platforms have become critical amplifiers of extrajudicial violence. His discourse analysis reveals how social media narratives frame mob action as morally necessary community defence. Ilori (2020) examined jungle justice patterns in Lagos, identifying persistent neighbourhood crime and institutional mistrust as primary drivers. Tiwa (2022) traces the shift from ethnic militias to jungle justice, documenting how community-level security crises create receptive audiences for misinformation-driven mob action. Shodunke et al. (2023) provide further empirical grounding by establishing the nexus between mob justice, human rights violations, and state responsibility in Nigeria.

This pattern of belief translating into behavioural non-compliance is theoretically generalisable to the mob justice context. The convergence of these findings establishes a defensible basis for hypothesising that undergraduates' level of exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice significantly predicts their perception of the moral justification embedded in such misinformation. Grounded in this evidence and anchored in Social Cognitive Theory's proposition that repeated symbolic exposure shapes moral cognition through observational learning and vicarious reinforcement

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, selected for its capacity to capture attitudinal data at a single point in time and to examine predictive relationships between variables within a large population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design is appropriate for investigating how exposure to social media misinformation shapes undergraduates' moral cognition, as it permits standardised measurement without the temporal constraints of longitudinal inquiry. The population comprised all undergraduates enrolled in the three universities in Kwara State: University of Ilorin, Kwara State University, and Al-Hikmah University. Purposive sampling was employed to select these institutions based on their diverse profiles, geographic spread, and high concentrations of digitally active undergraduates, ensuring demographic and digital-behavioural heterogeneity.

Purposive sampling was further applied to select 398 respondents. Participants were chosen based on predefined criteria: registered undergraduates across all levels of study, ensuring representation of diverse disciplinary backgrounds and digital engagement patterns. Postgraduates and non-social

media users were excluded. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, assuming a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, yielding 398.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising two sections. Section A captured demographic variables, whilst Section B measured exposure to social media misinformation (six items) and perceptions of moral justifications (six items) on a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument was adapted from validated measures by Banaji and Bhat (2019) and Shodunke et al. (2023), with modifications for the Nigerian undergraduate context. Content validity was established through expert review by three communication scholars, whilst construct validity was assessed via factor analysis. A pilot test among 40 undergraduates yielded Cronbach's alpha values of .79 for exposure and .82 for moral justifications, exceeding the .70 threshold. Data were collected face-to-face in March 2026, with written informed consent obtained from all participants.

Data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics characterised the sample and variable distributions. Prior to regression, assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals were verified. Standardised composite indices were computed for both constructs. Simple linear regression tested the hypothesis, with effect size interpreted using Cohen's (1988) conventions.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Analyses of Respondents

Demographic profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	180	45.2
Female	218	54.8

Total	398	100%
Age range		
16-20	72	18.1
21-25	243	61.1
26-30	71	17.8
30 and above	12	3
Total	398	100%
University of study		
UNILORIN	238	59.8
KWASU	131	32.9
Al-Hikmah Uni.	29	7.3
Total	398	100%
Level of study		
100 Level	27	6.8
200 Level	87	21.9
300 Level	71	17.8
400 Level	113	28.4
500 Level	96	24.1
600 Level	4	1.1
Total	398	100%

Source: *Researcher's fieldwork, 2026.*

The demographic profile carries significant implications for interpreting the findings. The slight female majority aligns with Nigerian university enrolment trends and suggests that gendered patterns in social media engagement and moral reasoning warrant consideration, as prior research indicates differential susceptibility to misinformation across genders (Apuke & Omar, 2020). The dominance of the 21-25 age cohort reflects the typical undergraduate demographic and is theoretically pertinent given that this life stage represents formative civic identity development, during which exposure to morally charged digital content may crystallise enduring attitudes toward extrajudicial violence (Bandura, 2001). The concentration at 400 and 500 levels implies that respondents possess sufficient critical reasoning maturity to evaluate complex moral claims, yet remain digitally immersed enough to encounter high volumes of misinformation. The distribution

across universities, whilst weighted toward the largest institution, ensures coverage of diverse institutional cultures and digital ecosystems within Kwara State.

Table 2. Extent of exposure to social media misinformation related to mob justice

Exposure to social media misinformation	Mean	SD
I frequently encounter social media posts about false accusation that portray suspects as deserving of immediate punishment.	3.33	1.14
Repeated exposure to misleading crime-related content on social media has influence my perception that mob justice can sometimes be justified.	3.14	1.11
Even when I recognized crime-related information on social media as false, it does not change my views on mob justice.	3.14	1.14
My views on mob justice are influenced by my level of trust in law enforcement than by information encountered on social media.	3.41	1.04
I often come across crime-related post on social media that are shared without verification.	3.7	1.04
Social media platforms present information about suspected criminals in various formats, such as text, images and videos.	3.88	0.90
Total	3.43	1.06

The findings revealed a digitally saturated environment in which respondents encounter mob justice-related misinformation across multiple formats, with multimodal content (text, image, video) amplifying the salience and memorability of unverified claims. The high frequency of unverified posts suggests that platform architecture prioritises emotional arousal over factual accuracy, corroborating concerns that algorithmic amplification systematically erodes critical evaluation capacities. Notably, the finding that institutional trust in law enforcement exerts greater influence than social media content implies that exposure effects are moderated by pre-existing legitimacy perceptions, a pattern consistent with procedural justice theory. The partial endorsement of repeated exposure as shaping moral perception, coupled with belief perseverance even when falsehood is recognised, signals that moral disengagement mechanisms may operate

beneath conscious awareness, rendering digital literacy interventions insufficient without addressing affective and normative dimensions of misinformation processing.

Table 3. Perception on moral justification embedded in social media misinformation

Moral justification embedded in social media misinformation	Mean	SD
When social media portrays suspected criminals as a serious threat to my community, I tend to view mob justice as morally acceptable.	3.1	1.12
Observing widespread support for mob justice against suspected criminals on social media influences my perception that such actions are justified.	3.0	1.1
Even when social media spreads false information portraying suspects as dangerous, I believe mob justice is morally wrong.	3.52	1.08
Regardless of how negatively social media portrays suspected criminals, I do not consider mob justice to be morally justified.	3.49	1.05
Social media posts accusing individuals of crimes influence my views on the morally acceptability of mob justice.	3.14	1.08
The presentation of crime-related information on social media (e.g., wording, images, videos) affects my judgement of whether mob is right or wrong.	3.26	1.04
Total	3.25	1.07

The findings revealed a tension between principled moral rejection and situational cognitive susceptibility. The strong endorsement of mob justice as morally wrong, coupled with the rejection of moral justification regardless of negative portrayal, indicates that respondents retain foundational human rights values and due process commitments. However, the concurrent acknowledgment that misinformation influences moral judgement and that presentation format affects evaluation suggests that these values are not cognitively impervious; rather, they are vulnerable to framing effects and emotional manipulation. This ambivalence is theoretically significant: it demonstrates that moral disengagement does not require full endorsement of violence but operates through incremental shifts in cognitive availability and evaluative weighting

(Bandura, 2001). The resistance to peer influence (widespread social media support) is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that vicarious reinforcement from digital networks may be less potent than theorised, whilst platform-specific affordances (wording, imagery, video) retain substantial persuasive power.

Test of the hypotheses

Table 4. Linear Regression showing exposure to social media misinformation on mob justice as a predictor for moral justification.

Model	B	SE	T	P
Constant	2.207	.160	13.788	.000
Exposure to social media misinformation	0.205	.046	4.468	.000

$F_{(1, 396)} = 19.967, R^2 = .048, p = .000$

Dependent Variable: Perception of Moral Justification.

The regression result substantiates the hypothesised predictive relationship, yet the modest effect size (4.8% of variance explained) carries important theoretical and practical implications. Whilst exposure to misinformation significantly predicts moral justification perceptions, the overwhelming proportion of unexplained variance indicates that moral cognition is shaped by a complex constellation of factors beyond digital exposure, including institutional trust, personal ethics, and community norms (Tankebe, 2009; Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). This pattern aligns with Social Cognitive Theory's probabilistic framework, which posits that observational learning influences but does not determine moral outcomes (Bandura, 2001). The small effect size should not be interpreted as trivial; in attitudinal research concerning socially sensitive behaviours, even modest predictive effects can signify meaningful population-level risks when scaled across digitally saturated environments. The finding challenges deterministic narratives of media effects

whilst underscoring that targeted interventions reducing misinformation exposure may yield incremental but valuable attitudinal shifts among emerging civic leaders.

Discussion of Findings

This study assessed the extent of undergraduates' exposure to social media misinformation related to mob justice and examined the perception of the moral justifications embedded in such misinformation.

The findings revealed a digitally saturated environment in which undergraduates routinely encounter mob justice-related misinformation across multiple formats, with unverified crime-related posts and multimodal content dominating their social media ecosystems. This extent of exposure indicates that platform affordances prioritising emotional arousal over factual accuracy have created conditions wherein respondents repeatedly encounter symbolic models of extrajudicial violence, progressively eroding critical faculties through observational learning (Bandura, 2001; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). The finding that institutional trust in law enforcement exerts greater influence than social media content suggests that exposure effects are moderated by pre-existing legitimacy perceptions, a pattern consistent with procedural justice theory (Tankebe, 2009; Ruwan, Ogechukwu, Fadare, & Garba, 2020). The partial endorsement of repeated exposure as shaping moral perception, coupled with belief perseverance even when falsehood is recognised, signals that moral disengagement mechanisms may operate beneath conscious awareness (Badiora, 2020).

The examination of moral justification perceptions reveals a striking ambivalence that constitutes the study's most theoretically significant finding. Respondents concurrently endorsed the proposition that mob justice is morally wrong and rejected the notion that negative social media

portrayal justifies extrajudicial punishment, yet acknowledged that misinformation influences their moral judgement and that presentation format affects their evaluation. This tension between principled moral rejection and situational cognitive susceptibility indicates that respondents retain foundational human rights values whilst remaining vulnerable to framing effects and emotional manipulation. The ambivalence aligns with Social Cognitive Theory's probabilistic framework; moral cognition is not determined by exposure but is incrementally shifted through repeated encounters with morally charged symbolic content (Bandura, 2001). The resistance to peer influence is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that vicarious reinforcement from digital networks may be less potent than theorised, whilst platform-specific affordances retain substantial persuasive power (Okafor & Emeka, 2022).

The hypothesis that exposure significantly predicts moral justification perceptions is substantiated, yet the modest explanatory power carries important implications. The overwhelming proportion of unexplained variance indicates that moral cognition is shaped by a complex constellation of factors beyond digital exposure, including institutional trust, personal ethics, and community norms (Tankebe, 2009; Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). This pattern corroborates Mackintosh, Mackintosh, and Mazzi's (2024) finding that underlying normative frameworks render mob justice socially intelligible, confirming that the phenomenon is rarely conceptualised as morally transgressive. The Nigerian context amplifies these dynamics through historically entrenched vigilantism scripts and acute perceptions of criminal justice inefficacy (Essoh, Ukpung, & MacLeva, 2025; Ilori, 2020). The small effect size challenges deterministic narratives of media effects; it signifies that targeted interventions reducing misinformation exposure may yield incremental but valuable attitudinal shifts among emerging civic leaders, even as broader structural reforms addressing institutional legitimacy remain imperative (Salihu & Gholami, 2018).

This study replicates prior findings regarding vulnerability to misinformation-driven moral disengagement (Tiwa, 2022; Shodunke, Oladipupo, Alabi, & Akindele, 2023).

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media misinformation on mob justice among undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria. Findings reveal that respondents are substantially exposed to mob justice-related misinformation across multiple digital formats, perceive moral justifications embedded in such content, yet concurrently maintain that mob justice is morally wrong. Exposure to misinformation significantly predicts moral justification perceptions, though the modest effect size indicates that moral cognition is shaped by a broader constellation of institutional, ethical, and communal factors beyond digital exposure alone.

The study fills a critical gap by providing the first empirically grounded account of misinformation-driven moral cognition among undergraduates in northern Nigeria, extending Social Cognitive Theory's proposition that repeated symbolic exposure incrementally shifts moral evaluation without fully determining it. Practically, the findings underscore the need for targeted media literacy programmes within higher education institutions that strengthen critical evaluation of algorithmically amplified crime-related content, alongside regulatory frameworks that balance digital freedom with human rights protection. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, warranting longitudinal and experimental approaches to trace how misinformation effects unfold over time.

Recommendations

1. General studies programmes should train students to interrogate the provenance and emotional design of crime-related visual content, recognise dehumanising frames that activate moral disengagement, and practise verification protocols using actual Nigerian case scenarios.
2. Given that institutional trust in law enforcement moderates exposure effects, universities in Kwara State should create units comprising trained students, security personnel, and faculty who verify circulating crime claims in real time and disseminate counter-narratives through official channels, maintaining liaison with state police and civil society organisations.
3. The modest predictive effect of exposure indicates individual-level interventions are insufficient; regulatory frameworks should require friction mechanisms for forwarding unverified crime alerts within university geolocations, including delay timers and contextual warnings on legal and human rights implications.

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