Vol. 15, Issue: 10, October 2026
ISSN: (P) 2347-5412 ISSN: (O) 2320-091X

Impact of Social Media on Local Governance Accountability in Politics

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Abstract— Social media now sits between citizens and their local governments, yet little is known about whether it makes those governments more accountable. This study looks at that question in four urban local bodies in northern India. A survey of 400 residents, carried out between January and April 2026, measured social media use intensity, perceived transparency, responsiveness of officials, citizen participation, exposure to misinformation, and perceived governance accountability. Together the predictors explained 58% of the variance in accountability ($R^2 = .58$, $p < .001$). Heavier social media use was linked to higher accountability scores ($\beta = .17$), and about two-thirds of its total effect ran through transparency, responsiveness, and participation. Exposure to misinformation pulled scores down ($\beta = -.11$). Responsiveness of officials mattered most of all. The findings suggest that social media helps local accountability mainly when officials answer what citizens post, and that false content and unequal access limit the gain.

Keywords: ***social media, local governance, accountability, transparency, citizen participation, misinformation, urban local bodies***

Introduction

Accountability means that officials explain what they do, answer questions about it, and face consequences when they fall short (Bovens, 2007). People feel this most at the local level. Water supply, garbage collection, road repair, and trade licences are handled by municipal bodies, and when they fail, residents know exactly whom to blame.

Over the last decade, social media has become a regular place for these encounters. Residents photograph potholes and tag the municipal handle. Ward groups on WhatsApp pass around notices and complaints. Local bodies post tender notices, budgets, and project updates. In principle this makes information easier to find, lowers the cost of speaking up, and gives officials a visible audience (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010).

There are reasons for caution. False stories travel faster than true ones online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), and officials sometimes use their pages to manage their image instead of answering citizens (Mergel, 2013). Whether social media actually improves local accountability is still an open question.

Three gaps motivate this study. Most research looks at national politics or protest movements and leaves everyday municipal service aside. Many studies treat social media use as a single predictor and skip the pathways that might carry its effect. Misinformation is seldom modelled in the same equation as the benefits. This paper addresses all three with data from urban India.

Literature Review

Accountability and local governance

Bovens (2007) describes accountability as a relationship in which an actor feels obliged to explain and justify conduct to a forum, which can ask questions and pass judgement. Read this way, accountability needs information for the forum to work with, a way to put questions to the actor, and a forum able to act. Fox (2015) reviews the evidence on social accountability and finds that citizen voice makes a difference mainly when institutions are able and willing to respond. Voice alone seldom changes outcomes.

Social media and openness

Bertot et al. (2010) argued that social media and other e-government tools can promote openness and curb corruption by making information easier to reach and by letting citizens watch what officials do. Studies of municipalities show a mixed picture. Bonsón, Torres, Royo, and Flores (2012) examined European local governments and found that many used social media to publish information but few used it for dialogue. Mergel (2013) saw the same tendency in U.S. federal agencies, where adoption ranged from simply posting information to real engagement with citizens.

Participation and trust

Several studies link social media use to civic engagement. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) found that people who use social media for news report more social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. Boulianne (2015) reviewed dozens of studies and found a positive but modest association between social media use and participation, with the size of the effect varying by context. Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang (2016) reached a similar conclusion in a meta-analysis of citizen engagement, with stronger effects for informational and expressive use than for entertainment. Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar (2014) reported that social media use fostered online civic engagement and was associated with more trust in government institutions.

Vol. 15, Issue: 10, October 2026
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Connective action

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe connective action, in which people coordinate by sharing personalised content on digital media instead of relying on formal organisations. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) showed that social media changed how people learned about protests and decided whether to join them. At the ward level, the same logic suggests that residents can organise around a blocked drain or an unlit street with no organisation behind them.

Misinformation

Vosoughi et al. (2018) analysed rumour cascades on Twitter and found that false stories reached more people, and reached them faster, than true ones, mostly because people chose to share them. A false rumour about a councillor or a municipal contract could mislead residents about who is responsible, so exposure to misinformation may reduce whatever accountability gains social media offers.

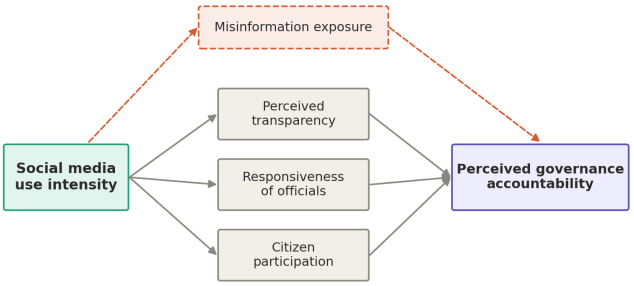
Research gap

The literature shows that social media can improve transparency, participation, and trust, and that misinformation works against these gains. What is missing is a single model that tests the mechanisms together for local accountability, especially in urban India. This study provides one.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The study set out to measure how widely urban residents use social media in relation to their local government, to estimate the association between social media use and perceived accountability, to test whether transparency, responsiveness, and participation carry that association, and to assess the effect of misinformation exposure. Three hypotheses followed from the literature.

- *H1:* Social media use intensity is positively associated with perceived local governance accountability.
- *H2:* Perceived transparency, responsiveness of officials, and citizen participation mediate the relationship between social media use and accountability.
- *H3:* Exposure to misinformation is negatively associated with perceived accountability and partly offsets the benefits of social media use.



Conceptual model guiding the study

Methodology

Research design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey. This design suits the aim of estimating associations and testing mediation pathways in a varied urban population.

Study area and sampling

Data came from four urban local bodies in northern India. Wards were first selected within each local body, and respondents were then drawn by systematic random sampling from household lists, with 100 respondents allocated to each body. The minimum sample was calculated with Cochran's (1977) formula for a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and maximum variability ($p = .5$), which gives 384. To allow for non-response, 432 questionnaires were distributed and 400 complete responses were retained, a response rate of 92.6%. Eligible respondents were residents aged 18 or above who used at least one social media platform.

Instrument and measures

The questionnaire was built from the constructs in the literature, and every item used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Social media use intensity (five items) captured how often and for what purpose respondents used social media for local civic matters. Perceived transparency (four items) asked whether the local body shares timely and understandable information online. Responsiveness of officials (four items) covered the speed and adequacy of replies to online complaints. Citizen participation (five items) recorded activities such as tagging officials, signing online petitions, and joining ward groups. Misinformation exposure (three items) measured how often respondents met false or misleading local information. Governance accountability, the dependent variable, was measured with six items on answerability and consequences for officials. Age, gender, and education served as controls.

A pilot with 40 respondents, who were excluded from the final sample, led to minor wording changes. Cronbach's alpha exceeded .70 for every scale (Table 2). A confirmatory factor analysis supported the measurement model ($\chi^2/df = 1.92$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .047, SRMR = .041).

Vol. 15, Issue: 10, October 2026
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Data collection and analysis

Trained enumerators administered the questionnaire face to face between January and April 2026. Data were analysed in SPSS 27 with the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). The analyses were descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, hierarchical multiple regression, one-way ANOVA, an independent-samples t-test, and parallel mediation with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Variance inflation factors were checked for multicollinearity (maximum VIF = 1.84), and the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.97 indicated independent residuals.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained, responses were anonymous, and the data were used only for this research.

Results

Sample profile and platform use

Table 1 summarises the sample. Men made up 56.0% of respondents, and the largest age group was 26 to 35 years (32.0%). Graduates and postgraduates together formed 56.0% of the sample.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 400)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	224	56.0
	Female	176	44.0
Age (years)	18–25	98	24.5
	26–35	128	32.0
	36–45	94	23.5
	46–60	56	14.0
	Above 60	24	6.0
Education	Up to secondary	72	18.0
	Senior secondary	104	26.0
	Graduate	148	37.0
	Postgraduate	76	19.0

WhatsApp was the most widely used platform for local civic matters (92.0%), followed by Facebook (69.0%), YouTube (65.5%), Instagram (53.5%), and X (24.5%). Respondents could select more than one. About 61.5% agreed that their local body's social media posts improved transparency, and 54.5% agreed that officials respond to complaints raised online. Nearly half (48.0%) had taken some form of online civic action, and 70.0% said they met false or misleading local information at least weekly.

Descriptive statistics and reliability

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and reliability (N = 400)

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Social media use intensity	5	3.46	0.82	.86
Perceived transparency	4	3.28	0.79	.83
Responsiveness of officials	4	3.05	0.88	.88
Citizen participation	5	3.12	0.84	.85
Misinformation exposure	3	3.61	0.91	.79
Governance accountability	6	3.19	0.76	.90

Social media use intensity differed significantly across age groups, $F(4, 395) = 24.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Mean use fell from 3.88 among respondents aged 18 to 25 to 3.67, 3.34, 2.90, and 2.38 in the successively older groups.

Correlation analysis

Table 3. Pearson correlations among study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social media use intensity	1					
2. Perceived transparency	.52**	1				
3. Responsiveness of officials	.47**	.49**	1			
4. Citizen participation	.58**	.44**	.41**	1		
5. Misinformation exposure	.31**	−.18**	−.15**	−.09	1	
6. Governance accountability	.55**	.61**	.64**	.53**	−.24**	1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Accountability correlated positively with every benefit-oriented variable and negatively with misinformation exposure. Misinformation exposure was unrelated to participation ($r = −.09$, not significant).

Vol. 15, Issue: 10, October 2026
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Regression analysis

Hierarchical regression was used to test H1 and H3. Model 1, with the controls only, explained 6% of the variance in accountability, $F(3, 396) = 8.43$, $p < .001$. Adding the five focal predictors in Model 2 raised R^2 to .58 (adjusted R^2 = .57), $F(8, 391) = 67.5$, $p < .001$, a change of .52, $\Delta F(5, 391) = 96.8$, $p < .001$.

Table 4. Regression predicting governance accountability (Model 2)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.412	0.190	–	2.17	.030
Age (coded)	0.019	0.021	.03	0.90	.370
Gender (female = 1)	0.030	0.046	.02	0.65	.520
Education (coded)	0.046	0.027	.06	1.70	.090
Social media use intensity	0.158	0.038	.17	4.16	< .001
Perceived transparency	0.260	0.045	.27	5.78	< .001
Responsiveness of officials	0.285	0.040	.33	7.13	< .001
Citizen participation	0.127	0.039	.14	3.26	.001
Misinformation exposure	−0.092	0.031	−.11	−2.97	.003

Social media use intensity stayed a significant positive predictor after the mediators and controls were included, which supports H1. Responsiveness of officials was the strongest predictor, followed by transparency. Misinformation exposure had a small but significant negative effect, which supports H3. None of the demographic controls was significant.

Mediation analysis

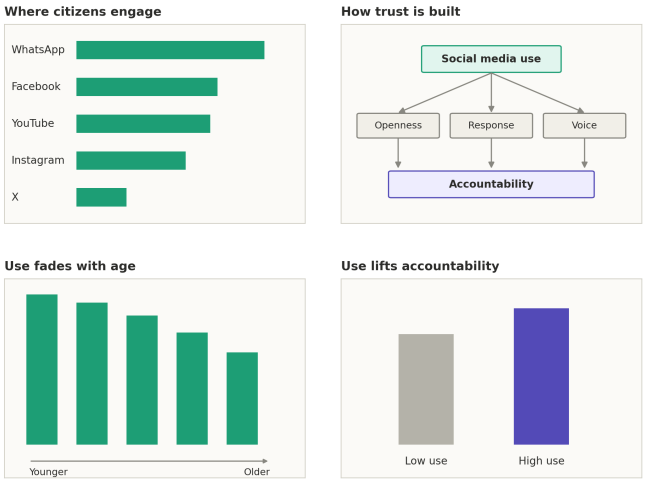
Table 5. Bootstrapped effects of social media use on accountability (5,000 samples)

Pathway	Effect	95% CI
Via perceived transparency	0.130	[0.078, 0.188]
Via responsiveness of officials	0.144	[0.093, 0.203]
Via citizen participation	0.075	[0.032, 0.124]
Via misinformation exposure	−0.032	[−0.063, −0.009]
Total indirect effect	0.317	[0.250, 0.391]
Direct effect	0.158	–
Total effect	0.475	–

Every confidence interval for an indirect effect excluded zero. About two-thirds (66.7%) of the total effect ran through the mediators, which supports H2. The negative pathway through misinformation shows that heavier users meet more false content, and this offsets part of what they gain.

An independent-samples t-test split respondents at the median of social media use (200 in each group). High users reported higher accountability ($M = 3.52$) than low users ($M = 2.86$), $t(398) = 9.2$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.92$.

Visual summary



Infographic summary of key findings

Discussion

The results support the idea that social media use goes with higher perceived accountability in local government, and they show where the link comes from. Transparency, responsiveness, and participation together carried two-thirds of the total effect. This fits Bovens's (2007) account of accountability as information, dialogue, and a forum that can act, and it agrees with Fox's (2015) point that voice counts when institutions respond.

Responsiveness of officials had the largest coefficient, ahead of transparency and participation. Residents seem to judge accountability by whether their complaints get answered, and posting information matters less on its own. Bonsón et al. (2012) and Mergel (2013) found that public bodies often use social media to broadcast. The present data suggest that broadcasting earns less credit from citizens than replying does.

The positive link between use and participation agrees with Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), Boulianne (2015), and Skoric et al. (2016), and the association with accountability fits Warren et al.'s (2014) finding on trust. That nearly half of the respondents had taken some online civic action suggests that

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ward-level connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) is already part of everyday urban life.

Misinformation complicates the picture. Heavy users see more false or misleading local content, and exposure lowered accountability scores. The effect was small, yet it cancelled part of the benefit of heavy use, in line with the spread patterns Vosoughi et al. (2018) describe. Exposure was unrelated to participation, so false content seems to affect how residents judge institutions more than whether they take part.

The age gradient shows that the benefits are unevenly spread. Older residents use these platforms far less, so any channel that depends on social media will hear less from them. Education did not predict accountability once use and its mechanisms were in the model, which suggests that how people engage matters more than their schooling.

Implications

For local administrators, response time to online complaints deserves to be tracked as a performance indicator. Service commitments for replying, dedicated grievance staff, and public dashboards showing resolution status would strengthen the mechanisms identified here. Local bodies should also publish verified information themselves and correct rumours quickly, since misinformation erodes trust. For policymakers, social media channels should sit alongside offline grievance systems so that older and digitally excluded residents are still heard. Civil society groups can use ward-level groups to document problems and follow them up with officials.

Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design supports associations and mediation tests but cannot establish causation, and accountable governments may also attract more social media engagement. All measures were self-reported, so perception bias is possible. The sample covered social media users in four urban local bodies, which limits generalisation to rural areas and to non-users. Future work could use longitudinal or experimental designs, combine survey data with platform and administrative records on complaint resolution, compare rural and urban settings, and look at platform-specific effects, particularly in closed messaging groups.

Conclusion

This study examined how social media use relates to perceived accountability in urban local government. Heavier use predicted higher accountability scores, both directly and through transparency, responsiveness, and participation, while exposure to misinformation reduced them. The practical advice for municipal bodies is short: answer citizens who write to you online, publish verified information, and keep offline grievance channels open for residents who are not on social media.

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