Identifying Manipulation Techniques for Inoculation

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The primary goal of this project is to develop and test five videos, each of approximately 1-3 minutes in length, that build psychological resistance against manipulation and persuasion techniques commonly used in misinformation in India. This approach is grounded in a method called "technique-based inoculation". By "manipulation technique" we mean rhetorical devices and strategies that intend to exploit, control, or otherwise influence recipients' behaviour, in this case on social media. To be suitable for inoculation, manipulation techniques must be 1) known to be epistemologically dubious, and 2) be identifiable by any person familiar with the manipulation technique when it is used in written or audiovisual content one might encounter online. The first task of this project is to determine which manipulation techniques the videos should cover. This document contains the following: 1) a brief explanation of "technique-based inoculation", the theoretical foundation of this project, 2) a discussion of why inoculation videos are a particularly powerful format for tackling misinformation in India, 3) a literature review of misinformation in India, with a view of identifying common manipulation techniques, and 4) a final selection of 5 manipulation techniques that will be addressed in each of the inoculation videos.

Inoculation theory and "technique-based inoculation"

Inoculation theory is a framework from the 1960s which posits that it is possible to build preemptive psychological resistance against future unwanted persuasion attempts (Compton, 2013; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961). Much like a medical vaccine, where people are injected with a weakened or dead virus or other pathogen which triggers the immune system to produce antibodies, psychological inoculations aim to prevent unwanted persuasion from happening in the first place ("prebunking"), rather than correct it post-exposure

("debunking"). Over many decades of research, inoculation has proven to be effective at increasing resistance against unwanted persuasion attempts (Banas & Rains, 2010; Traberg et al., 2022).

Traditionally, inoculation interventions have sought to build resistance against *specific* fallacious arguments, for example in the context of climate change misinformation (van der Linden et al., 2017) and the detrimental health effects of smoking (Pfau et al., 1992). This so-called *issue-based inoculation* approach is useful in the context of misinformation when it is possible to predict with reasonable certainty what kind of misinformation people will be exposed to in the near future. For instance, before the 2020 US presidential elections, Twitter launched a so-called "prebunking" campaign against misinformation about election fraud (Ingram, 2020); because accusations of election fraud are a recurring theme on US social media during controversial elections, it was predictable that such narratives would make the rounds online, which meant that Twitter could design a campaign countering these narratives before they went viral.

In many cases, however, it is not possible to predict what specific misinformation people will likely be exposed to. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it becomes impossible to inoculate people against misinformation altogether. Much of the misinformation that goes viral online makes use of a limited number of manipulation techniques or tropes, which are indicators of low epistemic quality (Carrasco-Farré, 2022; Simchon et al., 2021). Such manipulation techniques include, for example, logical fallacies, conspiratorial reasoning, emotional manipulation, trolling, and false amplification (Cook et al., 2022; Roozenbeek, van der Linden, et al., 2022; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020; van der Linden & Roozenbeek, 2020). Previous research has shown that people can be successfully inoculated against the use of these techniques in social media content and news headlines that they are entirely unfamiliar with (Basol et al., 2021; Harrop et al., 2022; Roozenbeek, Traberg, et al.,

2022; Roozenbeek, van der Linden, et al., 2022). This approach of inoculating people against manipulation techniques rather than individual arguments is commonly referred to as *technique-based inoculation*.

Using videos to inoculate against misinformation in India

A growing body of work has found that video is a particularly powerful medium for technique-based inoculation interventions (Hughes et al., 2021; Piltch-Loeb et al., 2022; Roozenbeek, van der Linden, et al., 2022). The advantage of using video over other types of interventions such as games (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019) or short pieces of text, for example infographics (Basol et al., 2021), is that they can be easily scaled across social media platforms and are readily shared from person to person. Roozenbeek, van der Linden et al. (2022), for instance, found that showing inoculation videos as advertisements on YouTube boosted viewers' ability to correctly identify manipulation techniques in previously unseen news headlines by about 5%, compared to a control group. This finding showed that it is feasible to improve people's ability to identify manipulative content even in a noisy social media environment, where people do not have to pay attention to the video, can turn off the sound, switch to another tab, or disengage from the intervention in some other manner.

India is YouTube's largest and fastest growing market worldwide (The Hindu, 2019). After the government banned TikTok in June 2020, India experienced a massive boom in home-grown video content production. Today, YouTube is the most popular source of news in India, with 53% of Indians reporting that they use the platform to access news content (Basuroy, 2022). At the same time, misinformation has become a growing problem on Indian social media (Badrinathan, 2021). As the number of social media users (particularly on YouTube and WhatsApp, but also Facebook and ShareChat and other direct messaging apps) continues to grow (see Appendix), so does the amount of harmful, false, and/or misleading

viral content. Countering this problem can be difficult, as educational interventions have in the past failed to yield an improvement in Indian social media users' ability to identify misinformation (Badrinathan, 2021), and Indians' awareness of fact-checking resources remains low (see Appendix). In addition, content moderation and debunking efforts are often not feasible, for example because direct messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram are encrypted, making it impossible to know exactly what kind of misinformation is shared and by who. Therefore, to leverage the viral potential of video content, the goal of this project is to produce videos that improve resilience against the types of manipulative content that Indian social media users are likely to encounter. These videos can then be shared on encrypted direct messaging apps, or run as ads on YouTube, so as to show them to as many people as possible.

Misinformation in India

Viral misinformation in India is thought to have serious adverse consequences. For instance, in 2018, several people were killed after rumours started spreading about child kidnappings taking place in several villages (BBC News, 2018; Phartiyal et al., 2018). At a societal level, the spread of misinformation poses a challenge in the domains of health, politics, and religion (see Appendix), where it has been implicated in giving rise to false beliefs about COVID-19, political polarisation, and ethnic and religious tensions.

Past research has yielded video-based interventions that "inoculate" people against manipulation techniques known to be common in Western contexts (although knowing exactly how common each technique is vis-a-vis other techniques is a highly complex task, see Coan et al., 2021). Roozenbeek, van der Linden et al. (2022) developed a series of videos that tackled the following manipulation techniques: 1) emotionally manipulative language intended to evoke negative emotions such as fear, anger or outrage; 2) the use of incoherent

or mutually exclusive arguments; 3) false dichotomies (or false dilemmas); 4) scapegoating or holding an individual or group solely responsible for a complex problem with multiple causes; and 5) engaging in ad-hominem attacks (i.e., attacking the person instead of engaging with the argument). However, it is not necessarily the case that these manipulation techniques are commonly encountered outside of Western contexts. It is therefore of key importance to survey what tactics and manipulation techniques are common in misinformation found on Indian social media.

Mythos Labs recently conducted an investigation into the proliferation of misinformation in India (see Appendix). The report identifies three common tactics used to spread misinformation: *spoofing*, *decontextualisation*, and *social proofing*. *Spoofing* refers to false or misleading content that mimics the look and feel of reliable sources. Such content can come from parody accounts (which imitate well-known individuals, for example politicians) or misattribute claims to influential figures. This tactic is sometimes also referred to as "impersonation" (van der Linden & Roozenbeek, 2020). The Mythos Labs report gives an example of a tweet, supposedly authored by former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, which mocked current Prime Minister Narendra Modi; in reality, the tweet was written by a parody account, but this did not prevent screenshots of the tweet from going viral on social media.

Decontextualisation consists of removing or editing content to distort the facts, for example by cropping an image so that important information is left out, misrepresenting the time, date or location of real information, or leaving out crucial contextual information about a particular news story. The report mentions an example of a viral Facebook post in which a Hindu woman appears to be assaulted (the post claimed that Muslims watched on while it happened). However, the image was a picture from a movie set which had been cropped so that the actors around the woman were no longer visible.

Social proofing refers to the artificial amplification of inauthentic content, for example via bots or paid trolls. Here, the goal is to make it appear as though a post has a lot of likes or comments, thus artificially inflating its apparent popularity. This type of social information is known to influence people's perceptions of its credibility (Traberg & van der Linden, 2022), and might increase the potential virality of unreliable content. The report mentions an example of a YouTube video which claimed to show a mob of angry Muslims physically assaulting Hindus in Baduria, West Bengal. The video had a view count that was artificially inflated so as to lend it credibility. It helped spur the Hindu-Muslim riots in Baduria in 2018. However, one problem with this particular manipulation technique is that it is not easily recognisable when looking at individual examples of manipulative content. A video viewer cannot tell just from looking at the video that the view count was artificially inflated, for example; this means that this manipulation technique does not lend itself particularly well to inoculation, as it is difficult to train individuals to be able to spot this technique by looking at a piece of content (other strategies may be required, such as lateral reading or reverse-image searching).

The report further mentions three common types of misinformation: health, politics, and religion. Health misinformation in India is typically about fake cures and remedies, as well as distorted predictions about the severity of various illnesses (such as about the COVID-19 death toll); this type of content can be said to fall under the "fake expert" manipulation technique (Basol et al., 2021; Cook et al., 2022). In addition, health misinformation tends to amplify fears and concerns that people may have about a particular disease or treatments such as vaccines (Al-Zaman, 2022). With respect to politics and religion, misinformation often seeks to amplify negative sentiments about individuals or groups, especially in cases where there exist between-group tensions (such as between Muslims and Hindus). The report mentions an example of a 15-year-old boy who drowned in

Gopalganj district on March 28th, 2020. OpIndia, an online media outlet accused of spreading right-wing propaganda, published a false claim that he had been killed in a mosque as ritual sacrifice by Muslims. In the literature, this type of content is referred to as "scapegoating" (Atlani-Duault et al., 2020).

Finally, one common technique mentioned in the report is emotional manipulation (Roozenbeek, van der Linden, et al., 2022). Negative emotions are key to the spread of (mis)information on social networks (Brady et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Content that seeks to evoke strong emotions such as fear, anger or outrage is exceedingly common, and can override considerations of accuracy (Van Bavel et al., 2021). In India, emotional manipulation is often used to fuel ethnic or religious tensions, and emotions play a large role in the spread of rumours. For instance, in 2018, false rumours on social media about child kidnappings were implicated in several lynchings (Phartiyal et al., 2018; Vasudeva & Barkdull, 2020); messages urging people to prioritise their children's safety over the accuracy of the stories appeared to indeed be successful at doing so.

Selecting manipulation techniques for inoculation

In the above discussion, we have identified five manipulation techniques that, based on the available data, are commonly encountered on Indian social media:

- **Spoofing** (or impersonation): imitating or mimicking real individuals, in order to drive engagement through borrowed credibility
- **Decontextualisation**: leaving out crucial information in order to make an event or story look more outrageous than it really is
- **Health scares**: promoting false cures and remedies to various diseases and stoking fears about the severity of these diseases or the risks associated with treatments and vaccines

- **Emotional manipulation**: seeking to evoke strong emotions such as fear, anger or outrage, with a view of overriding people's considerations of accuracy
- **Scapegoating**: holding individuals or groups responsible for adverse events (real or imaginary) in order to fuel intergroup tensions

Taken together, these five manipulation techniques do not comprise *all* misinformation going viral in India, but a substantial amount. These manipulation techniques lend themselves well to technique-based inoculation, as it is theoretically feasible to improve an individual's ability to recognise the use of such a technique in the content they may encounter on social media or on direct messaging apps. However, it is very important to think carefully about how exactly these techniques will be addressed and taught in the inoculation videos; for example, when it comes to scapegoating and emotional manipulation, it is of key importance to avoid discussing real-world political and religious identities as much as possible, as this may trigger strong negative reactions among viewers who may feel attacked by the video's message. Designing the content of the videos is the next step in this project; this will be undertaken jointly by Cambridge and Mythos Labs.

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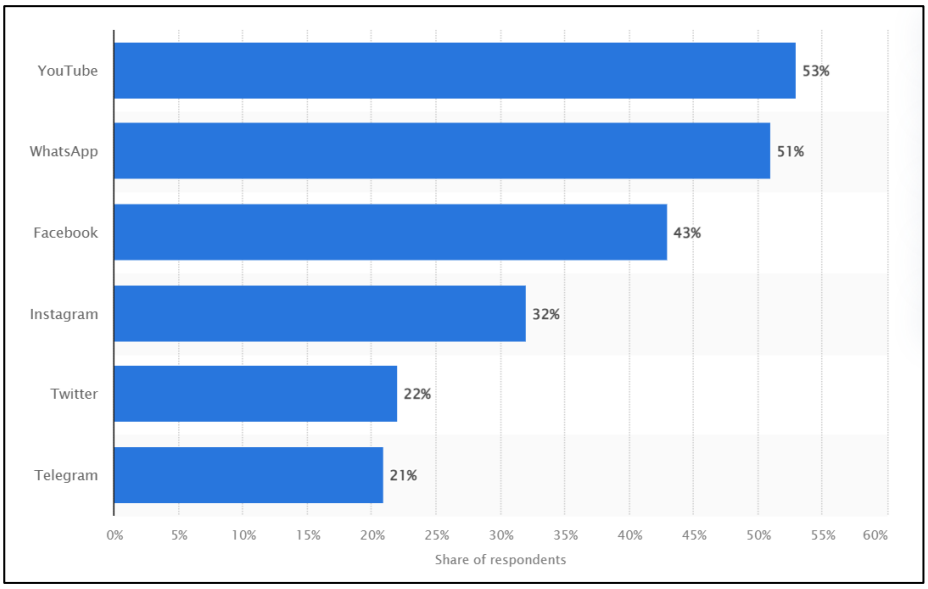
Appendix: Online Misinformation in India – Research and Insights (Mythos Labs report)

Background

- **Indians perceive misinformation as a serious concern –**51% of Indian respondents in a 2019 survey expressed concern that facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda online.
- **Yet awareness of fact-checking resources is low** – In a 2018 survey, 45% of respondents stated they were not aware of any fact checking sites
- **YouTube and WhatsApp are Main Sources of News on Social Media** - per a 2022 survey, the social media platforms most commonly used as a source for news by Indians are YouTube and WhatsApp, followed by Facebook.
- **Misinformation in regional languages is a growing threat –** The rise of Indian social media platforms such as ShareChat, which are optimized for regional languages, has contributed to a rise in misinformation beyond English. According to an investigation by the Hindustan Times, ShareChat was home to significant levels of misinformation in Hindi and Kannada as well.

Figure 1: Social networks used to access news across India in 2022 [Source: Statista]



Most Common Tactics for Spreading Online Misinformation in India

Researchers at Mythos Labs have identified three common tactics used to spread misinformation directed at audiences in India, across social platforms and languages:

1. ***Spoofing*** *– Intimating the look and feel of reliable information sources*
    - Ahead of the 2020 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council elections (Upper house of the UP assembly), a screenshot of a Hindi news channel graphic showing a statement made by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president Mayawati in October 2020 on 'supporting the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) if needed' was widely shared with the false claim that her party would align with the ‘saffron party’ in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in November 2020.

Figure 2

- A screenshot of a tweet in the name of former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, ridiculing PM Modi, had gone viral on social media. However, it was tweeted by an inauthentic 'parody' account of the former PM.

Figure 3

English translation: *"The man who could not run BSNL, who could not run the railway station, who could not run the airport and a blind devotee says he will run the country..!".*

2. ***Decontextualizing:*** *Removing/editing context to distort facts, e.g. misrepresenting the date/location of a real post or cropping an authentic image to perpetuate a false narrative.*
   - **Example:** Figure 4 is a screenshot of an image shared on Facebook that went viral, claiming to show Muslims watching while a Hindu woman is assaulted. The image was a cropped version of a real photograph showing actors shooting a movie scene (figure 5), with the part showing the famous male actor edited out.

Figure 4

Figure 5

3. ***Emotional Manipulation:*** Using emotionally charged language while spreading false information, with the intention of triggering a negative emotional response from the audience (e.g., fear, hatred, rage, resentment, etc.)
   - A report in Time magazine claimed that between 28 March and 3 April 2020, tweets with #CoronaJihad appeared almost 300,000 times and were seen by

approximately 165 million people on Twitter. By associating Muslims with something as dangerous and fearful as COVID, these tweets sought to incite negative emotions towards Muslim minorities.

Figure 6

- Following a Muslim politician's assassination in West Bengal in April of 2022, emotionally manipulative misinformation inspired fear and anger that helped incite deadly mob violence. Social media posts describing Muslim mobs as terrifying, and daring "coward" Hindus to respond, sought to pit Hindus against Muslims.

Figure 7

Most Prevalent Topics for Spreading Misinformation in India

- A study analyzing 419 fake news items published in India revealed that fake news shared on social media has six major themes: health, religion, politics, crime, entertainment, and miscellaneous; as seen in the tables below.
  Our own research supports this finding – Mythos Labs researchers studied over 100 pieces of misinformation shared with fact-checking websites in India and identified three topics to be most prevalent:

1. *Health Misinformation*

- ➢ **Example:** On October 6, 2020, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan released an "AYUSH standard treatment protocol" for the clinical management of COVID-19, that lists dietary measures, yoga, and Ayurvedic herbs with formulations. However, such an alternative medicine protocol was backed by no publicly available evidence.
- ➢ **Example:** The false claim that eating raw onion with rock salt can cure COVID-19 had to be debunked in a public announcement by the Press Bureau of India (PIB).

2. *Political Misinformation*

- ➢ **Example:** A false post claimed PM Narendra Modi had been declared the 'Best Prime Minister in the World' by UNESCO. The false claim, which went viral 3 years ago, continues to be re-circulated every year.

Figure 8

3. ***Religious Misinformation***

➢ **Example:** When a 15-year-old boy drowned in Gopalganj district on March 28th, 2020, OpIndia, an online media outlet accused of spreading right-wing propaganda, published a false claim that he had been killed in a mosque as ritual sacrifice by Muslims.

Figure 9

English translation: *"They sacrificed a child to make their mosque stronger. Police then harassed the Hindu family, forcing them to flee their village"*

➢ **Example:** Shortly after Ms. Droupadi Murmu, a tribal woman, was elected President of India in 2022, a graphic falsely claiming the late Dr. BR Ambedkar, a Dalit activist and social reformer, had said "Reservations in India should be abolished the day a tribal woman becomes president of the country" went viral.

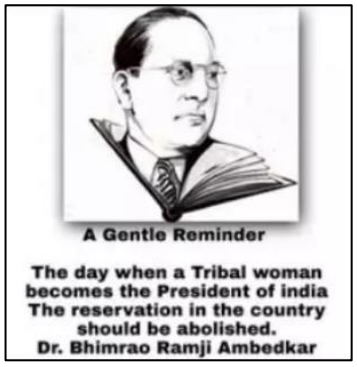



Figure 10