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FROM ACCOUNTABILITY TO PUNISHMENT: DIGITAL VIGILANTISM AND INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL IN INDIA

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I. ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have expanded the capacity of citizens to expose perceived wrongdoing, mobilise public attention and demand accountability. At the same time, the same visibility can produce forms of informal social control in which public judgement becomes reputational punishment. This article examines the boundary between collective accountability and collective punishment in digitally mediated public life in India. Drawing on qualitative interpretive analysis of scholarly literature and documented cases, it examines the June 2026 death by suicide of Samuel Garvyn De Braganca in Goa following the circulation of a video concerning alleged littering, and the 2026 online-harassment allegations made by Mumbai protester Rhiya Ahir. Rather than treating digital vigilantism as inherently harmful, the article examines the conditions under which citizen-led exposure moves from addressing an alleged act to sanctioning the person associated with it. Becker's labelling theory and Goffman's concept of stigma are considered alongside Papacharissi's concept of affective publics and scholarship on digital vigilantism. The article proposes a trajectory from act to label, identity, reputation and potentially social exclusion. It argues that the boundary between accountability and punishment becomes blurred when rapid visibility, decontextualisation, emotional amplification and disproportionate reputational sanctions converge. Digital vigilantism is therefore approached as a contested form of informal social control whose consequences depend on how information is framed, circulated and acted upon by networked publics.

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II. KEYWORDS

Digital vigilantism, labelling theory, digital stigma, affective publics, India.

III. INTRODUCTION

Within this environment, digital vigilantism has emerged as a form of citizen-led enforcement. Individuals and online groups use social media to expose perceived wrongdoing, identify alleged offenders, circulate evidence and mobilise public reaction. In doing so, citizens can assume functions associated with institutional authorities by identifying a perceived transgressor, constructing a narrative around an incident and encouraging others to participate in denunciation or sanction (Trottier, 2017; Trottier, 2020).

Yet digital vigilantism cannot simply be understood as destructive. Digital visibility can document experiences, challenge institutional silence and bring marginalised concerns into public discussion. Feminist digital activism, for example, has demonstrated how networked communication can help previously marginalised experiences gain visibility and collective support (Mendes et al., 2018). Public exposure can therefore serve accountability when it draws attention to problems and encourages institutional response.

The difficulty begins when the same mechanisms that facilitate accountability become mechanisms of punishment. Rapid dissemination, mass participation and loss of context can transform exposure into sustained condemnation. An allegation or relatively minor transgression may become detached from its original circumstances, while the individual involved becomes increasingly associated with a particular label. Digital visibility can consequently produce stigma and reputational harm (Trottier, 2017; Goffman, 1963).

This raises a sociological distinction between collective accountability and collective punishment. Accountability is directed primarily towards conduct, a problem or an institutional failure, with the possibility of correction or responsibility. Punishment emerges when consequences move beyond the conduct and begin to target the individual

as a social identity. The important question is therefore when collective judgement ceases to address an alleged transgression and begins producing a continuing social penalty for the person associated with it.

The sociological framework used here combines Becker's labelling theory, Goffman's theory of stigma, Papacharissi's concept of affective publics, Marwick and boyd's concept of context collapse, and scholarship on digital vigilantism. Together, these perspectives help explain how an incident can move from an act that is publicly questioned to a label attached to a person, and eventually to reputational or social punishment.

The discussion draws on two recent Indian cases: the June 2026 death of Samuel Garvyn De Braganca in Goa following the circulation of a video concerning alleged littering, and the 2026 online harassment reported by Mumbai protester Rhiya Ahir following her viral confrontation with police during NEET-related protests. These cases are not treated as identical or as proof of a single causal pattern. Instead, they illustrate different ways in which digital visibility can become connected to institutional intervention, public judgement and reputational consequences.

The central argument is that digital vigilantism becomes punitive when collective visibility stops functioning primarily as a means of demanding an appropriate response to conduct and begins functioning as a means of fixing a discrediting identity upon an individual.

A. Research Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the sociological boundary between digitally mediated collective accountability and collective punishment.
2. To trace the process through which digital visibility may progress from the exposure of an alleged act to labelling, reputational sanction and possible social exclusion.

3. To examine this accountability-to-punishment trajectory through the contemporary Indian cases of Samuel Garvyn De Braganca and Rhiya Ahir, while recognising the distinct factual and social circumstances surrounding each case.

B. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Under what conditions does digitally mediate collective accountability develop into collective punishment or reputational sanction?
2. How do labelling, stigma, affective amplification and loss of context contribute to the movement from criticism of an alleged act to the construction of a discrediting social identity?

C. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive and comparative case-based research methodology. It draws upon existing scholarly literature concerning digital vigilantism, labelling, stigma, affective publics and context collapse, together with published documentary reporting concerning two contemporary Indian cases: Samuel Garvyn De Braganca in Goa and Rhiya Ahir in Mumbai.

The two cases have been selected because they illustrate distinct pathways through which digital visibility may generate public judgement and reputational consequences. The De Braganca case concerns digital exposure arising from an alleged civic violation, whereas the Ahir case concerns political-protest visibility followed by allegations of sustained online harassment and reputational attacks.

The analysis relies upon scholarly literature and published reporting concerning the relevant incidents, complaints and official responses. The cases are examined illustratively and comparatively rather than as a representative sample of digital vigilantism across India or as evidence establishing a uniform causal relationship between digital exposure and subsequent consequences.

IV. DIGITAL VIGILANTISM AS INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

Digital vigilantism can be understood as citizen-led social intervention in which individuals or groups use digital technologies to identify, expose, denounce or sanction people whom they perceive to have violated social, moral or legal norms. Unlike formal systems of social control, digital vigilantism is decentralised and does not depend upon established authority. Ordinary users can participate directly in producing and circulating accusations, often without possessing the institutional authority to investigate or adjudicate the conduct in question (Trottier, 2017).

The importance of digital vigilantism lies in its ability to transform visibility into social sanction. A photograph, video or screenshot can become the starting point for identification and denunciation. Once circulated across networks, users who were not present during the original event can participate in interpreting it, assigning responsibility and encouraging others to respond. Trottier (2017) describes this through the weaponisation of visibility, in which exposure itself becomes a mechanism through which networked publics attempt to discipline perceived wrongdoers.

Digital denunciation may involve naming, tagging, sharing personal information, contacting employers or institutions, or encouraging others to participate in sanctioning. In more extreme forms, it can involve doxing and the exposure of personal information for further retaliation (Trottier, 2017; Trottier, 2020). The sanction is therefore often collective without requiring formal organisation.

This differs from formal punishment because institutional systems generally contain procedures through which allegations are investigated, evidence considered and responsibility established. Digital vigilantism can reverse this sequence: public judgement may occur before factual verification. At the same time, digital vigilantism should not be reduced to irrational online behaviour. Public exposure can help reveal wrongdoing and pressure institutions when conventional mechanisms appear ineffective. The sociological problem is that accountability and punishment can operate through the same infrastructure. An individual may initially be exposed because citizens

want an institution to investigate alleged wrongdoing, but as visibility increases, attention can shift from the conduct to the person.

Digital vigilantism is therefore best understood as a contested form of informal social control. Its democratic potential lies in making problems visible and challenging institutional silence; its punitive potential lies in producing persistent labelling, reputational damage and social exclusion without the procedural protections associated with formal adjudication.

V. LABELLING, STIGMA AND THE MAKING OF THE DIGITAL DEVIANT

Howard Becker's labelling theory provides an important starting point. Becker (1963) argued that deviance should not be understood simply as a quality inherent in an act. Behaviour becomes deviant through social reactions in which groups create rules and identify individuals who are perceived to have violated them. The significance of Becker's argument for digital vigilantism is that online publics actively participate in producing such judgements.

A digital incident can move through a process of social definition. An action is recorded or described, interpreted by an online audience and then labelled as unacceptable. As material travels between networks, the label may become increasingly detached from the circumstances of the original event. The individual can eventually become known primarily through the accusation associated with the circulating content.

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma helps explain what happens next. A stigma is a discrediting characteristic that can alter an individual's social identity and produce what Goffman describes as a "spoiled identity." Applied to digital public shaming, this draws attention to the movement from criticism of an action to the construction of a lasting identity around that action.

Emotion also matters. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics explains how networked publics can form through shared emotional responses. Anger, sympathy,

disgust and moral outrage can bring strangers together around a common interpretation of an event. Brady et al. (2021) further demonstrate that social feedback can reinforce subsequent expressions of moral outrage online. Emotional engagement does not make criticism inherently illegitimate, but it can contribute to the rapid amplification of a particular moral interpretation.

The crucial distinction is therefore between criticising conduct and condemning identity. Criticism can remain directed towards a particular action. Labelling shifts attention towards the person as a whole. The individual may become associated with a discrediting identity even where the underlying allegation has not been formally established. Digital punishment consequently emerges cumulatively: one person posts the original material, another identifies the target, another adds an accusation, and others repeat the narrative. Responsibility becomes dispersed, while the consequences become collective.

The digital environment therefore does not create labelling or stigma from nothing. Rather, it changes their speed, scale, persistence and reach. This provides the sociological basis for understanding how digital visibility can move from social control of conduct towards social punishment of identity.

VI. FROM COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY TO COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

Digital vigilantism becomes particularly complicated when public exposure produces consequences beyond the original purpose of drawing attention to a perceived wrong. Recording an incident, questioning behaviour or asking institutions to respond is not inherently problematic. The difficulty begins when attention shifts from the conduct itself towards the person associated with it.

The movement can be understood as a progression: visibility → identification → labelling → collective judgement → sanction. The initial stages may perform an accountability function; the later stages can become punitive. The boundary is therefore not fixed but develops through the reactions of networked publics.

Digital accountability is attractive because a phone camera can document an incident almost immediately and social media can bring it to large audiences. Public exposure can pressure institutions and provide visibility to concerns that might otherwise remain ignored, particularly for marginalised groups (Mendes et al., 2018). The problem is that visibility does not determine what happens next. A video may begin as evidence of an alleged act but become the basis for a much wider judgement about the person involved (Trottier, 2017).

The turning point comes when collective attention shifts from what happened to what kind of person the target is. Becker's labelling theory helps explain this movement, while Goffman's theory of stigma shows how a discrediting association can become attached to social identity (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Persistence, affective publics and context collapse can intensify the transition (Papacharissi, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011). The boundary between accountability and punishment is crossed when the response becomes disproportionate to the original conduct, allegations are treated as established facts, or attention moves from correcting behaviour to damaging social identity.

The case of Samuel Garvyn De Braganca in Goa illustrates the difficulty of maintaining this distinction. In June 2026, a video circulated on social media that purportedly showed De Braganca dumping garbage on a roadside in Mapusa. Following the circulation of the video and a complaint, Mapusa Police registered an FIR under the Goa Non-Biodegradable Garbage (Control) Act, 1996 and Section 271 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which concerns negligent acts likely to spread infection of a disease dangerous to life. De Braganca's family subsequently questioned the applicability of Section 271 to the alleged littering incident and alleged that inappropriate legal provisions had been invoked.

Police stated that he was summoned, questioned and served notice before being permitted to leave. He later died from a fatal gunshot wound in circumstances initially reported as suicide. Subsequent post-mortem findings concerning additional injuries, together with a departmental police inquiry and proceedings initiated by the Goa Human

Rights Commission, meant that the circumstances surrounding his death remained under examination in the following weeks.

A different trajectory can be seen in the case of Rhiya Ahir in Mumbai. In July 2026, Ahir became widely known after a video showed her standing in front of a Mumbai Police vehicle carrying detained protesters during demonstrations connected with the NEET paper-leak controversy. The footage circulated widely and gave her visibility far beyond the immediate protest site.

That visibility subsequently became associated with allegations of online harassment. Ahir filed a complaint alleging sustained online harassment, bullying, defamation and “slut-shaming” after videos of the protest went viral. She alleged that social-media users and content creators circulated misleading or manipulated material about her and that the attacks could affect her reputation, family and safety. These remain allegations contained in her complaint, with individual responsibility subject to investigation.

The two cases should not be treated as equivalent. Their value lies in demonstrating different directions in which digital visibility can move. In one, visibility around an alleged civic violation was followed by public scrutiny and institutional intervention; in the other, political visibility was followed by reported reputational attacks. Together, they show that visibility itself does not determine whether digital participation becomes constructive accountability or punitive social control.

The broader paradox is that digital platforms derive much of their social power from their ability to make things visible, yet visibility can support accountability as easily as punishment. Accountability is primarily concerned with conduct: what happened, who was responsible and what response is appropriate. Digital punishment can gradually become concerned with identity: what kind of person the target is and what should happen to that person. Digital vigilantism becomes punitive when collective visibility stops functioning primarily as a means of demanding an appropriate response to conduct and begins functioning as a means of fixing a discrediting identity upon an individual.

VII. THE INDIAN DIGITAL PUBLIC: VISIBILITY, EMOTION AND SOCIAL POWER

India's digital public is particularly complex because information moves across both public platforms and messaging networks. Research on WhatsApp misinformation has shown how digitally circulated claims can become connected with existing social tensions and collective suspicion (Banaji et al., 2019). Digital judgement is therefore shaped not only by the content of an incident but by the social environment in which that content circulates. A civic complaint can become a moral issue; a political protest can become a judgement about personal character; and a claim repeated often enough can acquire the appearance of fact.

Recent research by Haripriya (2026) on viral videos and public shaming in Manipur further demonstrates that digital shaming should be understood in relation to longer histories of community morality, gendered expectations and conflict. Technology may accelerate the process, but it does not create the underlying social norms from nothing.

Emotion is similarly important. Online participation can begin with anger at perceived injustice, sympathy for a victim, disgust at an alleged offence or fear of a perceived threat. Such reactions can draw attention to neglected problems, yet emotional identification can also narrow the space available for uncertainty. Once an incident becomes a symbol of a larger moral issue, questioning the dominant interpretation may itself be interpreted as defending the wrongdoer.

The Indian digital public should therefore be understood as a space where technology and existing social structures meet. Platforms provide speed, reach and persistence, while society supplies many of the meanings through which digital content is interpreted. The challenge is not to eliminate public judgement from digital life, but to preserve the accountability function of collective visibility without allowing it to become an unrestricted licence for collective punishment.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The distinction between digital accountability and collective punishment requires safeguards at the level of digital platforms, media practices and law-enforcement institutions. Such safeguards should not suppress legitimate public criticism or citizen documentation of wrongdoing. Rather, they should reduce the risk that an unverified allegation develops into a disproportionate and continuing reputational sanction.

1. **Responsible Media and Platform Practices:** Media organisations and digital platforms should clearly distinguish between allegations, verified facts and adjudicated findings. Where content concerns an identifiable individual in a matter that remains under investigation, responsible self-regulation should discourage decontextualised republication, manipulate material, doxxing and targeted gendered abuse, while preserve legitimate reporting and public-interest discussion. Digital platforms should also maintain accessible and effective grievance mechanisms through which individuals can report harmful or unlawful content and seek timely review. Greater attention should be given to content that involves targeted harassment, impersonation, disclosure of private information or sexually derogatory material.
2. **Standards for Police Communication:** Law-enforcement communication during an ongoing investigation should remain factual, proportionate and sensitive to the presumption of innocence. Official statements should clearly identify the procedural status of a matter and should avoid language that presents an allegation as established guilt before investigation or adjudication has been completed. Clear institutional protocols should govern who may conduct media briefings, the nature of information that may be disclosed during different stages of an investigation and the circumstances in which information should be withheld to protect privacy, dignity, the integrity of the investigation and the fairness of subsequent proceedings.

3. **Improved Processing of Online Harassment Complaints:** Complaints involving online harassment should be examined through a coordinated and conduct-specific legal framework. Cyber harassment does not constitute a single uniform offence under Indian law, and the applicable legal provisions depend upon the nature of the conduct alleged. Depending upon the facts of a particular case, online conduct may attract provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 relating to stalking, insult to the modesty of a woman, criminal intimidation or defamation, as well as provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 relating to violation of privacy and the electronic publication or transmission of obscene or sexually explicit material. Police authorities and cyber-crime units should therefore classify complaints according to the specific conduct alleged, preserve relevant digital evidence and, where appropriate, coordinate with intermediary grievance mechanisms. Complaints resembling the harassment alleged by Rhiya Ahir should consequently be assessed on their individual evidentiary circumstances rather than being placed under an undefined general category of online abuse.
4. **Preserving Accountability Without Disproportionate Punishment:** The broader objective of these measures should be to preserve the democratic value of digital visibility while introducing proportionality, procedural caution and meaningful avenues for redress. The purpose is not to shield individuals from lawful criticism, but to ensure that public accountability does not develop into punishment that is disconnected from verification, due process and the seriousness of the underlying conduct.

IX. CONCLUSION

Digital vigilantism represents an important contemporary form of informal social control. It enables citizens to document perceived wrongdoing, challenge institutional silence and demand accountability, but the same infrastructure can facilitate reputational punishment that extends beyond the conduct originally placed under scrutiny.

The two Indian cases illustrate different pathways through which digital visibility can acquire social consequences. The De Braganca case shows how a civic allegation became connected to public attention and institutional intervention, while the Ahir case demonstrates how political visibility was followed by allegations of gendered online harassment. Neither case establishes that social media alone produced the consequences experienced by the individuals concerned. Their significance lies in showing how digital visibility interacts with institutions, social norms and processes of labelling.

Becker's labelling theory helps explain how individuals become defined through social reaction, while Goffman's concept of stigma demonstrates how a discrediting association can become attached to social identity. Papacharissi's affective publics add the role of emotion and networked participation, while scholarship on digital vigilantism shows how visibility itself can become a mechanism of informal power.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest a trajectory from act to label, label to identity, identity to reputation and potentially reputation to social exclusion. The distinction between accountability and punishment is ultimately a question of proportionality, context and limits. Accountability asks that conduct be examined and responsibility established. Punishment begins to emerge when public judgement continues expanding after the alleged conduct has become the object of scrutiny, producing consequences increasingly directed at the person rather than the act.

The study is limited by its reliance on documented secondary material and two cases. It does not establish the prevalence of digital vigilantism across India or empirically measure its psychological effects. Further research could examine a wider range of cases across regions, languages and platforms and explore how targets, journalists, police officials and ordinary users understand the boundary between public accountability and online punishment.

Ultimately, the sociological question is not simply why people participate in digital outrage, but what happens to social control when everyone can participate in it. As digital

platforms increasingly mediate public judgement, the ability to make someone visible also becomes an ability to make someone socially vulnerable.

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