



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office

Research and analysis

# **Social Media, Human Rights and Democracy in the Pacific: Evidence and analysis from Fiji, Solomon Islands and Samoa**

Published 17 December 2024

---

## Contents

1. Acknowledgements
2. Executive Summary
3. Introduction
4. Fiji Country Analysis
5. Solomon Islands Country Analysis
6. Samoa Country Analysis
7. Regional Analysis: Synthesizing Insights Across the Pacific
8. Recommendations
9. Conclusion

Annex I: Methodology

References

Authors



© Crown copyright 2024

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3) or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk).

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-media-human-rights-and-democracy-in-the-pacific-report/social-media-human-rights-and-democracy-in-the-pacific-evidence-and-analysis-from-fiji-solomon-islands-and-samoa>

# 1. Acknowledgements

This report was made possible through the support of the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy (MCFHRD), the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's dedicated strategic fund supporting global human rights and democracy work. The Fund aims to further British interests overseas by addressing the root causes of human rights violations, strengthening institutions and governance, and promoting democracy and the rule of law. The report was authored by Dr Glenn Finau, Romitesh Kant, Benjamin Afuga, Dr Jeff Garae Liu, Dr Dion Enari, Dr Kushneel Prakash, and Susana Fineanganofu.

We extend our profound gratitude to all staff members of the UK FCDO, particularly those based in Solomon Islands and Fiji, for their assistance in facilitating the necessary paperwork, engaging in internal discussions, and providing thorough reviews of various drafts and the final report.

We are also immensely thankful to all respondents who completed the online survey, the individuals who consented to interviews, and participants in the webinars who provided invaluable insights that greatly enriched this study.

The authors accept responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies that may remain in the report.

## 2. Executive Summary

Empowering citizens through informed and responsible use of social media is pivotal in advancing human rights and strengthening democracy across the Pacific. Social media can be a vector for the spread of misinformation and online harassment, contributing to division, political polarisation and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Addressing these digital threats is crucial for maintaining social cohesion and promoting transparent governance in the region.

This report presents findings and analysis of social media usage and its implications for human rights and democracy in three Pacific Island Countries (PICs): Fiji, Solomon Islands and Samoa. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study involved structured online surveys with 1,060 participants across the three countries, semi-structured interviews, and an extensive review of publicly available data. To deepen our understanding of these issues, the report also explores the trends and patterns of social media discourse related to political and human rights issues within large online communities in each country. This research, led by experts in Pacific digital ecosystems and democratic engagement, provides insights into the complex relationship between social media interactions and broader public perceptions of governance and civil liberties. These findings should shape policy interventions that can leverage social media's potential to enhance democratic dialogue while mitigating its risks.

The challenges of misinformation and online toxicity are highlighted in the three countries, reflecting broader regional concerns about the health of democratic

discourse in the digital age. The report also proposes targeted strategies to combat these issues, supporting robust and resilient democratic processes across the Pacific.

The key findings include:

**Digital Engagement Trend:** The survey data, alongside interview insights and analysis of activity on popular social media pages, suggest increasing digital engagement in Fiji, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands. While high daily Internet usage rates were reported by respondents—95% in Fiji, 91% in Samoa, and 85% in the Solomon Islands—it is important to recognise that these figures are reflective of the survey population and may not represent the broader public, particularly in regions like the Solomon Islands where actual digital engagement is likely lower. However, the growing interaction of political candidates and governments with social media, combined with the Pacific's youthful demographic and ongoing developments in ICT infrastructure, suggests that digital engagement is on an upward trajectory. This trend is likely to continue, with social media playing an increasingly significant role in shaping public discourse and democratic processes in these regions.

**Social Media Platform Preferences and Associated Risks:** Survey data across Fiji, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands reveal distinct preferences for social media platforms, reflecting each region's unique digital landscape and user needs. In Fiji, Instagram is favoured, underscoring its visual appeal, while TikTok leads in Samoa, indicating strong engagement with video content. The Solomon Islands continues to show a preference for Facebook, highlighting the value of established social networking features for broad communication. X (Twitter), despite recent developments to include images and videos, remains the least preferred platform across all three countries, likely due to its traditional focus on text-heavy content, which may be less engaging in regions where visual and dynamic content is more valued. However, interviews and webinars reveal that Pacific Islanders, particularly youth, are increasingly adopting these image-based and video-based platforms, which pose specific risks. These platforms can amplify the spread of misinformation through compelling visuals, increase the potential for cyberbullying, and expose users to privacy violations as images and videos are more likely to be shared widely and manipulated.

**Social Media Impact on Elections:** The increasing reliance on social media for political engagement is evident in the most recent elections across Fiji (2022), Samoa (2021), and Solomon Islands (2024). A significant proportion of the electorate in these countries used social media to access information about electoral processes and political candidates. Specifically, 77% of Fijians, 70% of Solomon Islanders and 65% of Samoans reported using social media for these purposes. This trend underscores social media's growing impact on democracy and highlights its role in shaping political opinions and facilitating informed voting decisions.

**Regulatory Confidence Gap:** The differences in public confidence regarding the regulation of social media across Fiji, Samoa, and Solomon Islands align with the varying levels of development in their respective online legislations, frameworks and policies. Fiji, with 60% of respondents believing that current regulations

effectively balance the influence of social media, has the most developed set of online legislations and frameworks in the Pacific. This contrasts with Samoa and Solomon Islands, where only 43% and 31% of respondents, respectively, feel that regulations are adequate. This disparity suggests that Fiji's more mature legal framework may contribute to greater public confidence in managing social media's impacts, highlighting the importance of evolving and strengthening legislation in Samoa and Solomon Islands to address the rapid changes in digital communication.

**Misinformation challenges:** The survey results indicate that a significant proportion of respondents in Samoa, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands—89%, 89%, and 86%, respectively—have encountered false information on social media. Additionally, a large majority of respondents believe that misinformation significantly influences public opinion, with 89% in Samoa, 91% in Fiji, and 85% in the Solomon Islands acknowledging its impact. While these figures reflect a high level of awareness regarding the presence and effects of misinformation, awareness alone may not be enough to counter its influence. Therefore, there is still a crucial need for comprehensive digital literacy programmes that go beyond awareness. These programmes should focus on equipping individuals with the skills to critically assess the information they encounter, enabling them to identify false information and understand its broader societal implications. By enhancing public education in digital literacy, individuals can be better empowered to navigate social media platforms, fostering healthier public discourse and contributing to more resilient democratic processes.

**Rural Connectivity Variance:** The data illustrates notable differences in how frequently rural populations in Fiji, Samoa, and Solomon Islands access the Internet. In Samoa, rural residents tend to access the Internet more frequently, likely due to the country's smaller size and proximity of rural areas to urban centres. In contrast, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, with their more extensive and fragmented geographical layouts, show lower frequencies of Internet access. These disparities are influenced by the geographic challenges of island nations, where infrastructure development can be complicated. However, recent technological advancements, such as the introduction of Starlink services, are beginning to address these challenges by improving Internet connectivity, potentially transforming access in traditionally underserved areas. These results underscore the impact of geographical and infrastructural factors on digital inclusion and highlight the potential of emerging technologies to enhance connectivity in rural Pacific communities.

**Gender-specific social media impact:** The impact of social media on gender is perceived differently across the Pacific, with 87% of respondents in Fiji, 79% in the Solomon Islands, and 75% in Samoa recognising distinct gender-related effects. This perception is accompanied by reports of feeling unsafe or experiencing harassment based on gender, with only 50% in Fiji, 39% in the Solomon Islands, and a low 22% in Samoa stating they have never encountered such issues. These findings underscore a critical need for intervention, emphasising the importance of targeted policies and support systems to create a safer online environment for all genders, particularly addressing the unique vulnerabilities faced by women and gender minorities. Additionally, there is a gendered pattern of social media usage, suggesting that the perceived impact and the way different genders engage with social media varies across these

countries. This highlights the importance of further research to distinguish between perception and actual implications and to develop tailored approaches that address the specific needs of each demographic.

**Ethnicity-Based Safety on Social Media:** The survey results highlight experiences of safety and harassment related to ethnicity on social media across different Pacific countries. In Samoa, where the population is largely homogeneous, 26% of respondents reported feeling unsafe or never experiencing harassment based on ethnicity. In contrast, in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, where the populations are more ethnically diverse, 33% and 41% of respondents, respectively, have felt unsafe or have experienced online harassment based on their ethnicity. These findings align with expectations that greater ethnic diversity can lead to more frequent or pronounced experiences of ethnic-based harassment, as social divisions may be more pronounced. This is particularly relevant in the Solomon Islands, where ethnic tensions have previously manifested in significant social unrest, such as the recent riots. The prevalence of hate speech along ethnic lines during these events underscores the need for targeted interventions and policies to address and mitigate the impact of such speech on social media. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance online safety and promote social cohesion in ethnically diverse societies.

**Social media's impact on democracy and human rights:** Respondents across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa are generally optimistic about improving democracy and human rights. Despite some scepticism, there is a strong belief that social media can positively contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights and enhance the quality of democracy.

**Social media regulation:** There is widespread support across the Pacific for more stringent social media regulations aimed at combating misinformation and hate speech, with over 70% of respondents in each country expressing agreement. This support stems from growing concerns about the harmful effects of unchecked online content, including the spread of false information and the rise of hate speech, which can exacerbate social tensions and undermine trust in public institutions. In particular, respondents recognise the need for stronger regulatory frameworks that can more effectively monitor, control, and penalise such harmful activities on social media platforms. Awareness of existing social media regulations varies significantly across the region, with Samoa showing the highest level of awareness at 82% and the Solomon Islands the lowest at 48%. Despite this support and awareness, confidence in the effectiveness of current regulations remains relatively low. In all three countries, a significant portion of the population reports that social media policies and regulations have influenced their use of platforms, often leading to self-censorship or limiting their online expression due to fear of repercussions. This suggests a delicate balance that must be struck between implementing effective regulations and ensuring that these do not overly restrict freedom of expression or stifle legitimate discourse.

### 3. Introduction

In 2024, the world marks a significant moment in the global democratic journey. This year, a substantial proportion of the global population will participate in electoral processes, with significant elections scheduled in the world's two largest democracies, the United States and India, as well as other influential nations including the United Kingdom, Indonesia, South Africa, and the expansive political entity of the European Union. Within the Pacific region, nations including Tuvalu and Solomon Islands are holding elections.

Amidst this global focus on democracy, a parallel and pervasive discourse on human rights issues arises. From concerns over electoral integrity and freedom of expression to the right to information, the impact of these elections extends far beyond simple changes in leadership. In this context, the role of social media emerges as a double-edged sword. At the same time, it empowers and engages; it also presents unprecedented challenges in spreading misinformation, surveillance, and manipulating public opinion.

Understanding the intertwining roles of social media, human rights, and democracy is particularly critical in the Pacific—a region often overshadowed by more prominent geopolitical players and profoundly affected by these global trends. The Pacific islands' unique socio-political landscapes and increasing digital penetration provide a distinctive viewpoint on how digital platforms can influence democratic processes. This makes the Pacific an essential area for studying these dynamics, as it could offer broader insights into the future of democracy in the digital age.

This report employs a mixed-methods approach to exploring the intricate interplay between social media, human rights, and democratic processes in the Pacific. We conducted online surveys to gather quantitative data on the frequency of social media usage and the public's perceptions regarding its impact on democracy and human rights. These surveys were complemented by in-depth, in-person interviews, which provided qualitative insights and a deeper understanding of individual perspectives on the critical issues identified. Additionally, three webinars were conducted to disseminate preliminary findings, during which we validated these findings and received valuable insights and comments. This feedback has allowed us to refine our analysis and include additional recommendations in the final report.

Additionally, we extensively reviewed social media pages to observe real-time user interactions and discourse trends. This was paralleled by analysing current legislations and public documents across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, our selected case study locations. This dual review allowed us to assess the regulatory frameworks governing digital spaces in these countries, evaluating how they support or inhibit the protection of human rights and the facilitation of democratic engagement.

Together, these methodologies offer a robust foundation for analysing social media's role in shaping public discourse and influencing political landscapes in the Pacific. They provide a multidimensional perspective that underpins the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

### **3.1. Social media in the Pacific**

The term “social media” originated in the early 21st century, describing technologies that enable individuals to create, share, and exchange content within virtual communities and networks (Miller et al., 2016). These platforms empower users with tools to express themselves, communicate globally, and mobilise around shared interests. Social media has revolutionised communication, democratising information dissemination and enabling individuals to influence public discourse significantly. However, this empowerment also comes with challenges; the vast distribution of power can lead to unintended consequences such as the spread of misinformation, increased polarisation, and potential digital harassment, reflecting the complexities of balancing freedom with responsible usage (Valenzuela et al., 2019).

The Internet revolution and the adoption of digital technology in the Pacific have accelerated over the past decade, dramatically shifting how people in the Pacific access information and engage with pressing regional, national, and local issues. Since the reform and deregulation of telecommunications in the mid-2000s (Cave, 2012), the Pacific has experienced an ICT revolution, offering numerous opportunities for connection, learning, and engagement in meaningful discussions. The dramatic uptake of ICT, particularly in the last decade, has seen the Internet and its associated social media platforms used for various activities, from political discourse and disaster preparedness to activism and even the creation and reinvention of personal identities (Fa ‘avae et al., 2022; Finau et al., 2018; Hobbis & Hobbis, 2022; Titifanue et al., 2017).

Globally, social media has transformed the landscape of political engagement and human rights advocacy. Platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube have become critical spaces for political discourse, the mobilisation of protests, and the dissemination of information on human rights abuses. However, this digital revolution comes with challenges, including misinformation, privacy concerns, and the potential for state surveillance. PICs are not immune to these global trends, and the impact of social media on democracy and human rights must be analysed within the region’s specific socio-political dynamics.

PICs may have been one of the last frontiers for digital development. Still, they have slowly caught up with the rest of the world and now rate highly in terms of mobile phone usage and social media uptake (J Foster & A Horst, 2018). Being slow has also allowed the PICs to learn from other regions and develop innovative ICT solutions, positioning them to navigate this new digital landscape effectively.

Building on these broader regional insights, we will summarise our case studies, highlighting how social media shapes each country.

## **Fiji: Navigating Political Expression and Censorship**

In Fiji, social media has emerged as a critical platform for political expression, particularly following the 2006 coup, which marked a period of intense political turmoil. This digital sphere has provided a space for citizens to engage in political discourse, often serving as an alternative to state-controlled media outlets (Tarai et al., 2015). Fiji boasts some of the best Internet infrastructure in the Pacific, with the region’s highest mobile phone and Internet usage rates. This robust infrastructure

has positioned Fijians at the forefront of social media innovation, allowing for vibrant and dynamic engagement in political debates. The 2022 elections further highlighted this trend, with both candidates and citizens increasingly engaging via social media platforms, transforming the traditional electoral engagement landscape (Tarai, 2023). However, the government's response, including introducing laws aimed at combating hate speech and misinformation, poses potential risks to online freedoms. These laws, which include severe penalties for online defamation, have raised concerns about their impact on free expression and the integrity of democratic engagements (Kant et al., 2018). The ongoing challenge is crafting a regulatory environment that protects the right to free speech and ensures the integrity of information within the digital landscape, maintaining a delicate balance between open political dialogue and social harmony.

## **SOLOMON ISLANDS: Digital Dialogues and Digital Divisions**

In the Solomon Islands, social media is a powerful tool that both empowers and poses risks to democratic values (Finau et al., 2014). Despite its relatively poor ICT infrastructure, higher costs, lower penetration rates, and less frequent Internet usage than other Pacific regions, social media has significantly enhanced civic engagement and public discourse, contributing to a more informed and participatory citizenry (Foukona, 2019). For instance, during the 2019 Pacific Games hosted by the Solomon Islands, social media platforms played a crucial role in rallying support and fostering national pride. Additionally, an example of community engagement via social media is the "Yumi Toktok Forum." Originating as a Facebook page in 2012 and now boasting over 24,000 members, this forum exemplifies how social media can catalyse civic involvement and community-led initiatives in the region. However, like many online platforms, the 'Yumi Toktok Forum' also hosts content that some may find problematic, reflecting broader challenges in moderating diverse viewpoints. Alongside these positive aspects, the potential for spreading misinformation and inciting ethnic tensions remains a significant concern. This is particularly sensitive given the country's history of ethnic conflicts (Bennett, 2002). The ongoing challenge for the Solomon Islands is to harness social media's benefits in promoting unity and democratic values while effectively managing and mitigating the risks associated with misinformation and divisiveness.

## **SAMOA: Traditional Values and Modern Platforms**

Samoa, distinct from Fiji and the Solomon Islands with its Polynesian heritage, offers a fascinating case study on the intersection of traditional values and modern social media platforms. Unlike its Melanesian neighbours, Samoa is characterised by a smaller, more homogeneous population and a significant diaspora, profoundly influencing local and political dynamics. Social media has emerged as a potent tool for activism within this unique context, enabling campaigns on critical issues such as climate change, gender equality, and public health. In Samoa's most recent elections, commentators noted that social media played a crucial role in facilitating the current government's rise to power, thereby ending one of the region's longest tenures of a

prime minister (Alofaituli, 2023). This substantial political shift highlights social media's capacity to alter traditional political landscapes. However, the ascent of social media also challenges Samoa's traditional social structures, potentially disrupting established hierarchies and cultural norms. This scenario underscores the necessity for a nuanced approach to integrating social media in Samoa, which respects and preserves the nation's rich cultural heritage while leveraging these platforms for effective democratic engagement and human rights advocacy.

## 4. Fiji Country Analysis

### 4.1. Overview

Fiji is an archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean, part of the region commonly referred to as Melanesia. Despite its classification as Melanesian, Fiji is often considered a cultural mix of Polynesian and Melanesian influences due to its history and geographical positioning. The country consists of over 330 islands, about one-third inhabited. Its two major islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, host the majority of the population.

Fiji's population is diverse, mainly composed of indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, the latter being descendants of Indian labourers brought to the islands during the British colonial era. This ethnic composition has been a significant factor in the country's political landscape, with tensions historically influencing electoral and political dynamics.

Fiji has a mixed economy, with tourism and sugar exports being some of the primary contributors to its GDP. Additionally, remittances from Fijians working abroad, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, play a crucial role in the economy. Fiji is a regional hub in the Pacific, with advanced transport and communication infrastructure compared to neighbouring island countries, facilitating its role in regional logistics, business, and diplomacy.

Fiji is a parliamentary representative democratic republic. The President is the Head of State, while the Prime Minister is the Head of Government. The political system has seen significant reforms and instability in recent decades, including military coups and constitutional changes. The latest elections in Fiji have been part of the country's ongoing political stabilisation process, focusing on democratic governance and reducing ethnic tensions in politics.

Fiji's ICT infrastructure is relatively developed compared to other Pacific Island nations. The country has invested in expanding its digital connectivity, including widespread Internet access in urban areas and significant improvements in rural connectivity. This infrastructure supports the government's e-governance and digital services initiatives, aiming to improve public service delivery and engage more effectively with citizens.

## 4.2. Demographic profile of survey respondents

The survey demographics reveal a significant skew towards female respondents, who comprise 72% of the total, with males accounting for 27% and an 'Other' category at 2%. The age distribution is predominantly youthful, with 69% of respondents aged 18-24, highlighting the dominance of young adults in social media usage. The majority reside in urban areas, comprising 81% of the sample, which suggests a concentration of social media activity within more populated centres. Only 19% of respondents are from rural areas. A more detailed breakdown of these demographics is available in Annex III.

## 4.3. Social Media Landscape in Fiji

Fiji's social media landscape reflects a dynamic shift towards newer platforms, with Instagram and TikTok emerging as the most favoured among users.

Figure 1. Social Media platforms used (multiple options allowed) - ranked by preference from 1 (most used) to 6 (least used)



Based on the survey data presented in Figure 1 43% of respondents ranked Instagram as their most used platform, highlighting its significant appeal, particularly among the younger demographics. TikTok follows closely, with 37% of users identifying it as their primary platform for social media engagement, underscoring its rapid growth and the compelling nature of video content among Fijian users.

Facebook, once the dominant platform, is now the third most preferred, with 33% of respondents ranking it as their most utilised platform. This shift indicates a

diversification in social media usage patterns as users explore platforms offering different interactive experiences. LinkedIn, ranked highest by 26% of users, underscores its importance in professional networking. Meanwhile, other less mainstream platforms cumulatively hold a 19% preference rate. X (formerly Twitter), which is less popular, is used most by 16% of respondents. This suggests that X plays a more specialised role in the Fijian social media ecosystem, likely serving as a platform for niche communities focused on specific interests such as political commentary, real-time news updates, and public discourse on specialised topics. Its text-heavy format and real-time engagement capabilities appeal to users seeking concise, rapid information exchanges, differentiating it from more visually-oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These platforms offer unique affordances that resonate well with the Fijian context. Instagram and TikTok, for instance, are highly visual and interactive, enabling users to create and share videos that can go viral and promote significant user engagement. This capability has been leveraged effectively in various domains, including political campaigning. In the 2022 elections, politicians utilised TikTok to reach out to the youth demographic, illustrating how these platforms are entertainment venues and powerful tools for political and social discourse.

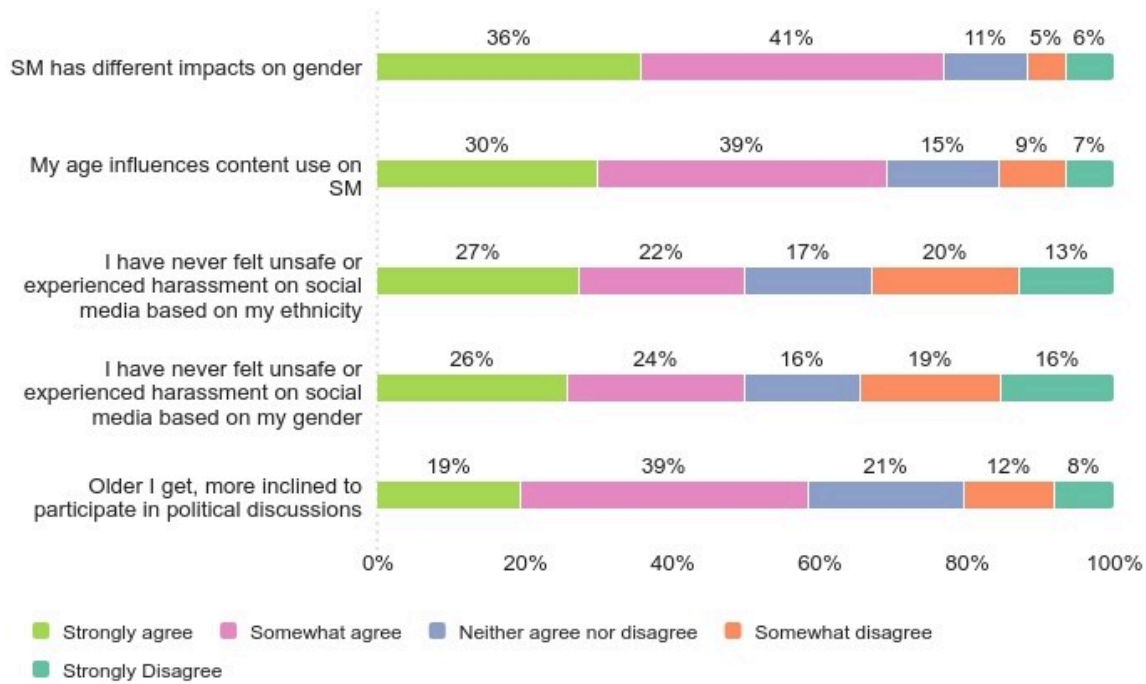
However, the increasing popularity of photo and video-sharing platforms also introduces significant risks, particularly as users may not fully comprehend the consequences of sharing sensitive content. A widely circulated incident involved a video showing a male relative beating a young child, which sparked public outrage and highlighted the potential for harm in sharing such sensitive content. Additionally, a female Member of Parliament became a target of cyber harassment when a popular political commentator, known as Grubsheet, shared manipulated images and sexual messages about her on Facebook. The MP contended that the photos were AI-generated, leading to an official complaint that resulted in Facebook removing Grubsheet's page for violating community standards. These examples underscore the potential for harm arising from the misuse of these powerful communication tools, necessitating more robust educational initiatives and regulatory measures to ensure that social media remains a safe and constructive space for all users.

This evolving landscape indicates a shift towards more visually-oriented platforms facilitating quick and wide-reaching communication, reflecting global influences and local adaptations. The increased use of these platforms for political campaigning underscores their importance in contemporary Fijian society, highlighting how social media continues to reshape public engagement and discourse in significant ways while presenting new challenges that must be carefully managed.

#### **4.4. Demographic variations in Social Media interactions and Impacts**

In this section, we explore how various demographic factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, influence Fiji respondents' social media usage. The findings provide insights into how demographic characteristics shape interactions on social media, impacting content consumption, engagement in political discourse, and experiences of safety and harassment online. This analysis provides a foundation for understanding the broader social dynamics at play within Fiji's digital landscape.

Figure 2. Demographic influence on social media (SM)



The survey reveals that age significantly influences social media usage, with 69% of respondents agreeing that their age affects the type of content they engage with, while 15% remain neutral. Additionally, as users age, their inclination to participate in political discussions or activism on social media increases, with 58% agreeing to this trend and 21% staying neutral. This indicates that older individuals are more selective about the content they interact with and become more actively involved in political and social issues as they age.

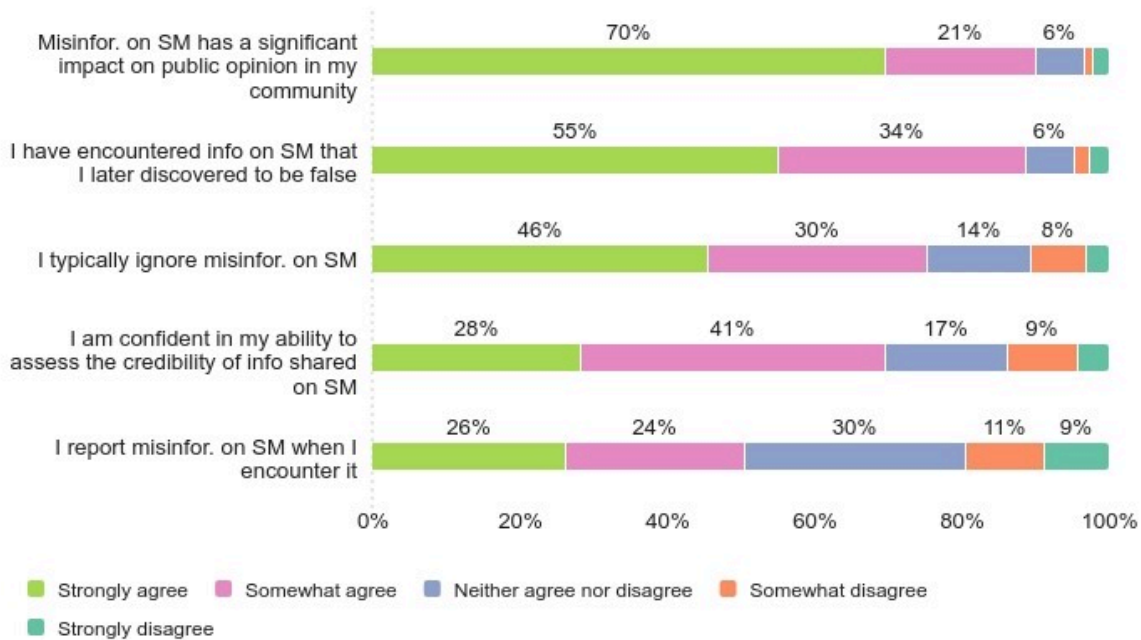
Regarding gender differences, a significant portion of the respondents perceive social media to impact men and women differently, with 77% agreeing and only 11% neutral. This substantial agreement suggests that gender plays a crucial role in shaping social media experiences in Fiji, potentially affecting everything from the types of content consumed to the frequency and nature of online interactions. Moreover, safety concerns based on gender are considerable, as 35% of respondents have felt unsafe or experienced harassment due to their gender, highlighting the need for enhanced safety measures and awareness on social media platforms.

Ethnicity also plays a role in shaping social media experiences in Fiji, with 33% of respondents reporting that they have felt unsafe or experienced harassment online due to their ethnicity and 17% expressing neutrality. These concerns point to underlying ethnic tensions that may be exacerbated or reflected in online interactions, suggesting a need for social media policies and community management practices that promote inclusivity and safety for all ethnic groups.

## 4.5. Perceptions of misinformation on social media

By analysing survey responses, we aim to understand how misinformation is identified, its perceived impact, and the strategies employed by users to navigate it on various digital platforms.

Figure 3. Perceptions on misinformation (misinform.) on social media (SM)



In Fiji, the prevalence of misinformation on social media is a significant concern, as indicated by 89% of respondents who have encountered information, they later discovered to be false. Despite this high incidence, the majority of users, 76%, typically choose to ignore such misinformation. This response might suggest either a resignation to the ubiquity of misinformation or a lack of resources to counteract it effectively. In terms of assessing the credibility of the information they come across, 69% of respondents express confidence in their ability to discern reliable from unreliable sources, indicating a relatively high level of digital literacy among the population. However, regarding proactive measures against misinformation, only 50% report encountering misinformation, while a substantial 30% remain neutral, highlighting potential gaps in user engagement or awareness of reporting mechanisms. Most critically, 91% agree that misinformation significantly impacts public opinion within their community, reinforcing the need for robust interventions to enhance information literacy and encourage active engagement in managing misinformation. This layered understanding of how misinformation is encountered and processed, and its perceived impact underscores the complexities of addressing this issue in Fiji’s digital landscape.

In 2022, the Fiji Elections Office (FEO) established a Centre for Credible Election Information. This initiative arose from the FEO’s concern over the proliferation of misinformation on social media pages created intentionally to mislead the public. The Centre was a virtual hub for all electoral and election-related information in Fiji, significantly contributing to ongoing voter education.

Objectives of the Centre:

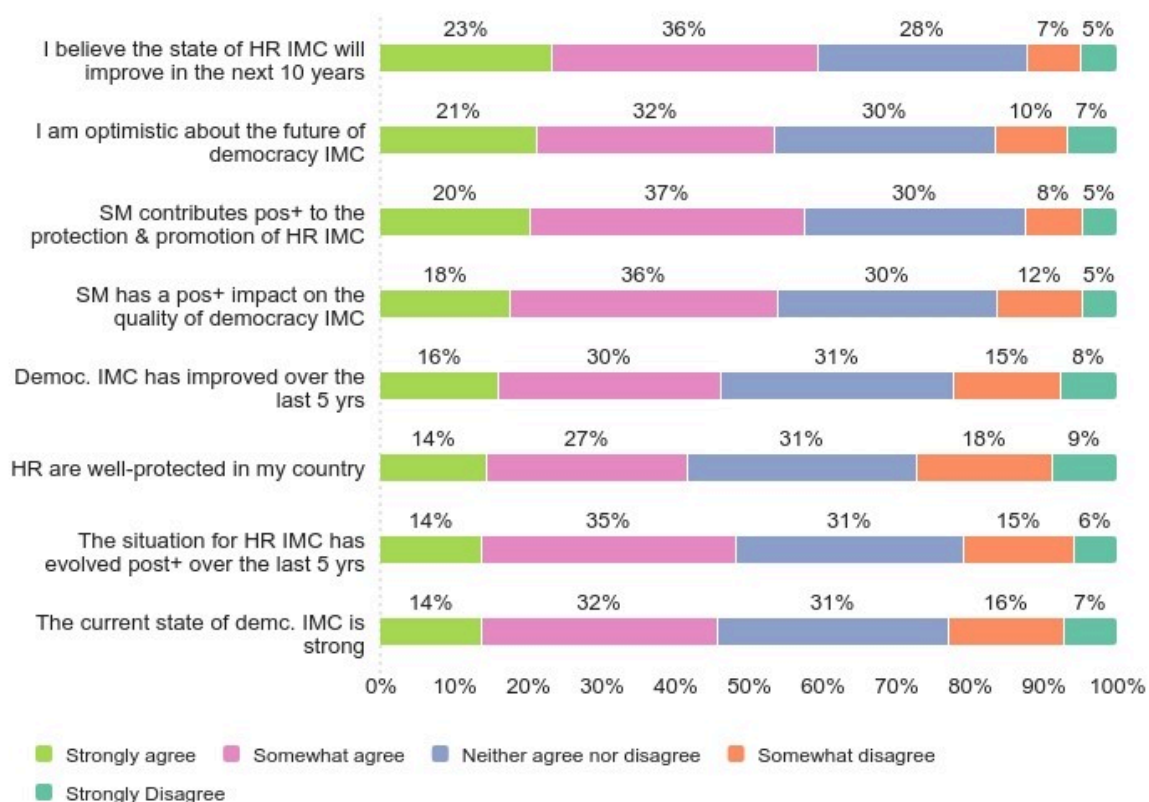
- Produce and Publish Information: The Centre was dedicated to producing and publishing accurate information about the 2022 general election.
- Clarify and Respond to Misinformation: It actively worked to clarify and respond to misleading or incorrect information regarding the election process.

As stated by the FEO, “...one of the best ways to counter misinformation is through the publication of credible information.”

## 4.6. Social media and its Influence on Democracy and Human Rights

This analysis examines the role of social media in shaping democratic and human rights outcomes, and the respondent’s outlook on future developments in relation to democracy.

Figure 4. Perceptions of democracy (democ.), human rights (HR) and social media (SM) in my country (IMC)



Reflections on the evolution of democracy and human rights over the past five years in Fiji reveal various views. Approximately 46% of respondents believe that democracy has improved during this period, with a similar percentage viewing the human rights situation as having evolved positively (49%). However, about 31% remain neutral on both counts, indicating a significant portion of the populace remains uncertain about the progress made.

Perceptions of the current state of democracy are cautiously optimistic but not without reservations. While 46% of respondents consider Fiji's democracy to be strong, 31% remain neutral, indicating that a consensus on the robustness of Fiji's democracy has not been fully established. Similarly, only 41% believe that human rights are well-protected, with another 31% expressing neutrality, suggesting ongoing concerns or uncertainties about the effectiveness of human rights protections.

Looking forward, the outlook becomes more optimistic. A majority (59%) believe that the situation for human rights will improve over the next ten years, and 53% are confident about the future of democracy. Furthermore, the influence of social media is seen positively, with 57% agreeing that it contributes positively to the protection and promotion of human rights and 54% saying it positively impacts the quality of democracy. This suggests a significant faith in the role of digital platforms in fostering civic engagement and enhancing democratic and human rights outcomes in Fiji.

Participants' reflections poignantly capture the nuanced role of social media in influencing public opinion and electoral processes.

One respondent noted:

“ During the Fijian elections last year, there was a lot of debate about which candidate to vote for amongst my peers as we were first time voters and looking forward to the improvement of our nation by choosing the 'right' candidate however many of my peers voted for a candidate only based on how popular he was on social media and not education/qualification which makes me fear for the future of our country.”

The quote above reflects the influential role of social media in shaping perceptions about political candidates, a phenomenon that is certainly not unique to the Pacific. Globally, many politicians have leveraged social media to significant effect. A notable example is Barack Obama's presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012, which are often cited as groundbreaking in their strategic use of social media to engage voters, especially the youth. Obama's team utilised platforms like X and Facebook to mobilise supporters, coordinate events, and spread their message effectively. Similarly, during Fiji's last election, the leaders of the two main parties heavily utilised social media, with the new Prime Minister showing particular adeptness. This trend underscores how social media has become a critical tool in modern political campaigns, enabling candidates to communicate directly with the electorate, influence public opinion, and shape the political landscape.

Another participant highlighted the double-edged sword of social media, stating:

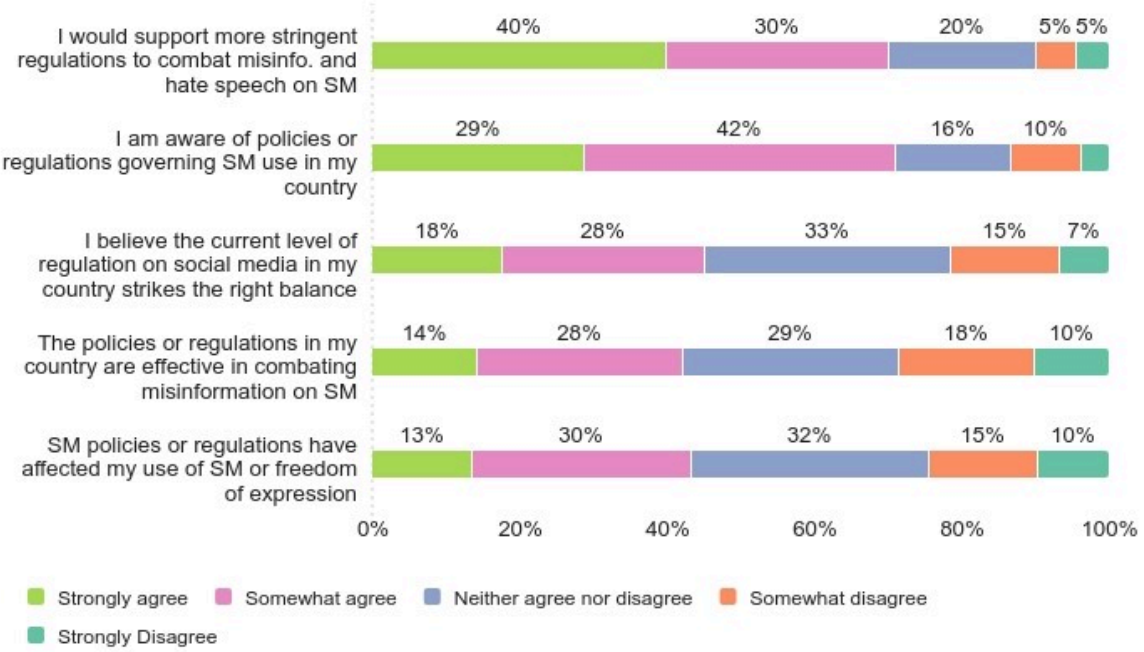
“ I think there is some connection between social media and democracy in Fiji. The past 2 elections have seen more and more people take to social media to vent their frustrations at public procedures, public officials etc., which has prompted public officials to put out public statements most times. Although I do acknowledge the impact social media has in moulding our democracy, I still have no faith (right now) that it will continue to generate the same, or even greater, impact on democracy. I say this because as hopeful as the prospects of social media have been, the onset of misinformation is also evident. This has also been present in the last two elections. Perhaps, the situation will improve in the future but for now realistically seeing how things are in Fiji, I have limited hope for change.”

This comment reflects the mixed impact of social media, where its potential to enhance transparency and accountability is tempered by challenges such as misinformation.

### 4.7. Perceptions of social media regulation

This section examines the landscape of Fiji’s social media policies and regulations, focusing on public awareness and perceptions of their effectiveness. We explore how well individuals understand the rules governing social media use, their views on the efficacy of these regulations in combatting misinformation, and the impact of these policies on their personal use and freedom of expression. Additionally, we assess the public’s satisfaction with the current level of regulation and their support for potentially more stringent measures to address misinformation and hate speech. This analysis will provide insights into the broader implications of social media governance in Fiji.

Figure 5. Social Media (SM) and regulation



In Fiji, the public’s awareness and opinions about social media policies and their implications reflect a complex landscape where regulation, freedom of expression, and the need for control over misinformation and hate speech intersect.

A substantial majority of Fijians, 71%, report being aware of the policies or regulations governing social media use in their country, indicating a high level of public consciousness about these rules. Additionally, there is strong support for more stringent laws to combat misinformation and hate speech, with 70% in favour and only 20% neutral. This suggests a significant concern among the population about the adverse effects of unregulated social media content.

Opinions on the effectiveness of these regulations in combating misinformation are somewhat divided. 42% agree that the measures are effective, but 29% remain neutral, suggesting scepticism about their impact. Regarding the balance between regulation and freedom, the sentiment is even more split: 46% believe that the current level of regulation strikes the right balance, yet a significant 33% hold a neutral position, reflecting uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the status quo.

The influence of these regulations on personal social media use and freedom of expression also shows a divided view. About 43% of respondents feel that regulations have impacted their use of social media or their freedom of expression, with 32% remaining neutral. This indicates that a considerable portion of the population perceives that regulatory measures might infringe on their personal liberties or alter their social media behaviour.

However, the recent tragic case of Esala Lewamama, a prominent Fijian LGBTQIA+ advocate and social media influencer, underscores the critical need for effective enforcement of these regulations. Esala, known as “Ranadi Kei Viti” online, reportedly died by suspected suicide after suffering intense cyberbullying<sup>[1]</sup>. This incident has sparked widespread debate about Fiji’s Online Safety Commission’s effectiveness and ability to protect individuals from online harm. Despite Fiji’s advanced online safety laws, this case highlights a significant gap between legislation and its implementation, raising concerns about the commission’s visibility and responsiveness.

The calls for stricter online safety measures following Esala’s death emphasise the complex balance that must be maintained between protecting freedom of expression and preventing online abuse. As Fiji grapples with these challenges, the effectiveness of existing regulations and the role of the Online Safety Commission are under scrutiny, prompting discussions on how to strengthen these frameworks to serve the community’s needs better.

## 5. Solomon Islands Country Analysis

### 5.1. Overview

The Solomon Islands, a sprawling archipelago with a significant rural population, recorded a provisional population count of approximately 721,455 in the 2019 National Population and Housing Census. This represents a notable increase in population size since the country’s independence. Most of the population resides in private households, with a small percentage living in institutional settings.

The Solomon Islands’ economy is traditionally based on agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, significant contributors to its GDP and employment. Economic challenges include limited infrastructure and external trade dependencies, particularly in commodities like palm oil and gold. In recent years, efforts have been made to

diversify the economy and improve economic resilience against global market fluctuations and natural disasters.

The Solomon Islands operates under a parliamentary democracy with regular electoral processes. Political stability has been a significant concern, particularly highlighted by the violent unrest in November 2021. In response, the Solomon Islands government requested international assistance, leading to the deployment of troops and police from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand to restore order and maintain stability. These peacekeeping forces have only recently begun to withdraw, reflecting ongoing challenges to the country's political stability.

A significant push to improve ICT infrastructure has been underway, particularly with the recent launch of the national cybersecurity policy on August 21st, 2024. This policy is part of a broader effort to bolster digital resilience and security, which aligns with ongoing initiatives to expand Internet access and digital services, critical given the geographic challenges of servicing many remote islands. Additionally, the forthcoming introduction of a cybercrime bill, which will address issues such as cyberbullying<sup>[2]</sup>, further highlights the government's commitment to integrating digital technologies into governance and economic development sectors. These efforts are key components of the national digital strategy, aimed at driving economic growth and improving public service delivery.

The Solomon Islands has seen increasing mobile phone usage. A significant portion of the population now owns devices that are predominantly used for accessing social media. This reflects broader trends in digital engagement and the growing importance of mobile connectivity for social and economic activities.

## **5.2. Demographic profile of survey respondents**

Compared to Fiji and Samoa, Solomon Islands shows a more balanced gender distribution among survey participants, with 53% male and 45% female respondents, and 1% identifying as 'Other'. The age groups most represented are 25-34 and 18-24 years, making up 35% and 25%, respectively, indicating a young adult user base most active on social media. Urban residency is predominant, with 85% of respondents living in urban areas compared to 15% in rural areas. Notably, 22% of respondents are part of the diaspora, reflecting the significant influence of overseas connections on local social media trends. Further demographic details can be found in Annex III. This sample represents active social media users in the Solomon Islands, providing valuable insights into their behaviours and perspectives. However, it is not representative of the entire population, particularly given the urban-rural split. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously when generalising to the broader population.

## **5.3. Social Media Landscape**

The Solomon Islands' pattern of social media use reflects a blend of global influences and local connectivity challenges.

Figure 6. Social Media platforms used (multiple options allowed) - ranked by preference from 1 (most used) to 6 (least used)



According to the survey data based on active social media users in Solomon Islands, Facebook remains the most utilised platform, with 68% of respondents identifying it as their primary social media tool, serving as a key portal for news and community engagement. Meanwhile, 67% of respondents also ranked platforms in the “Other” category, such as WhatsApp, Viber, and YouTube, among their most frequently used platforms. This indicates that users often engage with Facebook for broader social networking and news while turning to messaging apps like WhatsApp for direct communication and platforms like YouTube for video content. The popularity of the “Other” category underscores a local interpretation of social media that extends beyond traditional social networking sites, highlighting the integral role of messaging and video-sharing services in daily communication within the Solomon Islands. TikTok and Instagram, platforms that rely heavily on video content, are less prevalent, and they are used by only 26% and 24% of respondents, respectively. This lower usage rate was highlighted by interviewees from Solomon Islands to be due to the region’s high costs and limited Internet service speeds, which pose significant barriers to accessing data-intensive applications like video streaming. LinkedIn and X show modest engagement, with 23% and 16% usage rates, respectively, indicating niche roles within the Solomon Islands social media landscape.

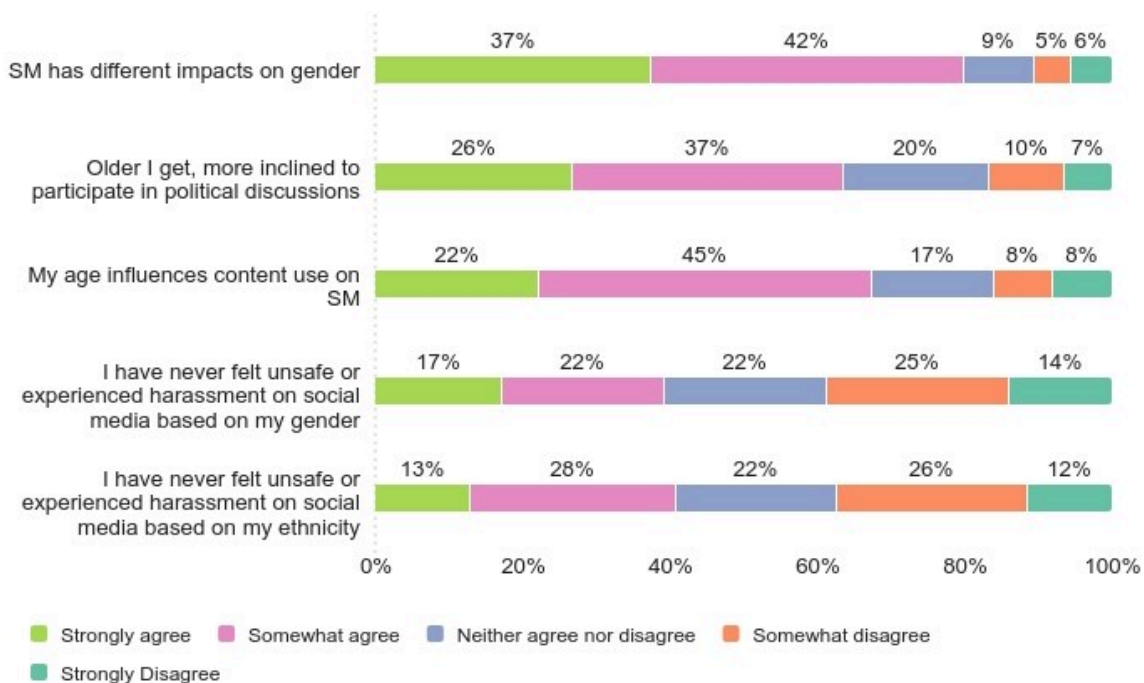
This varied usage pattern points to a social media ecosystem deeply influenced by local Internet infrastructure. The high operational costs and slower Internet speeds make video-based platforms less accessible, thus impacting the popularity of platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The inclusion of messaging apps and YouTube in the “Other” category further illustrates how social media usage extends into broader digital communication practices, which are pivotal in maintaining personal and professional connections across the islands.

This analysis provides a clear picture of how technological and economic factors shape the social media landscape in the Solomon Islands, affecting everything from platform preference to the overall digital engagement of its citizens.

## 5.4. Demographic variations in Social Media interactions and Impacts

This section explores how demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity influence social media usage in the Solomon Islands. By analysing survey data, we highlight the distinct ways these demographics engage with digital content, shaping the broader social media landscape in the country.

Figure 7. Demographic influence on Social Media (SM)



In the Solomon Islands, age has a considerable impact on social media engagement. 67% of respondents affirm that their age dictates the type of content they engage with, while 17% remain neutral. As they age, 63% of users report a heightened inclination to engage in political discussions or activism on social media, with 20% neutral on this trend. This suggests that with increasing age, users tailor their content preferences and become more involved in political and social dialogues online.

Gender differences are also pronounced, with 79% of the population acknowledging that social media impacts men and women differently and only 9% remaining neutral. This substantial agreement indicates a significant variation in how different genders experience social media, influencing aspects from content interaction to engagement levels. Additionally, concerns regarding safety based on gender are notable, as 39% of respondents have experienced harassment or felt unsafe due to their gender, underscoring the urgency for improved safety measures on social media platforms.

Ethnic tensions influence social media experiences as well, with 38% of respondents feeling unsafe or encountering harassment due to their ethnicity and 22% expressing neutrality. This highlights the need for social media guidelines and community management practices that foster inclusivity and ensure safety across all ethnic groups, reflecting the unique challenges of ethnic diversity in the Solomon Islands.

The role of social media in exacerbating ethnic tensions was evident during the November 2021 riots in Honiara. These riots highlighted the complex interplay between ethnic identities and political grievances, with targeted violence against the Chinese community and individuals from the Western Province, where the Prime Minister hails from. People from Western Province faced significant harassment both offline and online. An interviewee stated that during the 2021 riots they became targets:

“ People from Western Province and Choiseul provinces became victim [sic] since our Prime Minister is from the Choiseul province. Us from these two provinces are dark people and they call us “blacks” and they (ethnic group removed due to sensitivity) targeted black people during the riot.”

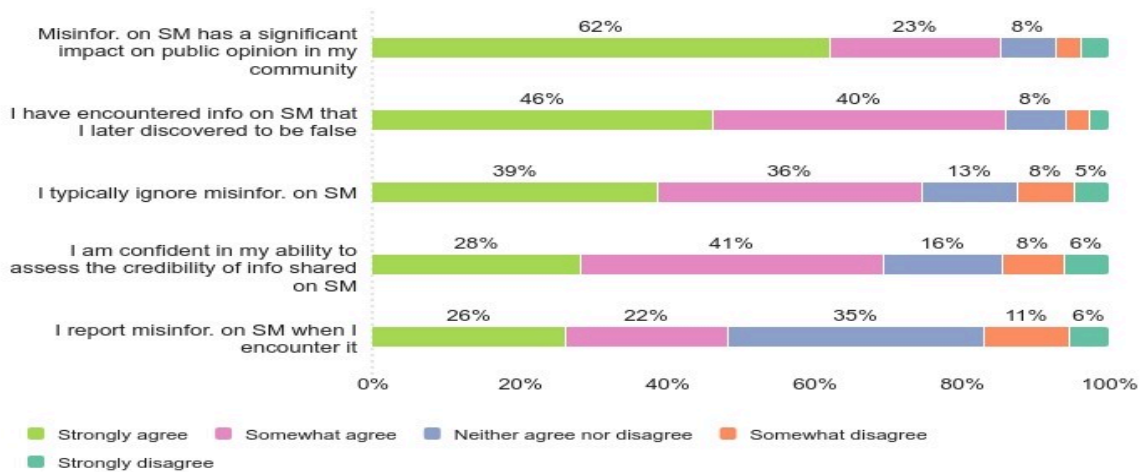
The situation escalated as social media platforms were used to spread incendiary messages and incite further violence[3]. Reports of social media posts explicitly targeting these ethnic groups inflamed the situation and posed significant challenges to maintaining public order. In response to these tensions, the non-executive members of the Choiseul Provincial Assembly called on the government to assist in repatriating Choiseul people from Honiara back to their villages for their safety[4]. The government and police issued calls for social media users to refrain from posts that could lead to more significant division, emphasising the need for responsible use of these platforms[5].

This case study underscores the urgent need for practical social media guidelines and community management practices that can prevent the spread of harmful content and ensure the safety of all individuals, regardless of their ethnic background. Implementing comprehensive social media policies that promote inclusivity and respect for diversity is crucial. Such measures are vital for conflict prevention and fostering a cohesive society that can manage and leverage its ethnic diversity positively.

## **5.5. Perception of misinformation on social media**

In this section, we investigate how people in the Solomon Islands perceive misinformation on social media, including their reactions to it and the influence it has on their online interactions.

Figure 8. Perceptions of misinformation (misinform.) on social media (SM)



A significant majority of the Solomon Islands population recognises the pervasive challenge of misinformation on social media. According to the survey, approximately 86% of respondents reported encountering information on social media that they later discovered to be false. This statistic underscores the widespread issue of unreliable content and the challenges it presents to users navigating the digital landscape. The prevalence of misinformation is a critical concern, particularly in a region where access to accurate and timely information is already limited due to infrastructure and connectivity challenges.

Despite the high incidence of exposure to false information, 75% of users indicated that they typically ignore misinformation when they encounter it. This tendency to overlook or disregard misinformation may suggest several underlying issues: a lack of awareness regarding the importance of countering false narratives, limited access to reliable fact-checking resources, or simply a sense of resignation to the overwhelming volume of misleading content online. The reluctance to effectively engage with or address misinformation could also be influenced by the users' digital literacy levels and familiarity with the tools and strategies needed to verify information.

Interestingly, confidence in distinguishing credible information from misinformation remains moderately high, with 69% of respondents expressing confidence in their capacity to assess the reliability of content shared on social media. However, this self-assessed confidence might be misleading. According to research findings, such as those from the BBC Media Action survey (2023), there is evidence that people tend to overestimate their ability to detect misinformation. This overconfidence can be problematic, as it may lead individuals to underestimate the influence of false information on their perceptions and decisions.

The discrepancy between the perceived ability to identify misinformation and the actual effectiveness of these efforts suggests a gap in digital literacy that needs to be addressed. In the Solomon Islands, where media access is often limited and informal channels of information, such as word of mouth, play a significant role, the potential impact of misinformation can be even more pronounced. The findings from the BBC Media Action survey highlight the importance of enhancing digital literacy programmes, which should aim not only to improve users' skills in identifying misinformation but also to equip them with practical tools and resources to verify information and engage critically with the content they encounter online (BBC Media Action, 2023).

Given the complexities of the digital media environment and the risks associated with misinformation, it is crucial to develop and implement targeted educational initiatives that can help users in the Solomon Islands navigate social media more effectively. Such efforts would contribute to a more informed and resilient online community, better equipped to challenge false narratives and support the integrity of public discourse.

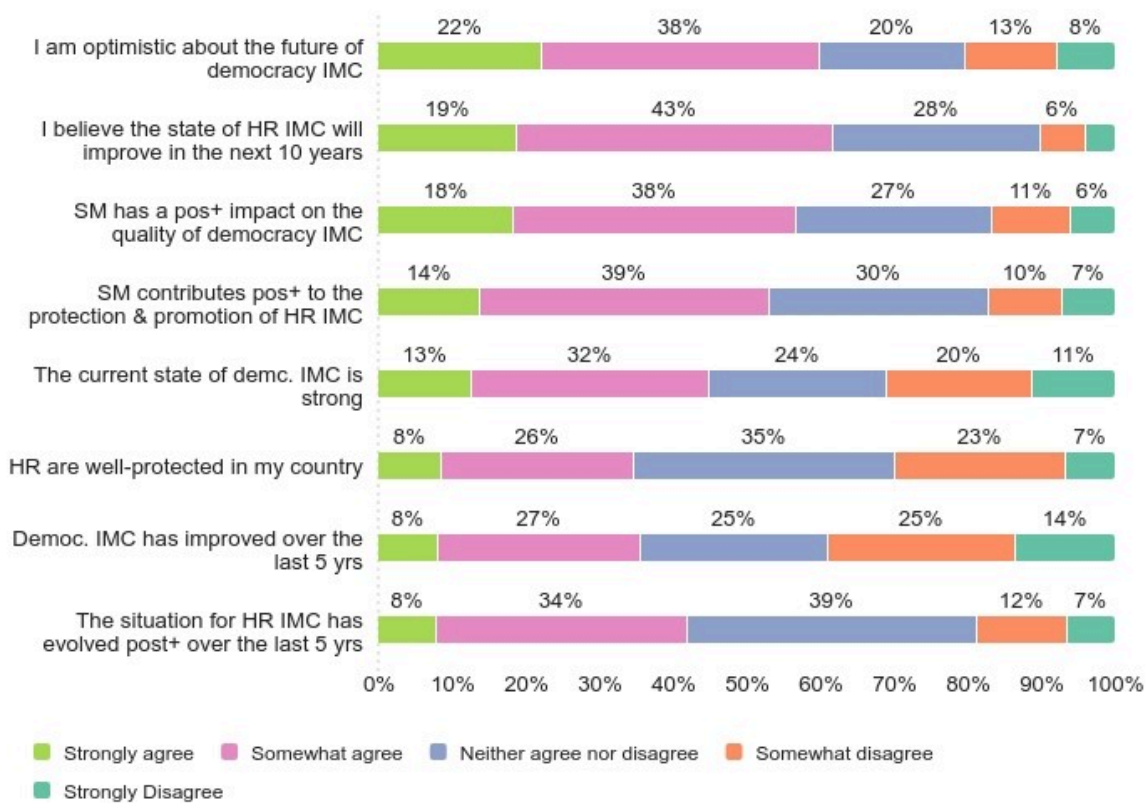
However, when it comes to taking action against misinformation, only 48% of respondents report such content when encountering it, while a substantial 35% remain neutral. This might indicate either a need for more awareness of how to report misinformation or a possible resignation from its prevalence. Moreover, the perceived impact of misinformation is significant, with 85% agreeing that it greatly influences public opinion within their community. This consensus underscores the need for targeted educational programmes to enhance digital literacy and encourage a more proactive stance in managing misinformation in the Solomon Islands' digital spaces. Such efforts could help mitigate the pervasive effects of misinformation on public discourse and community relations.

In 2021, both the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea faced challenges related to COVID-19 vaccination efforts, heavily influenced by misinformation spread via social media. However, the responses in each country varied significantly. In the Solomon Islands, initial vaccine hesitancy was prevalent, particularly among healthcare workers, due to widespread misinformation. This hesitancy led to delays in the vaccine rollout. However, when COVID-19 cases began to rise, vaccination rates increased rapidly as public perception shifted towards the urgent need for vaccination. Unlike the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea experienced prolonged vaccine hesitancy that did not see a similar quick uptick in vaccination rates when cases rose. The government of the Solomon Islands was compelled to enhance public information campaigns to counter false claims effectively and encourage vaccination uptake. [\[6\]](#)

## **5.6. Social media and its Influence on Democracy and Human Rights**

We analyse survey data to assess how residents view the past developments and current state of democracy and human rights, as well as their expectations for the future, emphasising the role of social media in these perceptions.

Figure 9. Perceptions of democracy (democ.), human rights (HR) and social media (SM) in my country (IMC)



Perspectives on the development and current state of democracy and human rights show mixed results, reflecting cautious optimism about future improvements. The survey reveals that 62% of respondents believe the state of human rights will improve over the next ten years, with 28% holding a neutral stance. Similarly, optimism about the future of democracy is somewhat high, with 60% feeling positive and 20% remaining neutral.

Current assessments of democracy and human rights are more varied. Only 35% of respondents agree that democracy has improved over the last five years, with 25% neutral, indicating some scepticism about recent democratic progress. The perception that human rights are well-protected is also relatively low, with only 34% in agreement and a substantial 35% neutral. This suggests concerns about the effectiveness of current human rights protections.

Moreover, 42% believe that human rights have evolved positively in the last five years, although a significant 39% remain neutral, highlighting ongoing uncertainties. When assessing the current state of democracy, 45% agree that it is strong, yet 24% are neutral, suggesting that while there is some confidence in the country's democratic state, a notable portion of the population remains unconvinced.

Social media's role is seen in a moderately positive light, with 53% agreeing that it contributes positively to the protection and promotion of human rights and 56% believing it positively impacts the quality of democracy. However, the neutral responses—30% for human rights and 27% for democracy—indicate some reservations about the extent of social media's effectiveness in protecting human rights and prompting democracy.

Based on the qualitative feedback, some respondents expressed a mix of concern and hope regarding democracy and human rights, emphasising a lack of widespread awareness and the potential power of social media. For example:

“ I personally noticed that the level of awareness to such democracy and human rights may not be fully felt throughout the majority of the citizens here in Solomons for instance the recent elections the majority of people don't have a great idea about the process, its importance and the broader spectrum of the actual system the “in and outs” I would say (sic). Another thing here is most people knew about the corruption happening in our country yet they somehow don't have the power to express their views I think fear of facing consequences from place of work etc. It's time we need more whistle-blowers and those so-called anti-corruption leaders to step up their game. I believe the use of social media platforms to fight corruption and promote democracy must be maintained thus providing the majority of people who lacks (sic) such essential information.”

Social media was also recognised for its role in disseminating essential information, particularly to remote areas during elections, suggesting its potential as a tool for democratic engagement:

“ ..one thing which I have experienced in my country on social media is that it helps to gives out awareness to the people in remote areas especially before an election day.”

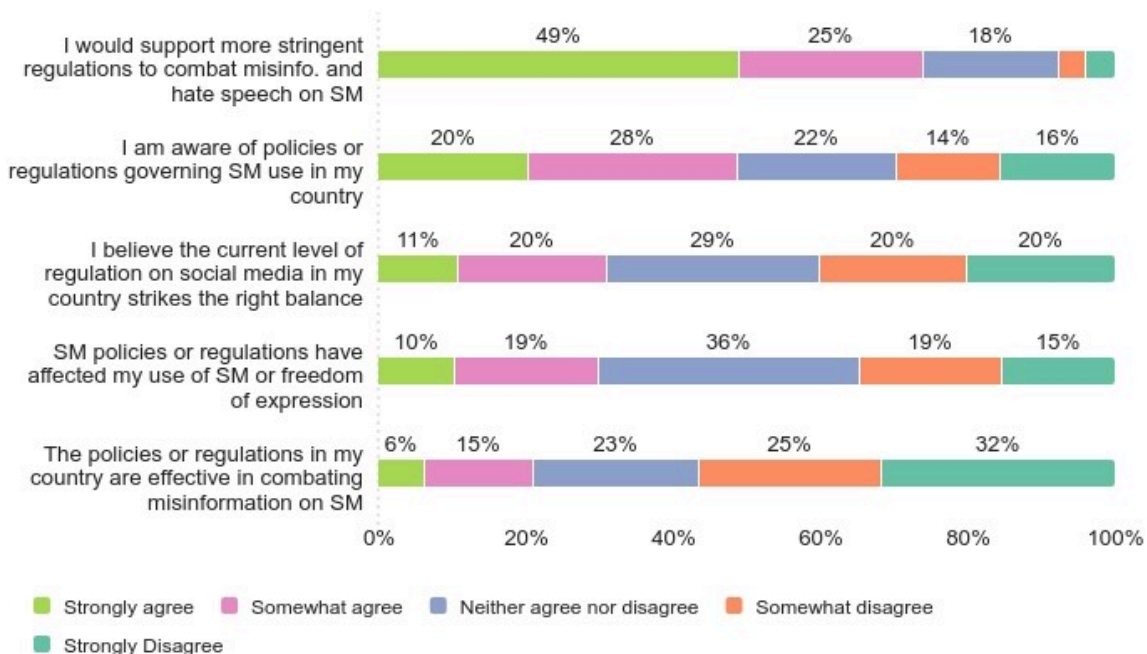
However, concerns are also raised about the misuse of these platforms by bad actors, including foreign entities, who might manipulate public opinion and influence democratic processes, as observed during the recent elections where issues like foreign interference were prominent:

“ Bad actors, including foreign entities, can exploit social media to manipulate public opinion, influence elections or other democratic process. Today SI (Solomon Islands) is preparing to cast their vote. Actors are now manipulate (sic) public opinions of the same. The issue of China is another case in point.”

This analysis reflects a cautious yet hopeful outlook among Solomon Islanders regarding the future of democracy and human rights, paired with moderate approval of social media's role in these critical areas. The data highlights the need for continued efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and human rights protections to match the population's expectations for improvement.

## **5.7. Perceptions of social media regulation**

This section explores the perceptions and effectiveness of social media regulations in the Solomon Islands. We'll assess public awareness of these policies, their impact on misinformation, and their influence on users' social media engagement and expression.



The public’s response to social media regulations reveals concerns about effectiveness and a strong preference for more stringent controls. A significant majority, 74% of respondents, support the implementation of more stringent regulations to combat misinformation and hate speech on social media, with only 18% expressing neutrality. This high level of agreement indicates a strong desire among the population for more robust measures to tackle the adverse effects of harmful online content.

Awareness of the existing social media policies and regulations is relatively low compared to other regional counterparts, with only 48% acknowledging their awareness and 22% remaining neutral. This suggests a need for increased efforts in public education and information dissemination about the regulatory framework governing social media use.

Confidence in the current regulatory measures is notably low; only 21% of respondents believe that the policies in place effectively combat misinformation, with a similar percentage expressing neutrality. Furthermore, just 31% agree that the existing regulations strike the right balance between control and freedom, with 29% neutral. These figures reflect significant scepticism about the adequacy and appropriateness of the current regulatory approach.

Concerning personal use and freedom of expression, 29% of respondents feel that regulations have affected their social media activities or their freedom of speech, with a more significant proportion, 36%, maintaining a neutral stance. This indicates that while some are affected by the regulations, a considerable portion is either uncertain about or indifferent to the impact of these policies on their personal freedoms.

The insights gathered from Solomon Islanders reveal a significant demand for better regulation of social media to enhance online safety and information credibility:

“ For Solomon Islands I think it’s time our law makers to come up with a regulation to safeguard the use of social media and the level or credibility of information in the various social media platforms”

There is a strong sentiment that without adequate regulatory measures, the risks associated with social media, such as cyberbullying and misinformation, will continue to escalate, potentially harming younger and future generations. Another respondent shared the following:

“ ...in the context of Solomon Islands, there is no regulation that safeguard social media. However, social media is one of the main sites people look up to for updates and at the same time cyber bullying becomes an issue that started to increase in our society which is not safe for the younger generation and the generation to come therefore it is a recommendation for SI (Solomon Islanders) to have a regulation on social media usage.”

Citizens are urging lawmakers to establish clear, effective, and balanced regulations that combat these issues, uphold freedom of expression, and maintain public trust. This call for action highlights the necessity for the Solomon Islands to develop a comprehensive legal framework tailored to the specific challenges and dynamics of social media usage within the country.

## 6. Samoa Country Analysis

### 6.1. Overview

Samoa, formally known as the Independent State of Samoa, is an island nation situated in the central South Pacific Ocean, part of the region known as Polynesia. It comprises two main islands, Savai'i and Upolu, and several smaller islands. Apia, located in Upolu, is the capital and the largest city. The country's population is predominantly of Samoan ethnicity, with a culture deeply rooted in the traditional Polynesian way of life, influencing its social structure, language, and customs.

Samoa's economy is primarily based on agriculture, fishing, and tourism. Agriculture remains the backbone, with primary exports of coconut products, nonu fruit, and taro. The tourism sector has been growing, driven by Samoa's natural beauty and vibrant culture, although it faces challenges from occasional natural disasters like cyclones and earthquakes.

The Samoan diaspora plays a crucial role in Samoa's socio-economic and cultural life. With significant communities established primarily in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, the diaspora contributes economically through remittances and acts as a cultural bridge, facilitating the exchange of ideas, traditions, and values between Samoa and the world. According to recent data, remittances from overseas Samoans constitute one of the country's largest sources of foreign income, underlining the diaspora's importance to the national economy. These financial contributions have been especially pivotal in times of natural disasters and economic hardship, helping to stabilise the local economy. Moreover, the diaspora actively engages in Samoa's political and social issues through social media and other online platforms, increasing their influence on domestic policies and national development.

This vibrant connection enriches Samoa's global presence and ensures its cultural heritage is preserved and celebrated internationally, even as it adapts to modern influences.

Samoa is a parliamentary democracy. Previously, the Head of State (a ceremonial role held for life) was elected for five-year terms. However, recent constitutional changes have moved towards an elected Head of State. The legislative framework is based on the parliamentary system, with a unicameral legislature called the "Fono," which enacts legislation and oversees the government. Samoa has a history of political stability compared to its Pacific neighbours, with peaceful transitions of power and democratic elections.

Samoa has been developing its ICT infrastructure to enhance connectivity and integration into the global digital economy. The government has prioritised ICT in its national development strategy, focusing on improving Internet accessibility and reliability, particularly in rural areas, to bridge the digital divide. Efforts are also being made to use ICT to improve public services, such as health and education, and for disaster risk management.

The Samoan society is communal and organised around the 'fa'a Samoa', the unique Samoan way which emphasises family, respect, and community obligations. While the population is predominantly Samoan, there has been a notable Chinese influence in commerce. Ethnic and cultural homogeneity has helped maintain social cohesion but also poses challenges in integrating modern governance with traditional leadership, known as the 'matai' system.

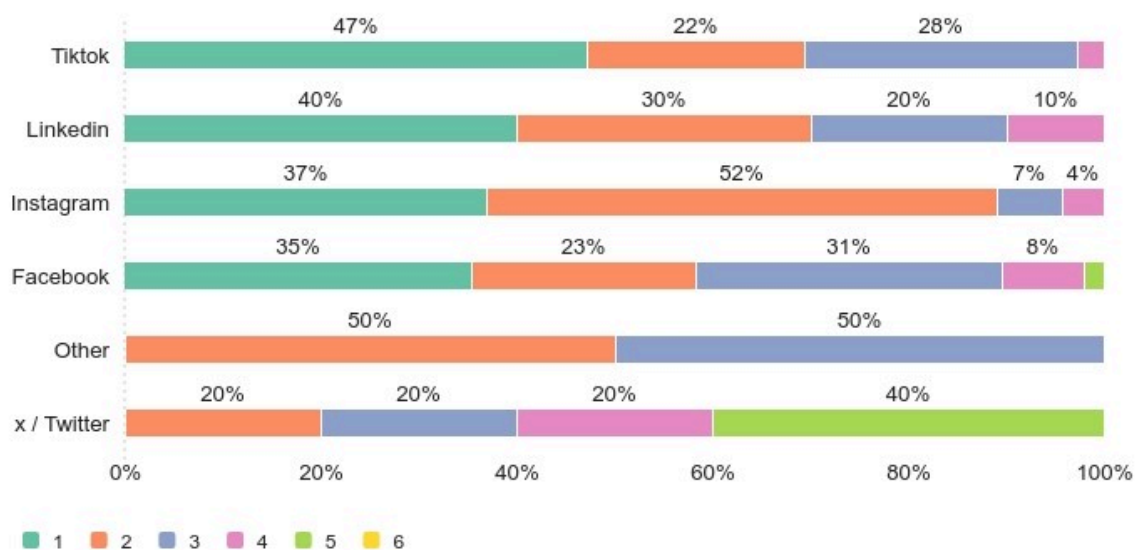
## **6.2. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents**

Samoa's demographic data shows a heavy female majority, with 80% of respondents identifying as female, 15% as male, and 5% as 'Other'. The survey population is notably young, with 80% aged between 18-24 years, emphasising the prominence of youth in Samoan social media landscapes. Urban residents comprise 68% of the sample, with a substantial 32% from rural areas, indicating reasonably widespread use of social media across different living environments. The diaspora represents a significant 36% of respondents, underscoring the strong cultural and communication ties maintained with Samoans overseas. Additional demographic information is provided in Annex III.

## **6.3. Social Media Landscape**

Samoa's social media landscape shows a distinctive distribution of platform preferences, highlighting diverse digital interactions among its users.

Figure 10. Social Media platforms used (multiple options allowed) - ranked by preference from 1 (most used) to 6 (least used)



Based on the survey data, TikTok is the most favoured platform, with 47% of respondents ranking it as their primary choice. This preference for TikTok underscores the growing global trend towards short-form video content, which resonates particularly well with the Samoan audience, likely due to its engaging and easily digestible format.

LinkedIn follows closely at 40%, indicating a strong interest in professional networking within Samoa. This is notably higher compared to other regions in the Pacific, suggesting that Samoans place significant value on professional development and global networking opportunities. Instagram is also popular, and 37% of respondents use it as their primary social media platform, highlighting its appeal across diverse demographics for sharing visual content and stories.

Facebook, traditionally a dominant player, is now the primary choice for only 35% of respondents, reflecting a broader shift in social media usage patterns towards newer platforms offering different interactivity and content engagement. Interestingly, 50% of respondents chose platforms under “Other” as their second choice when considering secondary preferences. This category did not rank first for any respondents. Still, it showed a significant secondary preference, which might include messaging apps and other niche social media platforms not listed in the primary options.

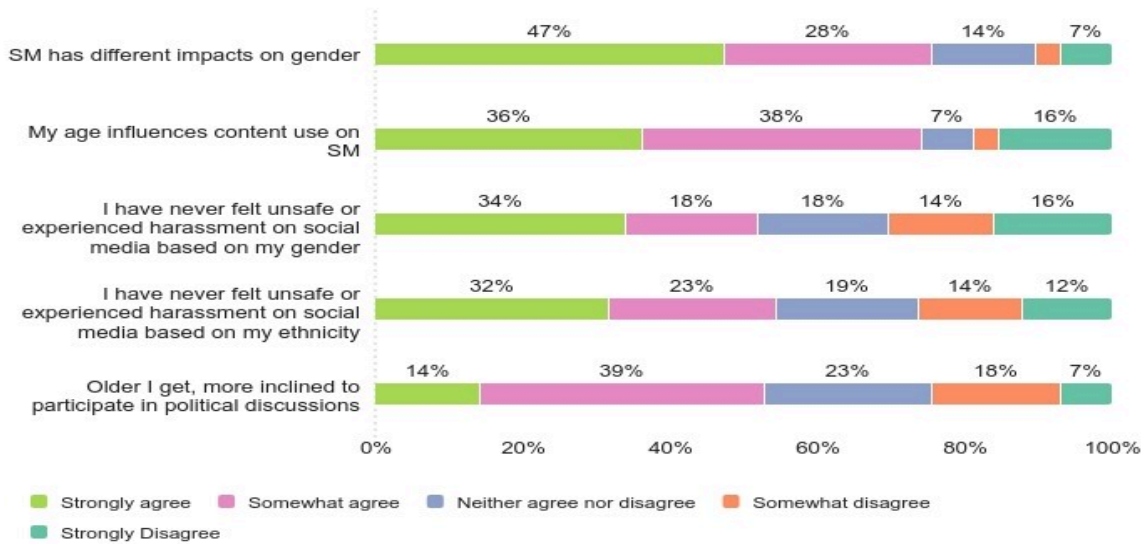
X shows minimal engagement, with no respondents ranking it as their primary platform and only 20% choosing it as a secondary option. This lower interest might reflect the platform’s text-heavy format, contrasting with the higher engagement in more visual and interactive platforms.

These findings illustrate a dynamic shift in Samoa’s social media usage, with a clear pivot towards platforms that offer rich media experiences and professional networking. The diverse preferences also highlight the importance of understanding local digital behaviours to tailor social media strategies effectively within the region. This evolving landscape suggests that Samoans are increasingly engaging with various platforms that cater to different needs, from entertainment and personal expression to professional growth and global connectivity.

## 6.4. Demographic variations in Social Media interactions and Impacts

This section explores the impact of demographic factors on social media usage in Samoa.

Figure 11. Demographic influence on social media (SM)



In Samoa, the demographic factors significantly shape the social media landscape, as evidenced by the strong agreement among respondents on various aspects. Age influences content engagement substantially, with 74% of respondents agreeing that their age affects social media content usage, while only 7% remain neutral. This trend indicates that different age groups in Samoa have distinct preferences for the types of content they consume. Furthermore, as individuals age, 53% feel more inclined to engage in political discussions or activism on social media, with 23% neutral, suggesting a growing engagement with civic matters among older users.

Regarding gender differences, 85% of respondents perceive that social media impacts men and women differently, with 14% remaining neutral. This overwhelming agreement highlights the crucial role gender plays in shaping social media experiences in Samoa, possibly influencing the nature of online interactions and exposure to content. Safety concerns based on gender are notably significant, with 62% of respondents reporting feelings of unsafety or experiencing harassment due to their gender and 18% neutral on the matter. This points to a pressing need for platforms to enhance safety measures and awareness to protect users against gender-based harassment.

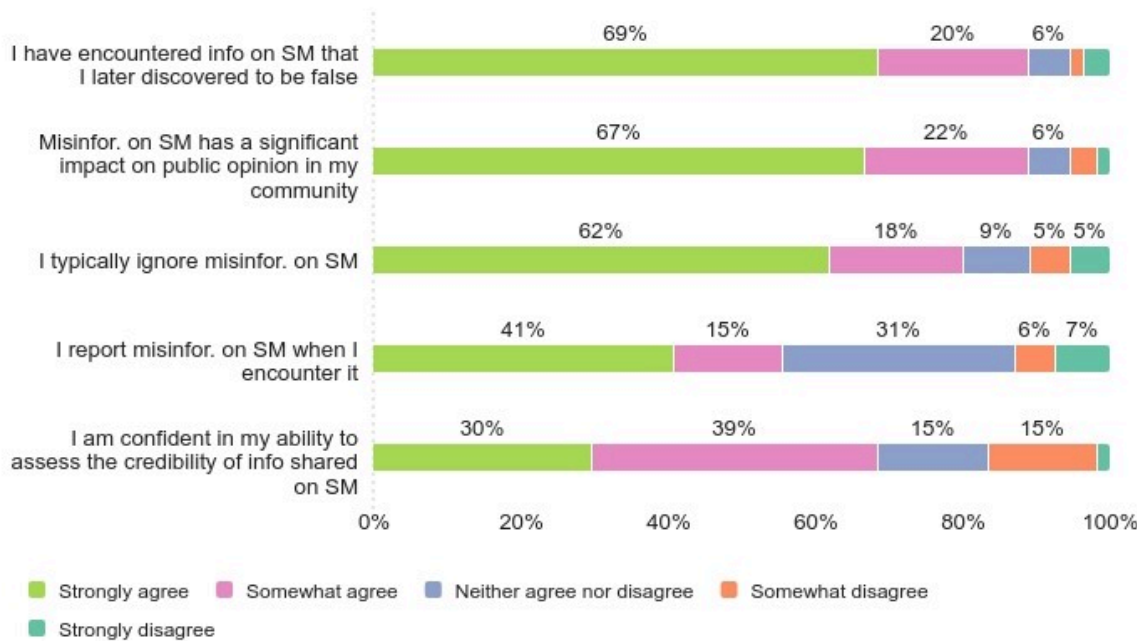
Ethnicity also influences social media use, with 26% of respondents feeling unsafe or experiencing harassment based on their ethnicity and 19% remaining neutral. In comparison to Fiji, where 33% of respondents felt unsafe, and the Solomon Islands, where this figure rises to 41%, the proportion of respondents from Samoa who felt unsafe online or experienced harassment is noticeably lower. This difference may reflect the more homogenous ethnic composition of Samoa and Polynesia in general, where social cohesion tends to be stronger and ethnic tensions less pronounced than in the more ethnically diverse Melanesian regions.

These insights into Samoa’s social media dynamics reveal significant demographic influences that must be considered for effective social media management and policy formulation to ensure a safe, engaging, and inclusive online environment.

## 6.5. Perception of misinformation on social media

This section examines the perceptions of misinformation on social media in Samoa.

Figure 12. Perceptions of misinformation (misinform.) on social media (SM)



89% of respondents acknowledge having encountered false information on social media, with the same percentage also recognising the significant impact this misinformation has on public opinion within their community. This high level of agreement underscores the pervasive influence of misinformation on the societal and political landscape.

Despite the frequent encounters with misinformation, 80% of Samoans typically choose to ignore it, with only 9% expressing neutrality. This predominant tendency to overlook false information may indicate challenges in effectively addressing or mitigating its spread. While 69% of respondents feel confident in their ability to assess the credibility of information shared on social media, this confidence may not necessarily reflect true digital literacy. Instead, it might indicate a misplaced confidence, which underscores the need for continued efforts to enhance digital literacy. This is particularly important given the complexities of navigating misinformation in today’s digital landscape. Moreover, when it comes to taking action, only 56% report misinformation, with a significant 31% remaining neutral, possibly highlighting a gap in proactive engagement or a need for clear guidelines on handling such situations. One respondent shared the following:

“ alongside its [social media] political sway, there’s been a surge in misinformation spreading across social media platforms. To combat this, various government

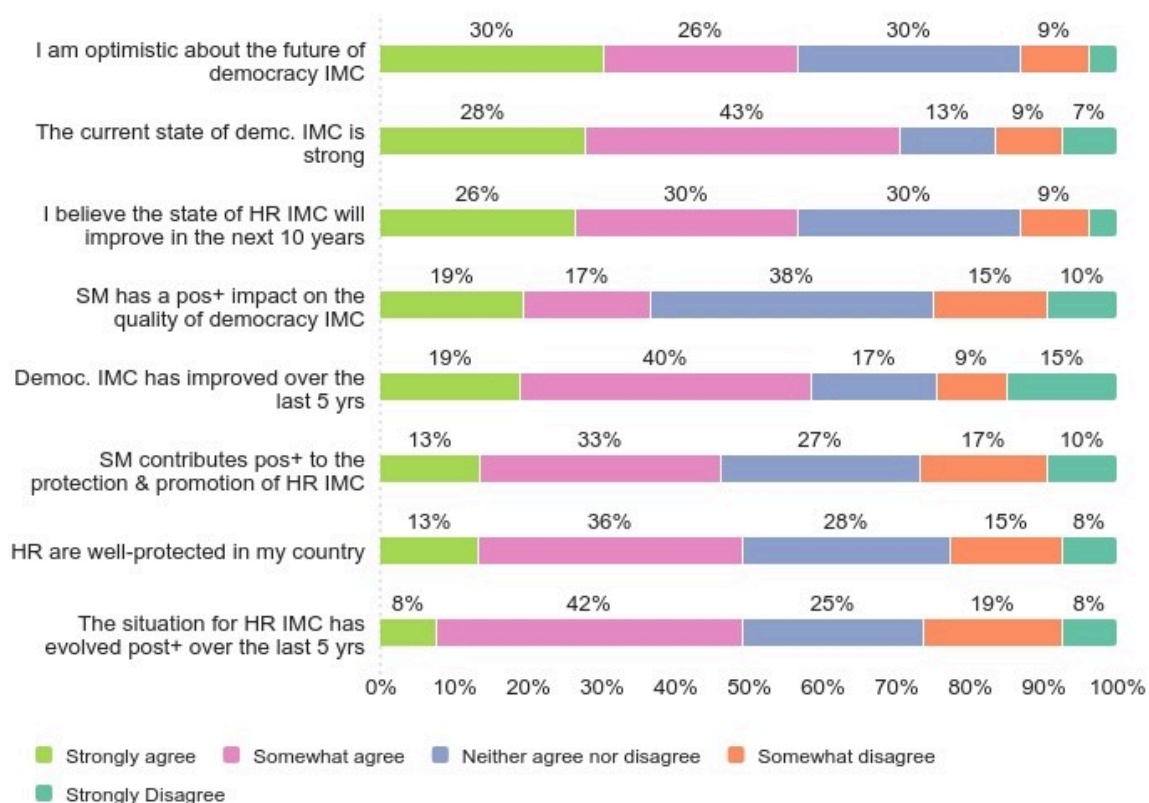
ministries, including the Ministry of Police and the Attorney General’s Office, have issued press releases to counter false information. Moreover, there’s a growing awareness among the populace, particularly in the education sector, regarding the unreliability of information found on social media. Efforts are being made to educate individuals, especially students, about the importance of discerning credible sources, as exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic when fake pages spread misinformation about school closures, causing confusion among students.”

This pattern of responses in Samoa highlights a critical need for enhanced educational efforts to improve information verification skills and encourage more active participation in combating misinformation. Addressing these issues could mitigate the widespread impact of misinformation and foster a more informed and engaged online community.

## 6.6. Social media and its Influence on Democracy and Human Rights

This section focuses on the impact of social media on perceptions of democracy and human rights in Samoa. It assesses how residents view the development, current state, and future expectations of these fundamental aspects, explicitly highlighting the role of social media in influencing these perceptions.

Figure 13. Perceptions of democracy (democ.), human rights (HR) and social media (SM) in my country (IMC)



In Samoa, survey responses indicate a generally positive outlook on the progression and current state of democracy and human rights, alongside a mixed reception

regarding the impact of social media on these areas. The majority of respondents, 56%, are optimistic about the future improvements in both democracy and human rights over the next decade, with an equal percentage maintaining a neutral position. When reflecting on recent history, 59% believe that democracy has improved in the last five years, while half of the respondents perceive that human rights situations have similarly advanced.

The assessment of current conditions shows that 71% of the population views the state of democracy as vital, marking a significant confidence in the governmental framework. However, only 49% feel that human rights are well-protected, indicating some reservations about the effectiveness of human rights safeguards. Regarding the role of social media, opinions are divided: while 46% see social media as a positive force for human rights protection, only 36% believe it has a beneficial impact on the quality of democracy, with a substantial proportion of respondents remaining neutral. This suggests a cautious perspective on the ability of social media to enhance democratic processes and human rights protections. Interestingly, one respondent shared the following:

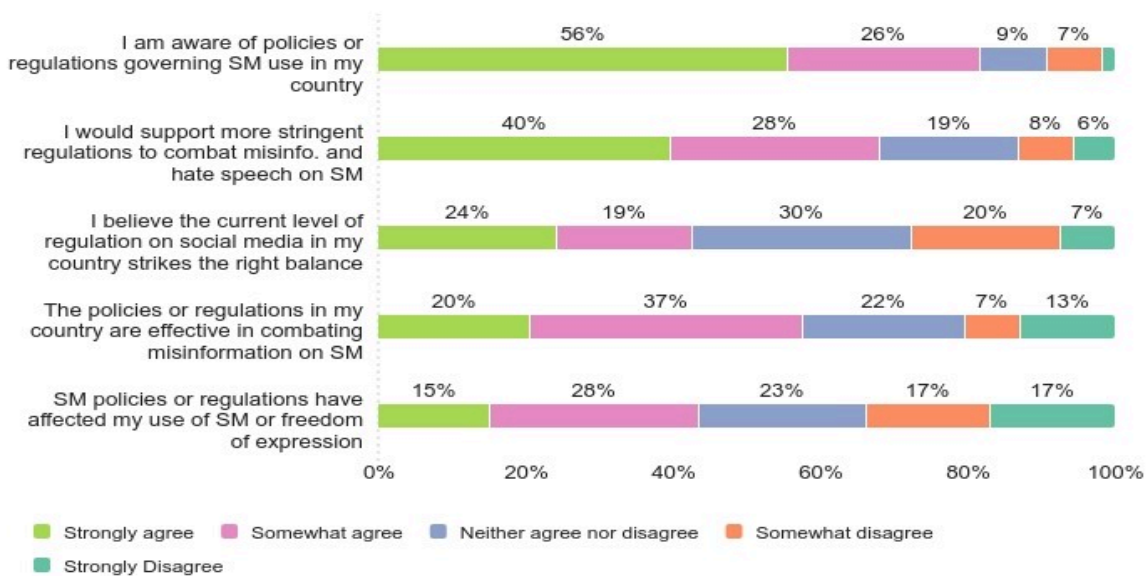
“ Social media in Samoa has significantly influenced the political landscape, notably during the 2021 elections, where its impact led to the rise of the new party FAST, ultimately forming the new government.”

In an interview with prominent Samoan academic Dr Dion Enari, he explained that social media was pivotal in Samoa's 2021 elections. The former Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, who had been in power for 22 years, lost his seat. The election resulted in Fiame Naomi Mata'afa becoming Samoa's first female Prime Minister, marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape.

## **6.7. Perceptions of social media regulation**

This section examines public attitudes towards social media regulations in Samoa, focusing on the community's awareness of existing policies, their perceived effectiveness in managing misinformation, and their impact on freedom of expression and social media usage.

Figure 14. Social Media (SM) and regulation



The public’s perspective on social media regulations reflects a relatively high awareness and mixed feelings about their effectiveness and impact on personal freedoms. 68% of respondents in Samoa support more stringent regulations to address misinformation and hate speech on social media, with 19% remaining neutral. This indicates a strong preference among the population for stricter measures to improve online discourse.

Samoa shows a high level of awareness regarding social media policies, with 82% of respondents acknowledging their familiarity with these regulations. This is significantly higher compared to other regions, suggesting effective communication and public engagement efforts by policymakers.

More than half of the respondents, 57%, believe that the existing regulations effectively combat misinformation, with 22% neutral about their impact. This is a relatively positive perception, indicating that a majority feel the current measures are adequate to address issues related to online misinformation.

Opinions are divided regarding the balance of these regulations with personal freedoms. Only 43% believe that the current level of regulation strikes the right balance. The same proportion of respondents, 43%, feel that these regulations have impacted their use of social media or freedom of expression, with 23% neutral. This indicates some concerns about how regulations may restrict personal use or expression to some extent.

Overall, the data from Samoa suggests a population that is well-informed and generally supportive of existing social media regulations, seeing them as beneficial in combating online misinformation. However, a notable portion of the community is cautious about the potential overreach of these regulations, reflecting the ongoing challenge of balancing effective oversight with safeguarding individual freedoms.

The evolving landscape of social media regulation in Samoa illustrates a significant gap between public awareness and the specificity of existing regulations. While many Samoans believe there are specific regulations for social media, the current legal framework primarily consists of general laws adapted to address online offences. Notable cases, such as individuals’ severe consequences for posting harmful content online, highlight the need for clear and specific social media laws<sup>[7]</sup>.

Samoa's approach involves using existing sections of the Crimes Act, such as Section 219 for harassment via electronic communication, and the reintroduction of the Criminal Libel Law aimed at curbing defamation by anonymous online entities. While these measures address certain harmful activities, they may also raise concerns about their impact on freedom of expression. The broad application of general laws to social media-related offences points to a need for a more tailored approach to safeguard individuals while respecting freedom of speech. Samoa could benefit from studying models like Fiji's Online Safety Act, which provides a specific framework for addressing online safety while balancing these concerns.

## **7. Regional Analysis: Synthesizing Insights Across the Pacific**

### **7.1. Demographic Interactions with Social Media**

#### **Common Trends Across the Three Countries:**

**Age Influence on Social Media Usage:** In all three countries, age significantly influences social media interactions, with younger demographics engaging more with content and platforms to enable visual and dynamic interactions, such as Instagram and TikTok. As users age, there is a noticeable increase in their inclination to participate in political discussions, indicating a trend where maturity correlates with greater civic engagement.

**Gender Differences and Safety Concerns:** Gender differences in social media usage and experiences are pronounced across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa. A substantial majority in each country agrees that social media impacts men and women differently, particularly regarding content interaction and online safety. Notably, all three countries report high levels of gender-based harassment or feelings of unsafety on social media, pointing to a widespread issue that requires targeted interventions.

#### **Distinctive Aspects in Each Country:**

**Fiji:** The responses from Fiji show a balanced concern for both gender and ethnicity regarding safety and harassment, with significant percentages reporting feeling unsafe or harassed due to these factors. This highlights a social media environment where gender and ethnic identity are critical in shaping user experiences.

**Solomon Islands:** The Solomon Islands stand out with a high engagement in professional networking, as indicated by the popularity of LinkedIn. Additionally, ethnic-based safety concerns are significant, albeit slightly lower than gender-based issues, suggesting that social tensions may spill over into digital interactions.

**Samoa:** Samoa exhibits the highest percentage of respondents who feel unsafe, or experience harassment based on gender. The extent of agreement on gender impacting social media use is also highest in Samoa, emphasising a particularly acute awareness of gender dynamics.

## Conclusion

While there are commonalities in how demographic factors influence social media usage in Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, the intensity and nature of these influences vary. All three countries face challenges with gender-based safety, which is a critical area for policy and platform intervention.

## 7.2. Perceptions of Misinformation on Social Media

### Common Trends Across Three Countries

**High Encounter Rates with Misinformation:** Across all three countries, a remarkably high percentage of respondents report encountering misinformation on social media. Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa all show agreement rates of around 89%, indicating that misinformation is widespread across the Pacific region.

**Significant Impact on Public Opinion:** Respondents in all three countries strongly agree that misinformation significantly impacts public opinion in their communities. The agreement rates are notably high, with Fiji at 91%, Solomon Islands at 85%, and Samoa at 89%, underscoring the potent influence of false information on societal beliefs and political views.

The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2023-2024 further emphasises that the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in the Pacific continues to undermine Pacific Island countries' sovereignty and social cohesion. The report highlights that these issues have been exacerbated by increased Internet connectivity and social media usage across the region. Over the past 18 months, the Pacific has likely been targeted by unattributed misinformation campaigns, particularly in relation to national elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also warns that as the region becomes more digitally connected, the scale and sophistication of misinformation, including the use of deep fakes and data weaponisation, will likely increase, posing even greater challenges in differentiating real from engineered information.

**Predominant Inaction towards Misinformation:** Despite the high rates of misinformation encounters, there is a common trend of inaction. A large majority of respondents in each country typically ignore misinformation they encounter, with about 76% in Fiji, 75% in the Solomon Islands, and 80% in Samoa opting to overlook it rather than address or counteract it.

According to the Pacific Islands Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (2024), while social media usage is widespread across the Pacific Islands, there is a concerning gap between perceived and actual digital literacy. Many users are overconfident in spotting misinformation, which exacerbates the spread of false information, especially during critical events like elections. This highlights the urgent need for enhanced digital literacy programmes to equip users with the skills necessary to critically evaluate the information they encounter online.

The high prevalence of misinformation and its recognised impact on public opinion across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa highlight a critical regional challenge. The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2023-2024 emphasises that these issues will likely intensify as geopolitical dynamics become more pronounced and technology evolves, making misinformation harder to detect and counter. At the same time, general trends indicate common issues and behaviours, and differences in engagement levels and confidence in handling misinformation point to tailored intervention opportunities. Enhancing digital literacy programmes, improving reporting mechanisms, and fostering a proactive approach to misinformation could be crucial steps toward mitigating its adverse effects in these Pacific nations.

## **Distinctive Aspects in Each Country:**

**Fiji:** Respondents in Fiji show a relatively higher confidence in their ability to assess the credibility of information shared on social media, with 69% expressing confidence.

**Solomon Islands:** The Solomon Islands display a somewhat lower impact perception of misinformation on public opinion than Fiji and Samoa, albeit still high at 85%.

**Samoa:** Samoa stands out with the highest percentage of respondents who actively report encountering misinformation, at 56%.

## **Conclusion:**

The high prevalence of misinformation and its recognised impact on public opinion across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa highlight a critical regional challenge. While the general trends indicate common issues and behaviours, the distinct differences in engagement levels and confidence in handling misinformation suggest that bespoke interventions are necessary. Notably, the confidence expressed by respondents, particularly in Fiji, in their ability to assess the credibility of information may not fully reflect actual digital literacy skills, pointing to the possibility of misplaced confidence. Thus, the enhancement of

digital literacy programmes is crucial to ensure users are equipped to effectively evaluate information. Additionally, improving reporting mechanisms and fostering a proactive approach to misinformation are integral steps towards mitigating its adverse effects in these Pacific nations.

### 7.3. Perceptions of Democracy, Human Rights and Social Media

The perceptions and impacts of social media on democracy and human rights across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa reveal both common trends and distinct national differences:

#### Common Trends Across the Region:

**Optimism About the Future:** Across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, there is a generally optimistic outlook about the future of democracy and human rights. Most respondents in each country believe both will improve in the coming years.

**Impact of Social Media:** All three countries recognise the role of social media in influencing democracy and human rights, although the perceived effectiveness varies. Most respondents agree that social media has the potential to positively impact these areas, supporting its role as a tool for engagement and advocacy.

#### Distinctive Aspects in Each Country:

**Fiji:** Respondents in Fiji strongly believe that social media can positively affect democracy and human rights, with over half agreeing on its beneficial impacts. However, they also display considerable concern about the current state of human rights protection, suggesting a need for more robust safeguards.

**Solomon Islands:** Perceptions in the Solomon Islands are marked by more moderate agreement regarding the positive impacts of social media. Compared to Samoa and Fiji, there is less confidence in the current state of democracy, with a significant number of respondents neutral about recent improvements.

**Samoa:** Samoa stands out with the highest confidence in the current state of democracy, with a significant majority affirming its strength. However, there is notable scepticism regarding the effectiveness of social media in enhancing the quality of democracy, highlighting potential challenges in leveraging digital platforms for civic engagement.

## Conclusion

While there is a shared regional optimism about the future of democracy and human rights, the effectiveness of social media as a tool for enhancing these areas is viewed differently across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa. Each country presents unique challenges and opportunities in harnessing social media for democratic engagement and human rights advocacy. Enhanced educational efforts and tailored strategies to improve digital literacy and proactive social media participation may help maximise its positive impacts across the Pacific.

### 7.4. Perceptions of social media regulation

Misinformation and disinformation are increasingly impacting the social cohesion and sovereignty of Pacific Island Countries. The spread of misinformation has been exacerbated by the shift in media consumption from traditional broadcast to digital media, including social media. There is a critical need for fact-checking initiatives and local moderation, especially given the lack of moderators fluent in Pacific languages. The absence of robust local media institutions further complicates this challenge, allowing undue foreign influence and increasing the risk of misinformation during critical periods such as elections.

Across Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, the attitudes towards social media regulations reveal common concerns and varying levels of satisfaction with the effectiveness of these policies:

#### Common Trends Across the Region:

The Pacific Islands Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (2024) reveals uneven development of social media regulatory frameworks across the Pacific Islands. While countries like Fiji have more comprehensive regulations, others lag, resulting in inconsistent management of misinformation and online harassment. This disparity calls for a coordinated regional approach to harmonise regulations and effectively address the challenges posed by the digital landscape.

**Support for Stricter Regulations:** This trend is prevalent across all three countries. Most respondents support introducing more stringent regulations to combat misinformation and hate speech on social media. Fiji (70%), Solomon Islands (74%), and Samoa (68%) all show substantial agreement on this point, reflecting a regional concern about the negative impacts of misinformation.

**Awareness of Regulations:** Awareness of social media policies varies significantly across the region. Samoa exhibits the highest awareness at 82%, followed by Fiji at 71% and the Solomon Islands at 48%. This disparity highlights differences in public information campaigns and the penetration of regulatory information in each country.

## Distinctive Aspects in Each Country:

**Fiji:** While there is a good level of awareness (71%) and a strong desire for stricter regulations (70%) in Fiji, only 42% of respondents believe that current regulations effectively combat misinformation. This suggests a gap between the regulations in place and their perceived effectiveness.

**Solomon Islands:** The Solomon Islands show the lowest confidence in the effectiveness of current regulations, with only 21% believing that the policies effectively combat misinformation. Coupled with the lowest awareness level, this highlights a critical area for improvement in policy dissemination and enforcement.

**Samoa:** Samoa stands out with the highest awareness of regulations and a relatively higher belief in their effectiveness (57%). However, the population is divided on whether the current level of regulation strikes the right balance between controlling content and preserving freedom of expression, with 43% agreeing and 30% neutral.

### Conclusion:

The regional perspective underscores a strong demand for more robust social media regulations to address misinformation and hate speech, accompanied by a need for increased effectiveness and balance. Each country shows a different level of engagement and satisfaction with current policies, indicating that while the problems may be similar, the solutions may need to be tailored to specific national contexts. Enhancing the effectiveness of these regulations, improving public awareness, and finding the right balance between regulation and freedom of expression are key challenges that need to be addressed to foster a safer and more reliable social media environment in the Pacific.

## 8. Recommendations

The digital landscape in the Pacific region presents unique challenges and opportunities for enhancing online safety and security. While our study has shown that individual nations like Fiji have made significant strides in legislating against cyber threats and online harassment, other countries are at varying stages of developing their regulatory frameworks. Despite these differences, a common thread across all countries is the pervasive challenge of misinformation and online abuse. These shared challenges underscore the necessity for a unified regional approach that not only addresses legal aspects of online behaviour but also fosters a culture of safety transcending borders and legal jurisdictions. Given the cultural, economic, and technological diversity across the Pacific islands, regional recommendations aim to harmonise efforts, share resources, and implement best practices that benefit all member countries. This strategy involves leveraging collective strengths, addressing common vulnerabilities, and enhancing cooperation among all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, international partners, and the private sector. Moreover, exploring collaboration and partnerships at a global scale, particularly with organisations like the United Nations, which is focusing on digitization both in terms

of risks and opportunities, can further strengthen the region's capacity to address online safety and security challenges. By doing so, the Pacific region can build a more resilient digital ecosystem that protects its citizens and nurtures positive online interactions.

## 8.1. Regional Recommendations for Enhancing Online Safety in the Pacific

The Pacific Islands Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (Digital Frontiers Project, 2024) highlights the need for regional collaboration to overcome the limitations faced by individual Pacific Island countries in negotiating with large tech companies and implementing effective online safety measures. By pooling resources and expertise, the Pacific Islands can create a more resilient digital ecosystem that protects its citizens from the harms associated with social media use. This collaborative approach is essential to ensure that all countries in the region can effectively address the challenges of the digital age.

To address the shared challenges of misinformation and online abuse while recognising the different stages of regulatory development across the Pacific, the following regional recommendations are proposed:

**1. Establish a Regional Online Safety Framework:** A Regional Online Safety Framework should be developed to create a unified approach to online safety across the Pacific. This framework will:

- **Set Minimum Standards:** Establish baseline standards for combating misinformation, cyberbullying, and online harassment, ensuring all Pacific countries adhere to common safety protocols.
- **Facilitate Best Practices Sharing:** Encourage the exchange of effective strategies and technologies among member countries, fostering a collaborative environment for addressing online safety issues.
- **Adapt to Local Contexts:** The framework should provide flexibility for each country to adapt the guidelines to its specific cultural and legal contexts while maintaining regional consistency.
- **Coordinate with International Organisations:** Collaborate with international organisations focused on digital safety to align the regional framework with global standards and best practices.

**2. Create a Pacific Online Safety Advisory Council:** A dedicated advisory council should be established to oversee and guide the implementation of the Regional Online Safety Framework. The council's key roles will include:

- **Regional Representation:** Ensure representation from all Pacific nations, allowing diverse perspectives and experiences to inform decision-making.
- **Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of the online safety framework, making adjustments as needed to address emerging threats and challenges.

- **Crisis Response Coordination:** Act as a regional body coordinating responses to major online safety incidents, ensuring a swift and unified approach across the Pacific.
- **Policy Development Support:** Provide guidance and support to member countries in developing and implementing national online safety policies.

### **3. Strengthening Regional Collaboration for Combatting Election-Related Misinformation:**

Given the success of Fiji's Elections Office in establishing the Centre for Credible Election Information during the 2022 general elections, PIANZEA (Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Administrators' Network) should consider adopting a collaborative regional approach to tackle election-related misinformation on social media, particularly on platforms like Facebook.

- **Regional Coordination with Meta:** PIANZEA should lead efforts to engage with Meta on a regional scale, leveraging collective bargaining power to establish a unified framework for addressing misinformation specific to the electoral processes in the Pacific.
- **Best Practices Sharing:** Utilise Fiji's experience as a model by sharing insights, strategies, and operational frameworks through PIANZEA meetings and workshops.
- **Establishment of National Information Centres:** Encourage each member country to establish its own "Centre for Credible Election Information", modelled after Fiji's example and tailored to its local context.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** PIANZEA could facilitate targeted training programmes for electoral officials across the region, focusing on digital literacy, misinformation management, and social media monitoring.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Develop and implement regional public awareness campaigns to educate voters about the dangers of misinformation and the importance of relying on credible sources.

**4. Support the Development of National Online Safety Laws:** To enhance the legal framework for online safety in individual Pacific countries, the following actions should be taken:

- **Provide Technical Assistance:** Offer expertise in drafting and refining online safety legislation, including sharing template laws and best practices from other jurisdictions.
- **Capacity-Building Workshops:** Conduct workshops for legislators, policymakers, and legal professionals to build capacity in developing and enforcing online safety laws.
- **Facilitate Legal Harmonisation:** Align national laws with the Regional Online Safety Framework to encourage legal consistency across the region, reducing jurisdictional gaps that could be exploited by online threats.
- **Monitor Legislative Impact:** Establish mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of these laws, allowing for timely updates and improvements.

**5. Implement Regional Education and Awareness Programmes:** To promote digital literacy and responsible online behaviour across the Pacific, comprehensive education and awareness programmes should be launched:

- **Develop Multilingual Campaigns:** Ensure education materials are available in local languages to maximise accessibility and understanding among diverse populations.
- **Target All Age Groups:** Create tailored programmes for different demographic groups, from young children to older adults, addressing their specific online safety challenges.
- **Leverage Media and Technology:** Use various platforms, including social media, radio, television, and community events, to reach a wide audience and disseminate key online safety messages.
- **Partner with Educational Institutions:** Work with schools, universities, and vocational training centres to integrate digital literacy and online safety into their curricula.

**6. Foster Public-Private Partnerships:** Encouraging collaboration between governments and technology companies is crucial for developing and deploying effective online safety solutions. Key actions include:

- **Collaborate on Technology Solutions:** Work with tech companies to create tools and technologies that enhance content moderation, data protection, and user safety on social media platforms.
- **Develop Industry Guidelines:** Partner with the private sector to establish industry-specific guidelines that support online safety and align with the Regional Online Safety Framework.
- **Host Innovation Challenges:** Organise regional hackathons or innovation challenges to stimulate the development of new technologies and solutions for online safety, leveraging the private sector's creativity and expertise.
- **Monitor Partnership Impact:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of these partnerships to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to the region's online safety goals.

**7. Promote Cross-Border Data Sharing and Cybercrime Units:** To combat cybercrime effectively, the Pacific region should enhance cross-border cooperation and establish dedicated cybercrime units:

- **Establish Data Sharing Protocols:** Develop standardised protocols for sharing cyber threat data between countries, ensuring that information is exchanged quickly and securely.
- **Harmonise Legal Frameworks:** Work towards harmonising cybercrime laws and enforcement mechanisms across the region, reducing legal barriers to prosecuting cross-border cybercrimes.
- **Create Regional Cybercrime Units:** Establish specialised cybercrime units within law enforcement agencies in each country, with regional coordination to address threats that transcend national borders.
- **Facilitate Training and Resource Sharing:** Provide training and resources to law enforcement agencies, equipping them with the skills and tools needed to tackle cybercrime effectively.

**8. Invest in Cybersecurity Infrastructure:** Strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure is essential for protecting against online threats. The region should take the following steps:

- **Develop Regional Cybersecurity Centres:** Establish centres of excellence for cybersecurity that can provide expertise, resources, and support to all Pacific countries.
- **Enhance Network Security:** Invest in upgrading the security of critical national and regional networks, including government, financial, and communication systems.
- **Promote Public Awareness:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness about cybersecurity risks and best practices, encouraging individuals and organisations to protect themselves online.
- **Support Incident Response Capabilities:** Build and maintain robust incident response teams that can quickly and effectively address cybersecurity breaches and attacks.

**9. Regular Evaluation and Update of Online Safety Policies:** To keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape, it is crucial to review and update online safety policies regularly:

- **Establish Continuous Review Processes:** Implement a system for regularly evaluating existing online safety measures and identifying gaps and areas for improvement.
- **Adapt to New Threats:** Ensure that policies are flexible and can be quickly updated to address new and emerging online threats as they arise.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** To ensure comprehensive and inclusive updates, the policy review process should involve a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, tech companies, civil society, and the public.
- **Monitor Policy Effectiveness:** Track the impact of policy changes on online safety outcomes using data-driven approaches to guide further adjustments and refinements.

**10. Strengthen Fact-Checking and Local Moderation Initiatives in the Pacific:** To enhance the resilience of Pacific Island Countries against the spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly during critical periods such as national elections.

- **Establish Regional Fact-Checking Networks:** Create a regional fact-checking initiative that involves collaboration between local media organisations, civil society groups, and international partners. This network should focus on verifying information circulating on social media and other digital platforms, particularly during elections or when significant legislation is being discussed.
- **Invest in Local Language Moderation:** Address the critical shortage of moderators fluent in Pacific languages by training and employing local moderators. This will ensure that content is accurately interpreted and appropriately moderated according to cultural and linguistic contexts. Tech companies should be encouraged to collaborate with local institutions to support this initiative.
- **Support the Development of Robust Local Media Institutions:** Strengthen local media institutions to reduce dependence on foreign media and influence. This can be achieved by providing training and resources to local journalists and media houses, enabling them to produce high-quality, fact-based content that resonates with local audiences.

- **Promote Media Literacy and Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch media literacy programmes that educate the public on how to identify misinformation and understand the importance of credible news sources. These campaigns should be culturally tailored and available in local languages to ensure they reach the broadest possible audience.
- **Monitor and Mitigate Foreign Influence:** Develop mechanisms to monitor and mitigate undue foreign influence in the media landscape of Pacific Island Countries. This includes tracking foreign investments in local media and identifying foreign-led disinformation campaigns that could impact national sovereignty and social cohesion.

## **8.2. National Strategies for Enhancing Online Safety**

### **Strengthening Digital Literacy Programmes:**

Governments should develop a comprehensive online media literacy strategy and action plan. This plan should aim to enhance the public's ability to understand and navigate the digital world effectively, focusing on critical issues like misinformation and the safe use of Internet resources. Additionally, it is crucial for governments to review their national Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategies and plans, considering how to incorporate aspects of social media, online education, and online safety into these frameworks. By prioritising digital literacy, countries can empower citizens to make informed decisions and engage safely and responsibly online.

### **Enhancing Regulatory Frameworks:**

Countries need to thoroughly review their existing regulatory frameworks to identify any gaps in addressing the current challenges posed by digital technologies. This review should reference international best practices and regional examples to understand practical regulatory approaches comprehensively. Following this, through consultations with stakeholders and the community, governments should consider the specific legislations and laws needed to strengthen online safety and governance. This process will ensure that new regulations are well-informed, contextually appropriate, and broadly supported by those they affect.

### **Promoting Ethical Social Media Practices:**

It is imperative for countries to engage with social media companies to discuss and implement country-specific requirements that promote ethical practices online. This

collaboration should focus on developing content moderation policies that respect local cultural norms while preventing the spread of harmful content. By working directly with these platforms, governments can help ensure that social media operates positively, supporting democratic engagement and community building rather than undermining it.

## **Encouraging Civic Engagement and Participation:**

Encourage greater civic engagement and participation by utilising social media as a platform for government transparency and citizen interaction. Governments should create online spaces that facilitate open dialogue and enable citizens to participate in policy-making. This approach not only strengthens democracy but also enhances the government's responsiveness to the needs and concerns of its citizens.

## **Supporting Research and Collaboration:**

Support and fund research initiatives that explore social media's impacts on society and the effectiveness of online safety measures. Collaboration between academic institutions, industry experts, and government agencies can lead to better-informed policies and innovations in digital governance. These efforts should continuously improve understanding of digital trends and their societal implications.

## **Implementing Community-Based Monitoring Systems:**

Develop community-based monitoring systems that can provide real-time data on social media's effects within different regions and communities. These systems should involve local stakeholders in their design and operation, ensuring that they are tailored to each area's specific needs and conditions. This localised approach will help governments and communities quickly identify and respond to issues arising from social media use.

## **Enhancing Public Awareness Campaigns:**

Launch comprehensive public awareness campaigns that educate citizens about social media use's potential risks and benefits. These campaigns should use various media channels to reach a broad audience and highlight practical steps individuals can take to protect themselves online. By increasing public awareness, governments can foster a more informed and cautious online community.

These recommendations aim to create a safer, more informed, and more participatory digital environment across the Pacific region, leveraging the benefits of digital technology while mitigating its risks.

Building on the broader national strategies, the next section presents tailored recommendations specifically crafted for Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa, addressing unique online safety challenges and opportunities within each country.

### **8.3. Recommendations for Fiji**

Fiji is a leader in the Pacific region for its comprehensive and advanced system of regulations and institutional frameworks dedicated to enhancing online safety. This commitment is evidenced by the enactment of the Online Safety Act 2018, which protects individuals from cyberbullying and other online harm. Further strengthening its legal framework, Fiji passed the Cyber Crime Act in 2021, which addresses a broader spectrum of cyber-related offences, ensuring robust mechanisms are in place for monitoring and enforcement.

In June 2024, Fiji reinforced its position as a regional leader by becoming the second country in the Pacific to accede to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. This international treaty enhances Fiji's cooperation and coordination capabilities in the fight against cybercrime at a global level. It is important to note that Fiji's Online Safety Act and Cyber Crime Act serve distinct yet complementary purposes. The Online Safety Act focuses primarily on personal safety and protecting individuals from online abuse, while the Cyber Crime Act targets the broader issues of cyber threats and crime prevention.

The Online Safety Act is the cornerstone of Fiji's legislative framework to combat online threats and protect citizens. This act outlines clear guidelines and legal measures designed to address various forms of cyberbullying, harassment, and misuse of digital platforms, aiming to create a safer online environment. The Online Safety Commission, established under the Online Safety Act, enforces these regulations. The commission plays a pivotal role in handling complaints, raising public awareness about online safety, and ensuring compliance with the law. Its efforts are crucial in mitigating online risks and protecting users.

Despite these measures, the recent suicide of a popular social media influencer allegedly linked to cyberbullying on a significant social media platform has highlighted potential gaps in the current regulatory framework. This tragic event has sparked widespread calls for stricter oversight and enhancements to the existing regulations to prevent future incidents.

### **Recommendations:**

**For the Government:** Review the Online Safety Commission's current resourcing, update legal provisions to cover emerging online threats, and ensure that these laws

are adequately equipped to deal with the modern challenges of digital interactions.

**For Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** Collaborate with the government to increase educational outreach on safe online practices. CSOs can play a significant role in supporting victims of online abuse and advocating for more effective policies.

**For Policymakers:** Consider revising and updating the Online Safety Act to incorporate more comprehensive measures against cyberbullying and harassment. Policymakers should ensure that the legislation keeps pace with technological advancements and the evolving nature of online interactions.

By addressing these areas, Fiji can enhance its framework for online safety, making the digital space safer for all its users and setting a precedent for effective online governance in the Pacific region.

## 8.4. Recommendations for Solomon Islands and Samoa

Samoa and Solomon Islands currently have less comprehensive regulatory frameworks for managing online safety compared to Fiji. Survey data indicate that citizens in the Solomon Islands perceive their country as having the weakest regulatory system in the region. However, recent developments suggest that Solomon Islands is making concerted efforts to strengthen its regulatory frameworks. On August 21st, 2024, Solomon Islands launched its national cybersecurity policy, marking a significant step forward. Additionally, the country is planning to introduce a bill on cybercrime, which will address issues such as cyberbullying. Unlike Fiji, however, neither Samoa nor Solomon Islands has implemented specific legislation such as an Online Safety Act or established an Online Safety Commission.

### Recommendations:

**Drafting Effective Legislation:** Samoa and Solomon Islands can benefit from studying Fiji's Online Safety Act closely. This includes understanding the scope of the legislation, the mechanisms it establishes for protection against online harms, and its enforcement protocols. Incorporating similar provisions could help these countries develop robust frameworks tailored to their unique cultural and social contexts. In drafting this legislation, it is essential to conduct comprehensive consultations with various stakeholders, including CSOs, the private sector, and the public, to ensure the laws are inclusive and address all relevant concerns.

**Establishing an Online Safety Commission:** Inspired by Fiji's approach, Samoa and Solomon Islands could consider establishing their own Online Safety Commissions. These bodies would oversee the implementation of online safety policies, handle complaints, and promote awareness about the responsible use of social media. The commissions would serve as central authorities in their respective countries to regulate and advise on online safety issues. The formation of these commissions should include mechanisms to allow contributions from CSOs and

private sector representatives, ensuring a broad perspective in their operations and decision-making processes. Implement targeted training programmes that involve international experts and local leaders to equip staff with the necessary skills and knowledge.

**Building Institutional Capacity:** Developing institutional capacity is crucial for effectively enforcing new cyber laws. Samoa and the Solomon Islands could learn how Fiji has structured its commission, including staffing, training, and operational practices. Capacity building also involves ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated to these bodies to enable them to perform their functions effectively.

**Government Social Media Policy:** While Samoa has implemented a social media policy for government use<sup>[8]</sup>, expanding this to include broader public guidelines could further enhance online safety. The Solomon Islands could also benefit from developing a similar policy, providing guidelines and best practices for government officials and the general public on the responsible use of social media platforms.

By adopting these recommendations and ensuring inclusive policy development, Samoa and the Solomon Islands can significantly strengthen their regulatory frameworks, enhance online safety, and better protect their citizens against the challenges posed by the digital age. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders in formulating and developing these policies will not only enrich the process but also enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the measures implemented.

## 9. Conclusion

This report has examined the complex dynamics between social media, democracy, and human rights within Fiji, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands. It highlights that while social media offers tremendous opportunities for boosting civic participation and enriching public discourse, it also brings significant risks, such as the proliferation of misinformation and the potential to disrupt established cultural norms.

As PICs chart their course through these challenges, developing well-considered policies will be crucial. These policies must address digital platforms' risks while maximising their potential to strengthen community ties. The policy recommendations provided in this report lay out a strategic path for establishing a robust digital ecosystem that promotes transparent dialogue, safeguards privacy, and maintains democratic values. By enhancing regional cooperation and partnering with global tech leaders, the Pacific can elevate their influence and ensure that the digital transition benefits all societal sectors.

Looking ahead, the social media landscape will continue to evolve, bringing new challenges and opportunities. With vigilant governance and a dedicated focus on improving digital literacy, the PICs can use these platforms for sustained social, economic, and political growth. Adopting the insights from this analysis will be essential as the region aims to forge a more interconnected, informed, and democratic Pacific.

# Annex I: Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, primarily relying on data collected from an online survey to assess the impact of social media on democracy and human rights in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Samoa. The survey was distributed through the authors' contacts and shared on various social media pages to enhance its reach and diversity of responses. To complement the quantitative data from the survey, qualitative interviews were conducted with citizens from each country, providing deeper insights into individual perceptions and experiences related to the study's objectives.

The total sample size represented 1,060 respondents comprising of 654 from Fiji, 346 from the Solomon Islands, and 60 from Samoa, reflecting varying degrees of participation and potentially influencing the depth of data available from each location. Alongside primary data collection, the study also included a review of publicly available information, such as legislation, government documents, and analyses of content from social media pages, to provide a broader context to the findings.

A significant aspect of the study's design was the choice of countries, which included two Melanesian countries (Fiji and Solomon Islands) and one Polynesian country (Samoa). This selection was strategic in understanding the differences within these sub-regional groupings in the Pacific. While no country from Micronesia was included in the study, comparing Polynesian and Melanesian countries was instrumental. Like Micronesian countries, Polynesian countries are generally characterised by more homogeneous societies. In contrast, Melanesian countries are noted for their relatively larger land areas and populations and their ethnically diverse populations. Notably, Fiji often exhibits characteristics of both Melanesian and Polynesian identities, providing a unique comparative perspective within the region.

Additionally, three webinars were conducted to disseminate preliminary finding. The first webinar focused on the findings from Fiji, the second on Solomon Islands and Samoa and the third webinar was a regional synthesis. During these webinars we validated these findings and received valuable insights and comments. This feedback allowed us to refine our analysis and include additional recommendations in the final report.

This methodological framework allowed the study to capture a wide range of data on public perceptions and the regulatory environment affecting social media use, setting the stage for nuanced analysis and targeted recommendations.

---

[1] <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/521883/fijian-lgbtqia-advocate-found-dead-after-alleged-intense-social-media-bullying>

[2] <https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/solomon-islands-grapples-with-gender-based-violence-and-cybercrime/>

[3] [People asked not to post sensitive comments on social media – Solomon Star News \(https://www.solomonstarnews.com/people-asked-not-to-post-sensitive-comments-on-social-media/\)](https://www.solomonstarnews.com/people-asked-not-to-post-sensitive-comments-on-social-media/)

[4] [Call to repatriate Lauru people – Solomon Star News](https://www.solomonstarnews.com/call-to-repatriate-lauru-people/)  
(<https://www.solomonstarnews.com/call-to-repatriate-lauru-people/>)

[5] [Police call on social media users to stop inciting posts that will cause division among our people – Solomon Star News](https://www.solomonstarnews.com/police-call-on-social-media-users-to-stop-inciting-posts-that-will-cause-division-among-our-people/) (<https://www.solomonstarnews.com/police-call-on-social-media-users-to-stop-inciting-posts-that-will-cause-division-among-our-people/>)

[6] <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/444972/warnings-to-anti-vaxxers-slowng-rollout-in-solomons-and-png>

[7] <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/08/25/>

[8] <https://mcit.gov.ws/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Social-Media-Policy-for-Government-2017.pdf>

---

## References

Alofaituli, B. (2023). American Samoa and Samoa. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 35(1), 263-271.

BBC Media Action. (2023) Solomon Islands: Understanding the audience needs, values and the role of media and communication. [solomon-islands-media-research-2023.pdf](https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/documents/solomon-islands-media-research-2023.pdf) ([bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk)) (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/documents/solomon-islands-media-research-2023.pdf>)

Bennett, J. (2002). Roots of conflict in Solomon Islands-though much is taken, much abides: legacies of tradition and colonialism.

Cave, D. (2012). Digital islands: How the Pacific's ICT revolution is transforming the region. *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 21(1), 1-24.

Digital Frontiers Project. (2024). Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment (DECA) Pacific Islands. USAID. [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/USAID\\_PacificIslands\\_DECA.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/USAID_PacificIslands_DECA.pdf)

Fa 'avae, D. T. M., Faleolo, R., Hepi Havea, E., Enari, D., Wright, T., & Chand, A. (2022). e-talanoa as an online research method: extending vā-relations across spaces. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 18(3), 391-401.

Finau, G., Prasad, A., Kant, R., Tarai, J., Logan, S., & Cox, J. (2014). Social media and e-democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. *Proceedings of the 20th Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS)*,

Finau, G., Tarai, J., Varea, R., Titifanue, J., Kant, R., & Cox, J. (2018). Social media and disaster communication: A case study of Cyclone Winston. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 24(1), 123-137.

Foukona, J. D. (2019). Solomon Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 31(2), 554-563.

Hobbis, G., & Hobbis, S. K. (2022). Beyond platform capitalism: critical perspectives on Facebook markets from Melanesia. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(1), 121-140.

J Foster, R., & A Horst, H. (2018). *The moral economy of mobile phones: Pacific Islands perspectives*. ANU Press.

Kant, R., Titifanue, J., Tarai, J., & Finau, G. (2018). Internet under threat?: The politics of online censorship in the Pacific Islands. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 24(2), 64-83.

Miller, D., Sinanan, J., Wang, X., McDonald, T., Haynes, N., Costa, E., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S., & Nicolescu, R. (2016). *How the world changed social media*. UCL press.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, (2024). *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2023-2024*. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre. <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Final%20Pacific%20Security%20Outlook%20Report%202023-24.pdf>

Tarai, J. (2023). Social media and democracy: The Fiji 2022 national election. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 29(1/2), 96-112.

Tarai, J., Kant, R., Finau, G., & Titifanue, J. (2015). Political social media campaigning in Fiji's 2014 elections. *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 35(3), 89-114.

Titifanue, J., Kant, R., Finau, G., & Tarai, J. (2017). Climate change advocacy in the Pacific: The role of information and communication technologies. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 23(1), 133-149.

Valenzuela, S., Halpern, D., Katz, J. E., & Miranda, J. P. (2019). The paradox of participation versus misinformation: Social media, political engagement, and the spread of misinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 7(6), 802-823.

---

## Authors

- Dr Glenn Finau
- Romitesh Kant
- Benjamin Afuga
- Dr Jeff Garae Liu
- Dr Dion Enari
- Dr Kushneel Prakash
- Susana Fineanganofa

This report is funded by the UK (FCDO). No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This work is provided for informational purposes only. The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the UK FCDO or any other agency of the UK Government.

