

Changing News Consumption Behaviour in the Era of Social Media

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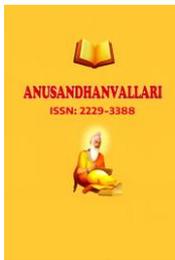
Abstract

The digital revolution in India has transformed how citizens consume news and information. With over 886 million internet users and 491 million social media users as of 2024, India has witnessed a paradigmatic shift from traditional media consumption to digital platforms. This study examines the changing news consumption patterns among Punjabi youth in the context of India's broader media transformation. The research reveals that while 71% of Indians now prefer online news sources, with 49% relying specifically on social media platforms like YouTube (54%), WhatsApp (48%) and Facebook (35%), there exists a concerning decline in traditional media consumption. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 indicates a double-digit percentage decline in newspaper reading, television viewing and radio listening between 2015-16 and 2019-21. In Punjab, where over 70% of the population use the internet through mobile phones, this transformation is particularly significant. Through a survey of 100 young respondents, this study found that despite heavy reliance on social media for news consumption, a significant portion of youth remain skeptical about the credibility of social media-based information. The findings highlight critical issues of media literacy and the need for enhanced digital awareness among young consumers.

Keywords: News Consumption, Social Media, Traditional Media, Digital Transformation, Media Literacy, Youth Behaviour

Introduction

The media landscape in India has undergone a revolutionary transformation in the past decade, fundamentally altering how citizens access, consume and interact with news and information. This transformation is characterized by the rapid adoption of digital technologies, the proliferation of social media platforms and decline in traditional media consumption patterns. As India emerges as one of the world's largest digital markets, understanding these evolving consumption behaviours becomes crucial for media practitioners and researchers. India's digital revolution is reflected impressively, with over 886 million active internet users as of 2024, representing 55.3% internet penetration (Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI], 2024). The country has established itself as a global digital market. The social media landscape is equally robust, with 491 million users comprising 33.7% of the total population (DataReportal, 2024). This digital transformation has been facilitated by affordable smartphones and low-cost data plans, making internet access more accessible. The shift towards digital news consumption is particularly striking. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, approximately 71% of Indians now prefer online news sources, with 49% specifically relying on social media platforms for their news needs (Newman et al., 2024). YouTube leads as the primary platform for news consumption at 54%, followed by WhatsApp at 48% and Facebook at 35% (Newman et al., 2024). This represents a fundamental departure from traditional news consumption patterns that dominated the Indian audience for



decades. Conversely, traditional media has experienced significant decline. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5, conducted between 2019 and 2021, reveals concerning trends in traditional media consumption (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). The percentage of women who did not access any form of media at least once a week increased from 25% in 2015-16 to 41% in 2019-21, while among men, this figure rose from 14% to 32% during the same period (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). This double-digit decline spans across all traditional mediums, indicating a comprehensive shift from conventional media sources.

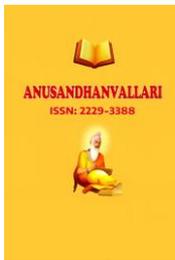
Punjab presents an interesting case study within this broader transformation. The state ranks among the top in India for smartphone penetration, with over 70% of the population accessing the internet through mobile phones (*The Tribune*, 2019). Women in Punjab have shown particularly high adoption rates, with 96.7% using smartphones compared to 94% of men (Chandigarh Media, 2024). Rural areas have not been left behind, with 91.2% of rural women using smartphones (Chandigarh Media, 2024). The present study focuses on examining news consumption behaviour among Punjabi youth, a demographic that represents the future of media consumption in India. By investigating how young people navigate between traditional and digital media sources, their trust levels in different platforms and their media literacy skills, this research aims to provide insights into the evolving media landscape and its implications for democratic discourse and informed citizenship.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests primarily on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, originally developed by Katz and Blumler (1974), which posits that media users actively select media sources based on their specific needs and the gratifications they seek to fulfil. This theory is particularly relevant in the contemporary media landscape where audiences have unprecedented choice and control over their media consumption patterns. In the context of social media news consumption, young people actively choose platforms that provide immediate access, interactive engagement, and personalized content delivery. The theory helps explain why traditional media consumption is declining while social media usage for news is increasing. Young audiences seek gratifications such as convenience, speed, interactivity, and social validation that social media platforms provide more effectively than traditional media sources (Boczkowski et al., 2018).

Digital Media Transformation in India

India's digital transformation has been unprecedented in scale and speed. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2024) reports that active internet users in India reached 886 million in 2024, marking an 8% year-on-year growth. Rural India has emerged as a significant driver of this growth, contributing 55% of total internet users with 488 million users (IAMAI, 2024). This rural digital adoption is particularly relevant for understanding news consumption patterns across diverse demographics. The democratization of internet access has been facilitated by affordable smartphones and competitive data pricing. Data costs in India have decreased from over Rs 100 per GB to less than one-tenth of that figure since 2016, significantly increasing subscriber base and data consumption (*The Tribune*, 2019). This cost reduction has enabled widespread adoption of data-intensive applications, including video-based news consumption platforms like YouTube. Research indicates that Indians spend an average of 90 minutes daily accessing the internet, with urban users spending slightly more time than rural users (IAMAI, 2024). This increased connectivity has created new opportunities for news consumption and information access, particularly among younger demographics who have adapted more readily to digital platforms.



Social Media as News Source

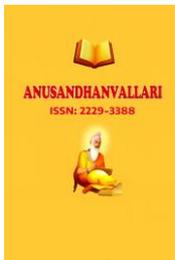
The transformation of social media platforms from mere communication tools to primary news sources represents a fundamental shift in media consumption patterns. According to recent studies, 71% of Indians prefer online news sources, with social media accounting for 49% of news consumption (Newman et al., 2024). This shift is particularly pronounced among younger demographics who have grown up with digital technologies. Facebook leads among social media platforms for news consumption at 30%, followed by YouTube at 19%, Instagram at 18%, and X (formerly Twitter) at 15% (Pew Research Center, 2024). WhatsApp, despite being primarily a messaging platform, has emerged as a significant news source at 14%, highlighting the role of peer-to-peer information sharing in contemporary news consumption patterns (Pew Research Center, 2024). The preference for social media news sources is driven by several factors including convenience, real-time updates, multimedia content, and the ability to engage with news through comments, likes, and shares (Boczkowski et al., 2018). However, this shift has also raised concerns about information quality, with 64% of urban Indians identifying social media feeds as the biggest source of disinformation and fake news (UNESCO-Ipsos, 2023).

Decline of Traditional Media

The decline in traditional media consumption has been documented across multiple studies and surveys. The NFHS-5 data provides compelling evidence of this trend, showing significant decreases in newspaper reading, television watching, and radio listening between 2015-16 and 2019-21 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). Among men, newspaper reading declined from 53.8% to 32.2%, while among women, it decreased from 26.5% to 14.5% (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). Television consumption, historically the dominant medium in India, also showed decline with 53.5% of women and 55.7% of men watching TV at least once a week in 2019-21, compared to higher percentages in the previous survey (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). Radio listening showed the steepest decline, with only 4.2% of women and 7.7% of men listening to radio at least once a week (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). Industry experts argue that these statistics may not capture the complete picture as they do not account for digital consumption of traditional media content (*ThePrint*, 2022). Many traditional media organizations have successfully transitioned to digital platforms, potentially maintaining their audience through online channels rather than traditional distribution methods.

Youth and Digital News Consumption

Young people represent the most significant demographic driving the shift toward digital news consumption. Research indicates that 55% of teens get news primarily from social media platforms, with convenience, accessibility, and interactive features being primary motivating factors (Circle at Tufts University, 2024). This generation approaches news consumption differently, preferring bite-sized, visual content over long-form articles traditionally offered by newspapers and magazines. Studies have identified several key characteristics of young people's news consumption patterns. First, they engage in "news snacking" - consuming short news items frequently for entertainment or transitory purposes, which can serve as a gateway to deeper media engagement (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Second, their news consumption is often incidental, occurring while they engage with social media for other purposes rather than actively seeking news content (Boczkowski et al., 2018). The role of social influence is particularly important in youth news consumption. Young people are more likely to read news stories shared by friends who share their interests, and they regard opinion leaders on social media as essential for keeping up with trends (Boczkowski et al., 2018). However, they also demonstrate awareness of the need to verify information, often cross-checking suspicious content with traditional news sources (Leeder, 2019).



Media Literacy and Information Verification

The shift toward social media news consumption has heightened concerns about media literacy and information verification skills among young people. Research indicates that while adolescents are aware of fake news and possess knowledge of verification tactics, their actual implementation of these skills varies (Leeder, 2019). Studies have identified several strategies that young people employ when encountering questionable information, including ignoring suspicious content, verifying sources, and using platform-specific tools like reporting and blocking features (Leeder, 2019). However, challenges remain significant. Nearly 80% of India's first-time voters report encountering fake news on social media platforms, with 37% finding it difficult to discern fake news from legitimate information (*Times of India*, 2024). The prevalence of fake news is particularly concerning in the Indian context, where 46% of fake news stories are political in nature, followed by general issues (33.6%) and religion (16.8%) (Al-Zaman, 2021). Media literacy interventions have shown promise in improving young people's ability to identify and respond to misinformation. Research suggests that education programs focusing on source evaluation, fact-checking techniques, and understanding of algorithmic content curation can enhance critical thinking skills necessary for navigating the contemporary media landscape (Wineburg et al., 2016).

Method: Research Design

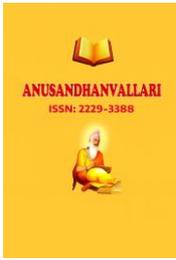
This study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine the changing news consumption behaviour among Punjabi youth in the era of social media. The descriptive approach was chosen as it allows for systematic data collection to describe characteristics of the population being studied and to explore relationships between variables related to news consumption patterns, media preferences, and media literacy levels. The research utilized a quantitative methodology with a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. This approach was selected to enable standardized data collection across respondents and to facilitate statistical analysis of consumption patterns and preferences.

Participants

The target population for this study consisted of young people in Punjab aged between 18 and 25 years. This age group was selected as it represents the demographic most likely to have grown up with digital technologies and social media platforms, making them ideal subjects for studying the transition from traditional to digital news consumption patterns. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who met the study criteria. The sample size was determined to be 100 respondents, distributed across urban and rural areas of Punjab to ensure representation of different socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of digital access. The sample included both male and female respondents to capture gender-based differences in news consumption patterns.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks. The questionnaires were distributed through multiple channels to ensure diverse representation: educational institutions, online distribution through social media platforms, community centers in rural areas, and workplaces with appropriate permissions. All participants were provided with clear information about the study purpose, assured of confidentiality, and informed about their right to withdraw from participation at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced.



Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The analysis plan included both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, chi-square tests, independent *t*-tests, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

Demographic Profile

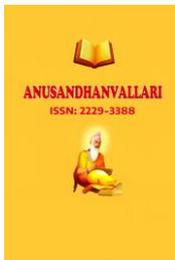
The study surveyed 100 young respondents from Punjab, representing a diverse cross-section of the target population. The age distribution showed 52% of respondents in the 18-21 years category and 48% in the 22-25 years category. Gender distribution was balanced with 51% male and 49% female respondents. Educational background analysis indicated that 68% of respondents were currently enrolled in higher education institutions, while 32% were working professionals. Urban respondents comprised 58% of the sample, while 42% represented rural areas, reflecting Punjab's demographic composition. Access to technology showed universal smartphone ownership among respondents, with 94% having access to high-speed internet connectivity. This high level of digital access is consistent with Punjab's leading position in smartphone penetration, where 96.7% of women and 94% of men use smartphones (Chandigarh Media, 2024).

News Consumption Patterns

The study revealed significant insights into how young people in Punjab consume news and information. Analysis of consumption frequency showed that 67% of respondents consume news daily, while 28% consume news several times a week, and only 5% consume news less frequently. This high frequency indicates that young people remain engaged with current affairs. However, the sources and methods of consumption have fundamentally changed. When asked about their primary news sources, 73% of respondents identified social media platforms as their main source of news and current affairs information. This finding aligns with national trends where 71% of Indians prefer online news sources (Newman et al., 2024). Traditional media sources showed significantly lower preference rates, with only 18% citing television as their primary source, 6% preferring newspapers, and merely 3% relying on radio for news. Among Punjab's youth, YouTube leads at 52% preference, followed by Instagram at 34%, WhatsApp at 28%, and Facebook at 21%. The preference for visual and interactive platforms highlights the generation's preference for multimedia content over traditional text-based news formats.

Device Preferences and Consumption Context

Mobile devices emerged as the dominant platform for news consumption, with 89% of respondents primarily using smartphones to access news content. This finding is consistent with national data showing that 73% of Indians access news through smartphones (Newman et al., 2024). Tablets and computers showed minimal usage for news consumption at 7% and 4% respectively. Peak consumption times were identified as morning hours (6-9 AM) at 45%, followed by evening hours (6-9 PM) at 38%. However, 67% of respondents reported consuming news throughout the day through notifications and social media feeds, indicating a shift from scheduled news consumption to continuous, ambient information intake. The concept of "incidental news exposure" was evident in the findings, with 78% of respondents reporting that they often encounter news while using social media for other purposes such as entertainment or social interaction (Boczkowski et al., 2018).



Trust and Credibility Patterns

Despite heavy reliance on social media for news consumption, respondents demonstrated sophisticated understanding of credibility issues. Traditional media outlets scored higher on credibility measures even though they were less frequently consumed. Television news received the highest credibility rating, with 67% of respondents considering it "highly credible" or "mostly credible." Newspapers scored similarly at 64% credibility rating, while radio achieved 58% credibility among those familiar with the medium. Social media platforms showed mixed credibility ratings. YouTube received the highest credibility rating among social media platforms at 45%, likely due to the presence of established news organizations. Instagram and Facebook showed lower credibility ratings at 32% and 28% respectively, while WhatsApp scored lowest at 23%. Importantly, 72% of respondents reported being able to identify potentially fake or misleading news content, and 68% claimed to verify important news information through multiple sources.

Media Literacy and Verification Practices

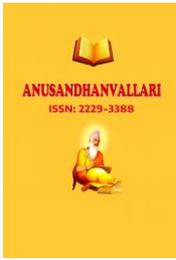
The study revealed encouraging findings regarding media literacy skills among young respondents. When presented with scenarios involving potentially misleading information, 74% demonstrated knowledge of basic fact-checking practices such as source verification, cross-referencing with multiple sources, and checking publication dates and author credentials. The most common verification method, used by 81% of respondents, was checking multiple sources for the same information. Cross-platform verification was employed by 67% of respondents, who compared information across different social media platforms and traditional media sources. Google searches for additional information were conducted by 73% of respondents when encountering suspicious content. However, the study also identified areas of concern. While respondents demonstrated awareness of fake news issues, 34% admitted to occasionally sharing news content without verifying its accuracy. The role of algorithmic content curation was poorly understood, with only 28% of respondents demonstrating awareness of how social media algorithms influence the news content they see.

Challenges and Gender Differences

The study identified several significant challenges associated with the shift toward social media news consumption. Misinformation emerged as the primary concern, with 89% of respondents reporting encounters with false or misleading information on social media platforms. Information overload was another significant challenge, with 73% of respondents reporting feeling overwhelmed by the constant stream of information. Analysis revealed interesting gender differences in news consumption patterns. Female respondents showed higher preference for Instagram (42% vs. 26% for males) and WhatsApp (34% vs. 22% for males), while male respondents showed higher preference for YouTube (58% vs. 46% for females) and Twitter/X (18% vs. 8% for females). Trust levels also showed gender variations, with female respondents expressing higher skepticism toward social media news sources while showing higher trust in traditional media sources. Female respondents were also more likely to verify information through multiple sources (72% vs. 64% for males).

Discussion

This study provides comprehensive insights into the evolving news consumption behavior among Punjabi youth, revealing a complex landscape that reflects broader transformations across India's media ecosystem. The dominance of social media platforms as primary news sources among 73% of respondents represents a paradigmatic shift that aligns with national trends showing 71% of Indians preferring online news sources



(Newman et al., 2024). The study's most significant finding may be the sophisticated media literacy skills demonstrated by young respondents, coupled with their continued respect for traditional journalism's credibility standards. Despite consuming primarily through social media, 67% of respondents rated traditional media sources as highly credible, and 74% demonstrated knowledge of fact-checking practices. This suggests that the decline in traditional media consumption does not necessarily indicate a rejection of professional journalism values, but rather a preference for accessing content through more convenient and engaging digital channels. The challenges identified—particularly regarding misinformation (encountered by 89% of respondents), information overload (experienced by 73%), and the gap between verification awareness and practice—highlight critical areas requiring intervention. The finding that 34% of respondents occasionally share unverified content despite awareness of misinformation issues reveals the complexity of changing behavioural patterns in digital environments where sharing is immediate and verification requires additional effort.

Implications for Stakeholders

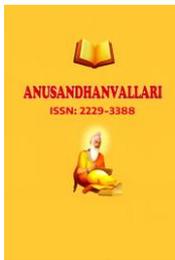
For Media Literacy Education. The findings suggest that media literacy education should focus not just on identification of fake news but on promoting responsible sharing behaviours and understanding of algorithmic content curation. The high level of engagement with news content among young people provides opportunities for developing more effective and engaging media literacy programs. For Media Organizations. Traditional media organizations need to continue adapting their content and distribution strategies to meet young audiences where they are, while maintaining professional journalism standards that young people still value and trust. The study suggests opportunities for hybrid models that combine social media distribution with professional journalism standards. For Policymakers. The findings support approaches that emphasize empowerment through education rather than restriction of access. Policy frameworks should focus on promoting media literacy, supporting quality journalism, and encouraging platform accountability for information quality without undermining democratic principles of free expression. For Social Media Platforms. The high level of news consumption through these platforms creates responsibilities for implementing better verification tools, promoting authoritative sources, and supporting user education about information quality.

Limitations

This study's limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting findings. The sample size of 100 respondents, while adequate for exploratory research, limits generalizability. The focus on Punjab may not represent consumption patterns in states with different levels of digital development or linguistic contexts. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, particularly regarding verification practices where respondents might overstate their actual behaviours.

Future Research

Future research should expand to larger, more diverse samples across multiple Indian states to develop a comprehensive understanding of regional variations in news consumption patterns. Longitudinal studies tracking consumption behaviour over time would provide insights into the stability and evolution of these patterns. Experimental research examining the effectiveness of different media literacy interventions could inform educational policy and practice.

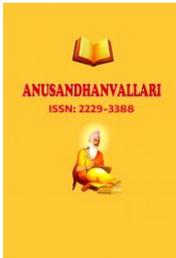


Conclusion

This study has shown that Punjab's youth are not passive victims of digital transformation but active, critical consumers who are navigating a complex media landscape with considerable skill and awareness. The transformation of news consumption behaviour documented in this study represents both challenges and opportunities for democratic society. While concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and the decline of professional journalism are valid, the findings also reveal a generation that remains engaged with current affairs, demonstrates sophisticated critical thinking skills, and values credible information sources. The key to navigating this transformation successfully lies not in resisting change but in adapting to new realities while preserving the essential functions that quality journalism serves in democratic society. This requires collaboration among educators, media organizations, technology platforms, and policymakers to create an information ecosystem that combines the accessibility and engagement of social media with the accuracy and accountability of professional journalism. As India continues its digital transformation, understanding and addressing the implications of changing news consumption patterns will be crucial for maintaining an informed citizenry capable of meaningful democratic participation. Supporting and enhancing these skills through appropriate education, policy, and industry practices will be essential for realizing the democratic potential of India's digital media transformation while mitigating its risks.

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