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From Print to Pixels: Examining Digital News Adoption in Kolkata

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards digital news consumption significantly, thereby challenging and transforming established media habits. This paper presents a purposive study that explores the adoption of digital sources of news - online news portals, mobile apps, and social media, in Kolkata and how these media became significant sources of getting news and information during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand what the key factors towards driving digital adoption were, the respondents mentioned immediacy, convenience, and safety concerns over virus transmission and limited access to printed newspapers as key factors driving digital adoption. This was also supported by the portability and affordability of smartphones and internet access.

However, as a flipside, signs of digital fatigue emerged. The users mentioned information overload, rise of fake news, and excessive screen time causing stress, that led them to revert to the traditional sources of news consumption. These findings suggest, while digital media consumption has expanded rapidly, there are concerns regarding its all-pervasive presence, excessive use and its impact on trust and credibility. The study provides critical insights into the Kolkata's evolving media landscape in Kolkata and highlights the coexistence of digital and traditional news ecosystems.

Keywords: #COVID19 #DigitalNewsConsumption #OnlineNewsPortals #SocialMedia #DigitalFatigue #NewsCredibility #MediaHabits #Kolkata #QuantitativeResearch

Introduction

News consumption has undergone huge transformations over the past decade, with the rise of digital platforms and the widespread adoption of mobile technologies. Global news consumption studies have noted a shift from traditional media to online sources, indicting digital platforms as primary gateways to news, especially among younger and more educated demographics (Shearer & Matsa, 2018; Newman et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, while did not bring about new trends, it seems to have further accelerated the transition from the traditional to the digital form of news consumption. Lockdowns and social distancing restricted access to physical newspapers and compelled consumers to get news and information from the

online formats. Also, people wanted to get real-time news and updates because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The digital platforms made it easier to get updates real-time and also get diverse perspectives. (Newman et al., 2020). During the pandemic (2020–2022), India witnessed an increase in digital news consumption in English as well as vernacular languages. Sharp declines were also noted in print circulation and revenues. (FICCI & EY, 2020; KPMG, 2020). In urban cities like Kolkata, where newspaper reading exists along with digital consumption of news, the pandemic marked a point of change towards adoption of digital news.

The digital platforms offered immediacy, portability, and affordability, helped people to stay informed, especially during the uncertain times. Social media and messaging apps, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, played significant roles in circulating information. However, increased reliance on digital sources was accompanied by widespread concerns regarding misinformation, declining trust, and the phenomenon of “infodemics” (Zarocostas, 2020). Algorithms promoting echo chambers and repetitive exposure to similar news contributed to a sense of digital fatigue, with users reporting feelings of overwhelm and uncertainty over credibility of the digital news sources (Lewandowsky et al., 2017;).

This paper focuses on the growth and sustenance of digital news consumption in Kolkata during the pandemic and post-pandemic, as compared to the pre-pandemic times. It also explores the reasons for adopting or not adopting the digital platforms for news consumption.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how people around the world consume news. The pandemic compelled people to rely on the media for news on health, updates from the government, and local news. While widespread exposure to news, especially the digital news was an important way to get information, it also made people more anxious and mentally stressed. A study conducted in the United States identified a correlation between heightened news consumption and increased perceptions of health and economic threats, subsequently resulting in elevated stress levels (Stainback et al., 2020). Similar results were found in Bahrain, where younger respondents showed more anxiety and depression linked to news about the pandemic (Aldoseri et al., 2023). Research conducted in Iraq and Lithuania indicates that social media significantly contributes to the escalation of fear and panic, with certain respondents refraining from news consumption due to fatigue and information overload (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Buneviciene et al., 2021). These observations underscore the paradox of COVID-19 news: it serves as both a vital resource and a catalyst for psychological distress and scepticism.

The pandemic heightened apprehensions regarding misinformation and 'infodemics.' Studies conducted in Canada and the Philippines indicated that traditional media promoted preventive behaviours, whereas misinformation spread more frequently on social media platforms (Bridgman, 2020; Hernandez et al., 2023). Cross-platform studies in Europe indicated that partisan alignments endured, with anti-systemic media exacerbating divisions (Kristensen et al., 2023). The limitations of democratic frameworks in combating misinformation in India were juxtaposed with China's authoritarian digital governance (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). It is encouraging that experimental interventions like critical thinking prompts helped users tell the difference between real and fake news (Kruijt, 2022).

Credibility and trust are very important factors when it comes to consuming news. Comparative studies conducted in Canada, the UK, and the US revealed that the coverage sustained a moderate level of

scientific quality with minimal sensationalism; however, political biases influenced representations, eroding trust (Mach et al., 2021). Various researches indicated that excessive exposure to distressing news contributed to the emergence of 'headline stress disorder' (Pal, 2022; Scopelliti et al., 2021). It was found that positive news, like stories of recovery, availability of vaccines etc. could help people feel better, while news containing tolls of people affected by the pandemic added to stress.

The economic condition of the media businesses was affected. Research done in Rajasthan shows that print media's circulation and advertising revenue went down. On the other hand, digital news consumption increased, especially on the mobile and vernacular platforms (Sharma, 2023; FICCI & EY, 2020; EY, 2021). These trends are similar to what was happening around the world with media consolidation, direct-to-consumer models, and personalised news delivery through the digital platforms.

Previous research revealed key insights: COVID-19 sped up the use of digital news but also made people more fatigued and distrustful of too much of exposure to digital news. Social media played important roles in spreading information. The economic impact on the media industry was significant. Legacy media faced economic challenges despite digital adaptations.

In this content, Kolkata, with its distinctive legacy media heritage and ongoing digital adoptions for news, put forth an interesting crucible for studying the transition to digital media and whether the pandemic brought about any lasting changes in news consumption.

Quantitative Study

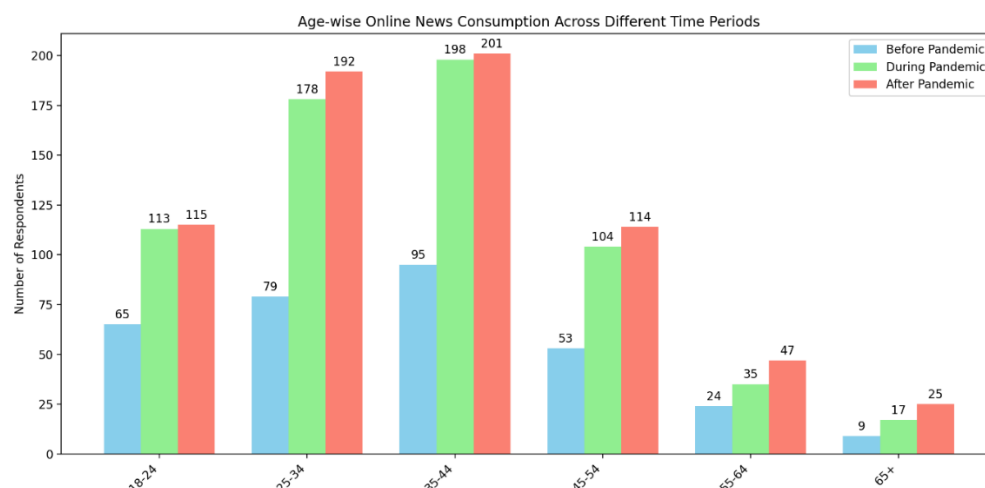
This study employed a quantitative methodology, involving a purposive study, to examine digital news consumption trends in Kolkata before (2015–2019), during (2020–2022), and after the (2023–2024) the COVID-19 pandemic. 1,010 adults filled out an online questionnaire sent through Google form. The questionnaire sought to gather information on news consumption via digital platforms, such as online news portals, mobile news applications, and social media, across the three time periods mentioned.

Demographic and socio-economic factors such as age, education, occupation, and family income were the independent variables. The dependent variables measured how interested respondents were in six types of news: health, business and finance, sports, local and city, entertainment and lifestyle, and international affairs. The scale used was a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being the least interested and 5 being the most interested. The online data was gathered between February and May of 2024.

Cross-tabulations and comparative evaluations among the three pandemic phases and different demographic groups were done as a part of the data analysis. Bar graphs and pie charts helped in visualising the data. Even though purposive sampling might not be suitable for generalising to a larger audience, the dataset provided useful information about how people's digital news habits have undergone transitions in Kolkata before, during and after the pandemic.

Online News Consumption Across Demographics

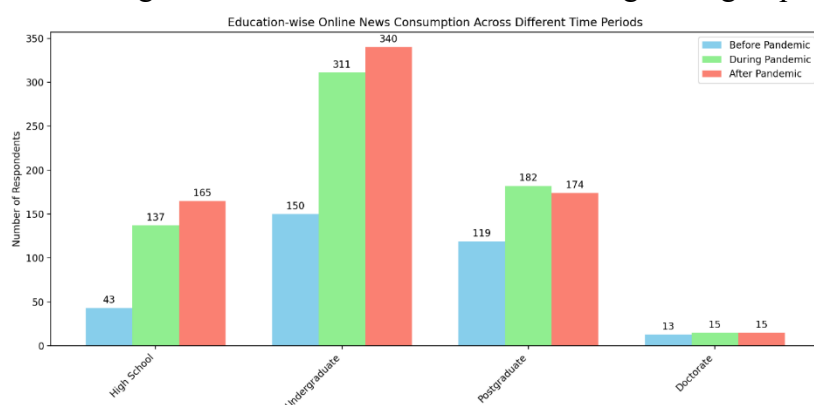
Online news consumption in Kolkata increased substantially across all age groups during the pandemic and maintained high levels post-pandemic (Figure 1).



(Figure 1): Age-wise online news consumption

The data highlights change in online news consumption before, during, and after the pandemic. Younger age groups (18 to 44) showed the highest adoption of digital media, with the 18 to 24 age-group rising from 44.83% before the pandemic to 79.31% after, and the 25 to 34 age-group achieving the highest post-pandemic adoption rate of 80.67%. This group also showed significant growth during the pandemic.

The 35 to 44 age group consistently had the largest number of users, increasing from 95 before the pandemic to 201 afterward, reaching 78.52%. Middle-aged users (45 to 54) showed moderate growth, moving from 28.04% pre-pandemic to 60.32% post-pandemic, while older users (55 to 64) increased steadily but more slowly, from 20.34% to 39.83%. The 65+ group demonstrated gradual growth. Overall, the pandemic significantly accelerated online news adoption across all demographics, with the strongest adoption and growth seen among younger age groups (18 to 44), moderate adoption among middle-aged users, and gradual but consistent increases among older groups.

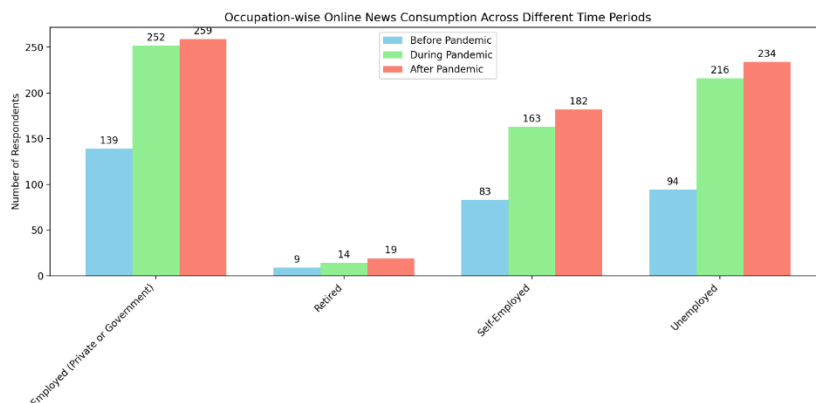


(Figure 2): Education-wise online news consumption

Figure 2 illustrates the trends in online news consumption by education level before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents with high school or lower level of education showed steady growth, rising from 13.96% before the pandemic to 53.57% after, with a notable surge during the pandemic. Users with undergraduate and graduate level education consistently showcased the largest absolute number of users. This group increased from 150 users (33.11%) before the pandemic to 340 users (75.06%) post-pandemic. Respondents with postgraduate level education demonstrated high adoption rates of digital

news, growing from 51.74% before the pandemic to 79.13% during, though this group experienced a slight decline to 75.65% afterward. The respondents with doctorate and above level education maintained the highest percentage engagement, starting at 68.42% before the pandemic and stabilising at 78.95% during and after.

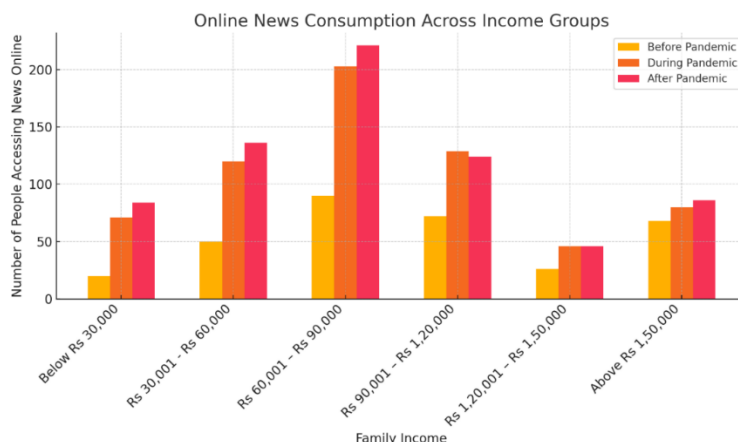
Overall, higher education levels (Postgraduate and Doctorate) showed the strongest adoption rates, while High School respondents recorded the most significant growth during the pandemic despite lower overall adoption compared to higher education groups.



(Figure 3): Occupation-wise online news consumption

Figure 3 shows online news consumption trends across different occupations before, during, and after the pandemic. Employed individuals, in private and government sectors, showed the highest adoption of digital news from 38.61% before the pandemic to 71.94% after, and showed consistency in using digital news all throughout. Respondents who are self-employed, also demonstrated steady growth, rising from 29.96% during the pre-pandemic times to 65.70% post-pandemic. This group also showed a surge using digital news during the pandemic. The unemployed group showed remarkable growth, increasing from 28.75% before the pandemic to 71.56% after, reaching adoption levels similar to employed individuals. Retired respondents showed the lowest adoption rates. However, they steadily progressed from 19.57% before the pandemic to 41.30% after the pandemic, thus doubling their participation.

The pandemic significantly increased online news adoption across all occupational groups. Employed and unemployed individuals reached comparable levels of engagement, self-employed users showed upward trends, and retired individuals showcased slower but consistent growth.



(Figure 4): Income-wise online news consumption

Figure 4 illustrates online news consumption across income groups before, during, and after the pandemic. Lower-income respondents, earning below Rs 30,000 monthly, showed the most significant growth. The digital news consumption in this group increased from just 13.89% before the pandemic to 57.64% after the pandemic, showing a four-time increase. However, the lower income group's overall adoption of digital media remained lower than the higher income group.

The Rs 30,001–60,000 monthly income group also showed steady growth, increasing from 23.92% during the pre-pandemic times to 65.07% post-pandemic. The Rs 60,001–90,000 group showed the highest users across all periods, growing from 28.94% to 70.74%. Higher middle-income groups (Rs 90,001–1,20,000) maintained high adoption rates of digital news, from 40.68% pre-pandemic to 72.88% during, though experienced a slight dip to 70.06% afterward. The Rs 1,20,001–1,50,000 group rose from 40.98% before the pandemic to 73.77% during, holding steady at the same level post-pandemic. The highest income group, earning above Rs 1,50,000, consistently showed the strongest engagement, increasing from 62.96% before the pandemic to 79.63% post-pandemic, making them the most digitally active segment.

Thus, the higher income groups demonstrated the highest adoption rates, middle-income groups represented the largest user base, and lower-income groups experienced the most significant growth during the pandemic.

Why are People Accessing or Not Accessing News Online

Reasons for Accessing News Through Online Portals During the Pandemic

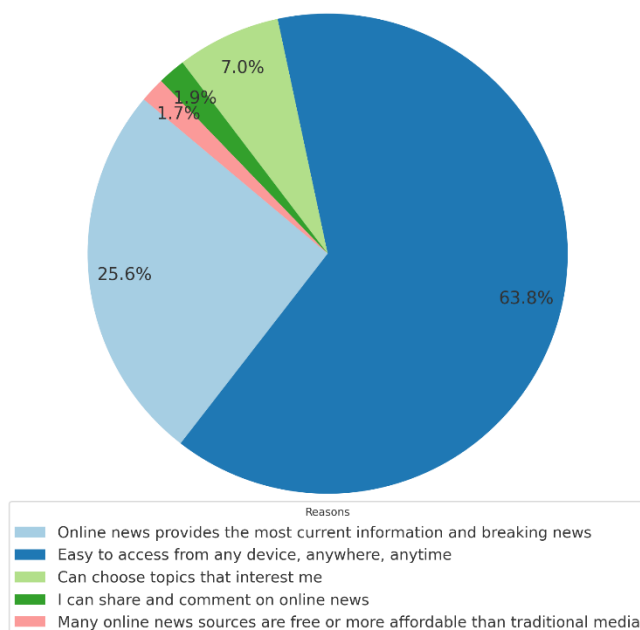
**Figure 5: Reasons Cited for Accessing Online News During the Pandemic**

Figure 5 shows the reasons why the respondents accessed news on digital platforms during the COVID-19 outbreak. 63.8% percent of the respondents said it was because of the convenience of the accessing news from any device at any time and from any location. Another 25.6% of the respondents used online news because it offers the latest information and news. 7% of the participants selected the option of

selecting news topics of their interest as an essential aspect which also shows people's inclination to select news topics of their choice.

Reasons for Not Accessing News Through Online Portals During the Pandemic

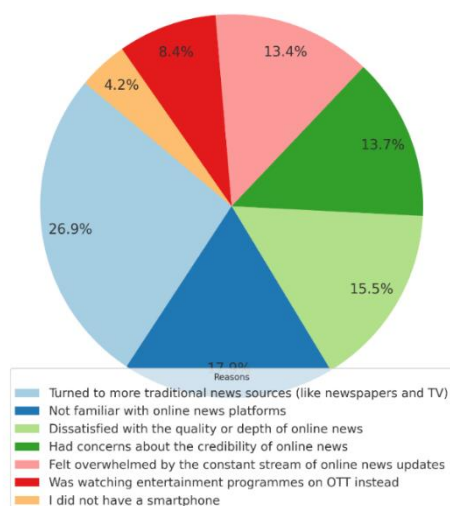


Figure 6: Reasons Cited for Not Accessing Online News During the Pandemic

Figure 6 shows the reasons why the respondents did not engage with online news during the pandemic. The most important reason, mentioned by 26.9 % of the respondents, was that they would prefer news from more conventional sources like newspapers and television. This implies that the traditional approach of news delivery is still preferred by many. Another 17.9% of the respondents said they could not access news from online platforms since they were not familiar with it. 15.5% complained about the quality or depth of information provided in the online news while 13.7% were concerned with the credibility of the online news sources. Another 13.4% of the respondents said that they were overwhelmed by the flow of news updates on various online platforms, which discouraged their use. 8.4% wanted to watch entertainment shows on OTT platforms rather than accessing online news. Finally, 4.2% of the respondents said they had no smartphones and were unable to access the online news portals.

Reasons for Viewing News on Online Portals and Websites Now, After the Pandemic

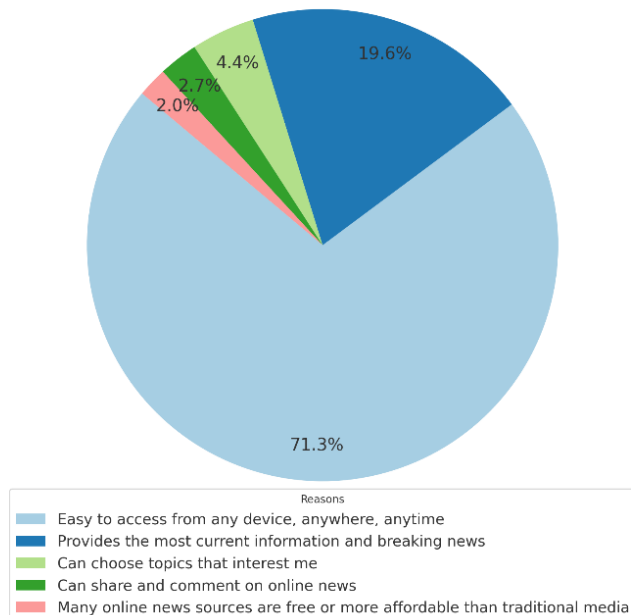


Figure 7: Reasons Cited for Accessing Online News After the Pandemic

As depicted in Figure 7, the main reason, mentioned by 71% of respondents, is the flexibility of being able to access news from any device, at any time and in any location. 19.6% of respondents read online news to get the latest and the most recent news. 4.4% appreciate the option of choosing topics they are interested in, indicating an interest in customised news feeds. 2.7% value the ability to sharing and commenting on online news. 2% finds it important that many online news sources are free or cheaper than other sources of news.

Reasons for Stopping Viewing News on Online Portals After the Pandemic

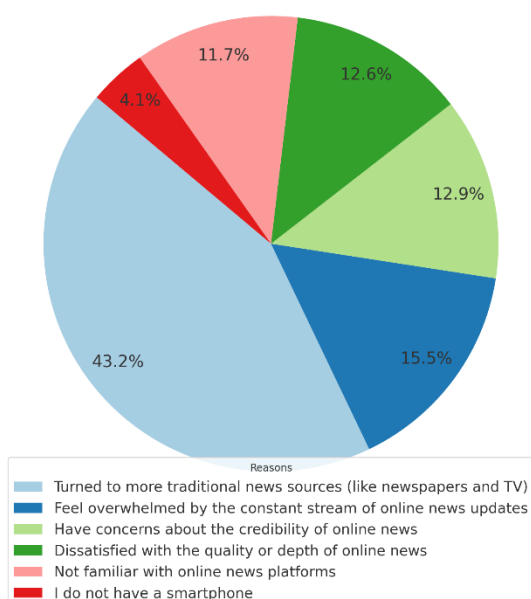


Figure 8: Reasons Cited for Not Accessing Online News After the Pandemic

Figure 8 shows the possible reasons why the respondents have stopped viewing news on online portals post the pandemic. The most important reason, stated by 43.2% of respondents, is that some people still prefer more traditional media such as newspapers and TV, often because they are accustomed to it or trust them more than other sources. Another 15.5% of the respondents said that they are constantly bombarded with online news updates which make them feel overwhelmed and hence they avoid digital media. 12.9%, of the respondents expressed doubts about the credibility of online news while 12.6% are dissatisfied with the quality or depth of news coverage provided by online media which influenced their decision to stop using these applications. 11.7% of the respondents are not familiar with online news platforms which may have limited their use. A small percentage of 4.1% of the respondents said they do not own a smartphone, meaning that they cannot access online news.

Discussion

Acceleration of Digital Adoption

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital news consumption in Kolkata, with younger and more educated demographics leading this shift. Convenience, accessibility, and immediacy were the main drivers, highlighting the critical role of smartphones and affordable internet in expanding digital reach. This aligns with global and Indian studies emphasising the pandemic's role as a catalyst for digital media adoption (Newman et al., 2020; FICCI & EY, 2020). The pandemic also has accelerated digital adoptions among lower income and education groups. As far as the overall usage are concerned, the higher income and education groups have showcased higher digital news consumption. However, this does not overlook the fact that there has been significant increase in digital news consumption with lower income and education groups. It can also be said that the pandemic has not brought about new trends as far as news consumption is concerned, but it has definitely accelerated trends that were perhaps a few years away. However, despite rapid growth, a digital divide seem to remain. Older adults and those with lower educational attainment continue to prefer traditional media, reflecting enduring trust and familiarity. This suggests the need for targeted digital literacy programmes in some groups and inclusive strategies to bridge gap and ensure equitable news access (Shearer & Matsu, 2018; Aldoseri et al., 2023).

Challenges of Digital Fatigue and Misinformation

While digital platforms provide timely information, many users report digital fatigue due to information overload and constant breaking news and notifications. The proliferation of fake news and misinformation doing the rounds in online media seems to have affected the trust and credibility of online news sources. This holds good especially in case of news that are not originating from the digital platforms of established media houses. These concerns also mirror similar global findings. This highlights a pressing need for responsible platform design, and fact-checking initiatives to sustain healthy news engagement (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook et al., 2020).

Traditional media remains relevant, particularly for those valuing newspaper reading or TV news viewing habits. It also points to the fact that the established print and television media are still seen as credible sources of information, especially when in doubt regarding the factual credibility of online news as well as forwards received on social media.

This coexistence points to a hybrid media environment, where traditional and digital news platforms complement each other, each addressing different audience needs and trust dynamics.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has used purposive sampling, which while suitable for exploring behavioural patterns, limits the generalisation of findings to the broader population of Kolkata or other regions. Also, with self-reported data, the possibility of certain biases related to recall or social desirability remain. The focus on digital media excludes significant influences from traditional media sources.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to track evolving news consumption behaviours over extended periods. Comparative studies across multiple Indian cities could highlight regional variations in news consumption. Qualitative investigations into motivations behind digital fatigue and trust issues would help in getting a deeper understanding of user experiences. Studies exploring the effectiveness of media literacy interventions and platform design modifications in curbing misinformation and information overload might also be valuable contributions.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has not introduced new trends. It has rather accelerated trends that might have arrived a few years later. It has sped up the adoption of digital news platforms in Kolkata and had habitual media consumption habits. Digital media offers convenience, immediacy, and diverse perspectives. However, challenges such as digital fatigue, misinformation, and trust issues remain. Traditional media continues to be relevant for sizeable sections of the population, especially the older generation. This news consumption behaviour introduces the coexistence of hybrid news ecosystems. This also highlights the opportunity for media organisations to promote credible journalism, and design platforms that address information overload. With digital news consumption sustaining its growth post-pandemic, ongoing research is needed in order to understand its evolving impact within India's diverse socio-cultural landscape.

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