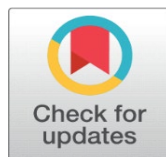
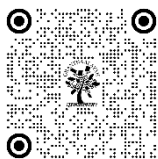


A STUDY OF NEWS CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

India will have 1 billion smart phone users by 2026, according to a recent Deloitte report [Big bets \(2022\)](#). As for news consumption, a June 2022 article in Mint says that around 72% on Indians access news through smartphones, and only 35% via computers. News aggregator platforms and apps such as Google News (53%), Daily Hunt (25%), In Shorts (19%), and News Point (17%) are also gaining currency [Jha \(2022\)](#). Even though the use of mobile phones is increasing, a 2022 study conducted by the Reuters Institute in 46 markets says that the trust in news is falling, especially with the younger age group. [Youth Avoiding News, Says Reuters Study. \(2022\)](#). The report says, “These groups are critical audiences for publishers and journalists around the world, and for the sustainability of news, but are increasingly hard to reach and may require different strategies to engage them.” This study also marks the difference in the consumption pattern between social natives (18 to 24) and digital natives (25 to 34). While digital natives still stick on to Facebook, social natives have moved to other new networks. Many news organizations are struggling to remain relevant to this group of youth. Using the quantitative survey methodology, this study aims to track news consumption patterns among youth.

Keywords: Social Natives, Digital Natives, News Consumption, Trust in News

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1. INTRODUCTION

As early as in 2016, Reuters published a report titled “Digital Journalism Startups in India.” Arijit Sen and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen from the Reuters Institute conducted interviews with 20 people who were startup founders, or other stakeholders. After some years of slow growth, by 2016, India boasted the second largest cohort of Internet users in the world. The Reuters researchers showed that: a) Rapid growth in Internet usage is accompanied by rapid increase in the number of journalism startups – profit-content-based, aggregation-based, and non-profit-based startups; b) Most of them acknowledge the emergence of the mobile network, and therefore prioritise “mobile-optimized websites and mobile apps” more than

websites for desktop users; c) When it comes to distribution, most of the apps were clear that they were not the destination sites then, but would soon try to be destination sites by focusing on social media [Nielsen & Sen \(2016\)](#).

This study is important as the scenario it has laid out for news apps and the focus on mobile users holds good even in today's scenario. India now has almost 800 million smart phone users [Service \(2022\)](#) Though the Indian mediascape is largely dominated by the print and broadcast sector, the penetration of digital media has made the mobile network a key player in the market. Data Reportal website states that there were 467 million social media users in January 2022, and it has increased by 19 million from 2021 to 2022 [Kemp \(2022\)](#). Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that a vast number of mobile phone users consume news through social media. But does the crucial youth segment, prized for its potential longevity as a consumer segment, its value as a demographic beloved of advertisers, its earning potential, and for its influence on peers and future generations, also consume news similarly? Do the youth consume news at all? If they don't, then what should be done to amend the situation? This is in the backdrop of developments such as the one reported by a 2022 Reuters study: young adults are losing trust in news.

Youth today can be classified as "incidental consumers" [Belfrage & Belfrage \(2018\)](#) as news stories, instead of being sought out by consumers, come to them as feeds on their mobile phones. A few deliberately seek out more information.

In this study, the researchers set out to analyse the news consumption habits of young adults aged between 18 and 22 years. The study also aims to find out reasons for low or non- consumption of news. The findings may help steer further inquiry in this area.

2. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To identify preferred sources of news among young people.
- 2) To determine the frequency and duration of news consumption among young people.
- 3) To analyse the factors influencing the choice of news sources among young people.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

This theory is best suited to study current news consumption patterns because the theory holds that the media consumer enjoys freedom of choice and agency, as opposed to what was believed about the media earlier. In the case of today's young media consumers, while the news is delivered to them, they choose to consume or ignore it. They choose particular types of stories that give them satisfaction. This theory suggests that media has limited power over audiences, and the plethora of media and channels at the disposal of the media consumer amplify these effects. The consumer may seek out a particular medium or social media platform; he may also choose to ignore or 'further read' the news that is delivered to him.

3.2. TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY

This theory can also be used analyse how youth get influenced on social media by 'influencers,' who are opinion leaders. "In this age of hustle culture, a breed of new age professionals is on the rise, and is called social media influencers. They are

the cool looking, working from home, smart individuals who lure the youngsters to join the ranks” [Ganguly \(2022\)](#). Given the variety of ways in which the current youth generation consume content even within a single medium – online, ‘influencers,’ including the people one follows on Twitter or Instagram, could play an important role in the news consumption behaviour of the youth.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using the quantitative survey method. Convenience sampling was done to study the news consumption preferences of 158 female undergraduate college students, aged 17 – 22 years. The researchers ensured that students with a journalism major were not administered the questionnaire, so as to eliminate a domain-specific factor in the news consumption pattern.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Almost a decade has passed since this paper was published, but the study still holds good as it throws lights on the digital era’s persistent problem of “information overload, suboptimal knowledge formation and biased worldview” [Pentina & Tarafdar \(2014\)](#). The study conducted in 2013 reports on a “qualitative investigation of news consumption practices.” Information processing theories, with information overload and sense-making perspectives, have been applied to contemporary news knowledge formation process. The qualitative exploratory study was conducted with 112 interviews with news consumers in the US Midwestern regions. This paper demonstrates that social media plays a nuanced role in online news consumption and identifies both its benefits and its “dark side.” In particular, the study highlights the positive aspect of social media-enabled news consumption by ensuring socially negotiated sense-making. It notes that when the individual draws upon his or her social network for online news consumption, he or she is able to expand a structure of meaning through the socialization process that provides a framework for sense-making about civic life. The study also reveals a non-beneficial aspect of social media-enabled news consumption, namely, the potential for a “filter bubble.” When individuals rely on their strong-tie social networks for news, the information tends to be filtered through the attitudinal preferences of this network and may not provide an encompassing, balanced or diverse knowledge about civic society.

Online news consumption leads to what Boczkowski, et al call, “incidental news.” In their paper “Incidental news: How young people consume news on social media,” the authors analyse the dynamics of news consumption on social media. Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted in Argentina through the snowball sampling method. They adopted the text-material perspective to examine the “key technological affordances in both hardware and software that are implicated in online news consumption on social media by youth.” The interviews with 16 young users revealed that the news consumption on social media can be labeled as “incidental news.” The users chance upon the news rather than seek them on purpose. Therefore, news becomes another post on a social media platform. This cohort is exposed to news constantly, but only sporadically clicks on new stories, with a very little time devoted to reading or watching videos. The literature also points out that “the emergence of incidental news signals a major discontinuity with the information ecologies associated with the consumption of news on print and broadcast media— and, to a lesser extent, with the consumption on news sites via laptop or desktop computers” [Boczkowski et al. \(2017\)](#).

Bergström and Belfrage, in their paper titled, “News in Social Media: Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders” use the theories of opinion leaders and incidental news consumption to examine the news consumption behavior of youth aged between 16 and 19. The analysis was based on three research questions:

- 1) To what extent do young people use news that appears in their Social Networking Site (SNS) feeds, and what factors contribute to the understanding of consumption?
- 2) To what extent do young people perceive their news consumption on SNSs incidental or deliberate?
- 3) What role do opinion leaders play when young people consume news on SNSs?

The researchers found that opinion leaders do play an important role.

“Although incidental, the interviewees count on the news to occur rather frequently, and they to a large extent count on people in their networks to pass on everyday news on different topics.

One overall conclusion is that even though SNSs are not a primary source themselves, they nonetheless could be considered an important distributor of current affairs from legacy media companies and other conventional sources. While abandoning traditional distribution forms, many people will continue to encounter traditional distributors, though this might happen across alternative settings. SNSs should be considered a significant factor in this context. The role of social media, thus, merits further emphasis in future research on news repertoires.” [Belfrage & Belfrage \(2018\)](#)

Another similar study titled, “Influence of the 'News Finds Me' Perception on News Sharing and News Consumption on Social Media” by Francisco Segado-Boj et al also explores the fact that news finds the consumers instead of them reaching out for news. The study also aims to find out that whether “internalizing” and “externalizing” happen in this phase. That is, whether the consumers read (internalizing) all the information that reach them and share (externalizing) the same with others. The survey-based study revealed that the “news finds me” perception does not encourage a news-sharing attitude. [Segado Boj et al. \(2019\)](#)

With consumers experiencing information overload, it is very important to have “news media literacy.” [Kelly & Kua \(2019\)](#) in their research article titled, “What predicts adolescents’ critical thinking about real-life news? The roles of social media news consumption and news media literacy” try to understand the critical thinking ability of youth as applied to news consumption.

The research explores the relationship among critical thinking, news media literacy and news consumption among 1505 school students from Hong Kong. The researchers found a news- seeking motivation, a wariness regarding personalised social media algorithms, and a habit of tracking down a news source, indicating fairly high media literacy.

6. FINDINGS

Of the 158 respondents, all female undergraduate students, a little more than half were science majors, and about a quarter were arts majors. As mentioned in the methodology, the researchers did not include journalism majors in this study, as the objective was to study news consumption attitudes among young people in general, and domain-specific reasons for news consumption would have skewed the results.

Figure 1

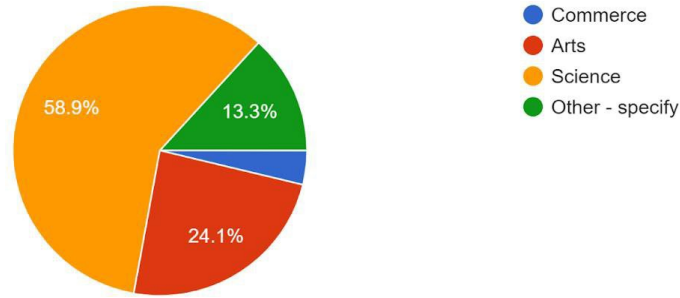


Figure 1 Undergraduate Study Majors of Respondents n = 158

More than half the respondents characterised themselves as moderate news consumers, with around 54 percent choosing a 3 on a 5-point rating scale of news consumption. Another 25 percent chose 2 or 1, describing themselves as light consumers of news.

Figure 2

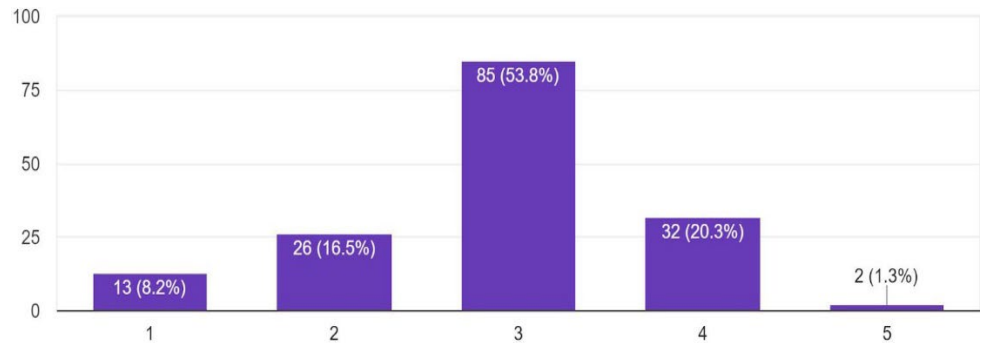


Figure 2 Self-Classification of Respondents as Light, Moderate or Heavy Consumers of News (5 Being Heaviest) n = 158

Those who described themselves as light consumers of news were asked for reasons for this news consumption behaviour. While the largest category was 'Others,' comprising a variety of reasons, between 10 and 14 percent chose each of the following reasons: 'It is boring,' 'It is difficult to understand,' 'It is not useful in my daily life,' 'It is depressing,' and 'There is no point knowing the news as I can't change anything anyway.' This is worth noting for news organisations, as factors to perhaps address.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Reasons that Self-Described Light Consumers of News Gave for their News Consumption Behaviour n = 81

Around 75 percent of respondents said they consumed news through social media, and television still holds sway in this age group, with 60 percent claiming they consumed news through this broadcast medium. Website or e-papers of mainstream newspapers came in at 31 percent, while print polled at 18 percent. For this cohort – college-goers, a majority of whom live with families rather than in hostels – family media consumption or news consumption habits are likely to have an impact on the news consumption habits of the respondents, perhaps explaining the strong showing for television as a news consumption medium.

Figure 4

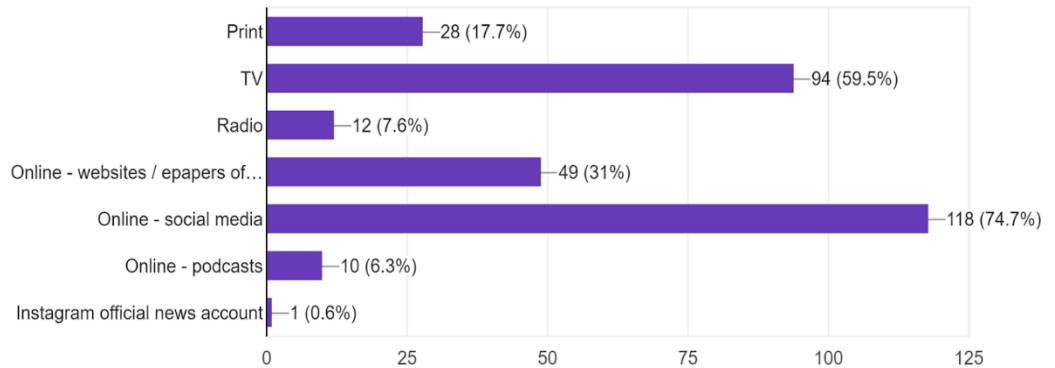


Figure 4 Media Used to Access News (Respondents Could Choose More Than One Medium) n = 158

Only 52 percent of respondents chose the online media as their primary preference for news consumption, followed by 40 percent for television. The idea of ‘incidental news’ as proposed by Boczkowski et al may be used to explain this pattern. The consumption of news, rather than intentional and purposeful, is perhaps incidental, wherein users’ chance upon the news on online media, rather than actively seek it out. Similarly, it is likely that family television viewing patterns have an impact on the 40 percent respondents who chose TV as their primary news consumption medium. This may merit further exploration.

Figure 5

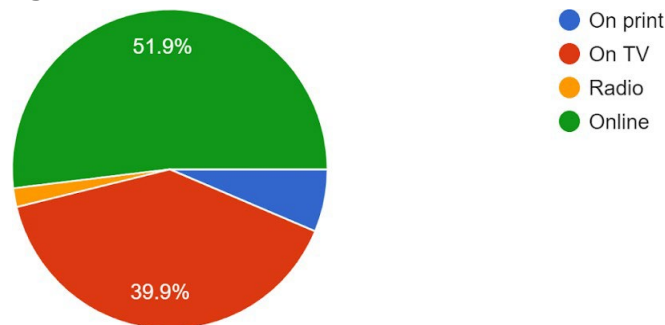


Figure 5 Preferred Medium for News Consumption n = 158

6.1. ATTITUDE TOWARDS NEWS CONSUMPTION ON PRINT

Some 65 percent of respondents said they do not use print for news consumption. Among those who do use print for this purpose, the most prevalent reading pattern (37 percent of respondents) was: ‘I don’t read the paper on some days, but I don’t mind, as I can catch up on the news on other media.’

Figure 6



Figure 6 Reading Patterns Among Respondents Who Do Use Print for News Consumption

The most common reason given for using print for news consumption was that it was easily available, as the family has subscribed to a copy (38 percent). Another 21 percent thought news on print was detailed and comprehensive.

The top two reasons given for not using print for news consumption were that it was too time-consuming (31 percent) and that the respondents did not want to pay for a print copy when news was available free online (30 percent).

Figure 7



Figure 7 Reasons for Non-Usage of Print for News Consumption

6.2. ATTITUDE TOWARDS NEWS CONSUMPTION ON BROADCAST MEDIA

Around 76 percent of respondents said they used broadcast media for news consumption, though responses to a previous question make it clear that television by far outperforms radio as a news consumption medium.

More than 60 percent of those who watch television for news said they do so because it is quick in delivering information, and 22 percent said they drew news from TV as they found TV news interesting.

Figure 8

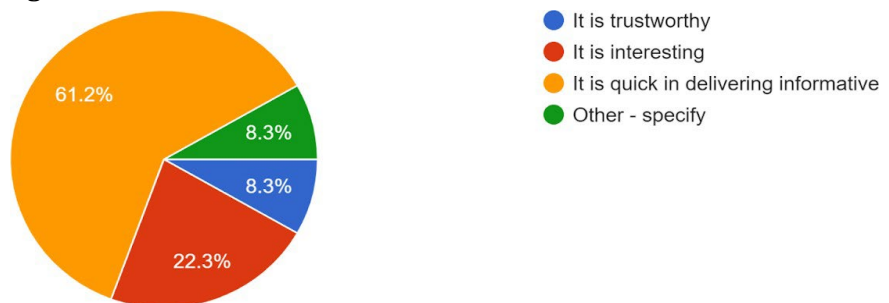


Figure 8 Reasons for Consuming News on Television, by Respondents Who Do So

Among reasons for non-consumption on news on television, the largest was the choice 'Others,' comprising a variety of reasons, but a reluctance to pay for a news channel subscription while news was available for free online, was cited by 17.6 percent of respondents. Also at 17.6 percent was the notion that television news was not objective in nature.

Figure 9

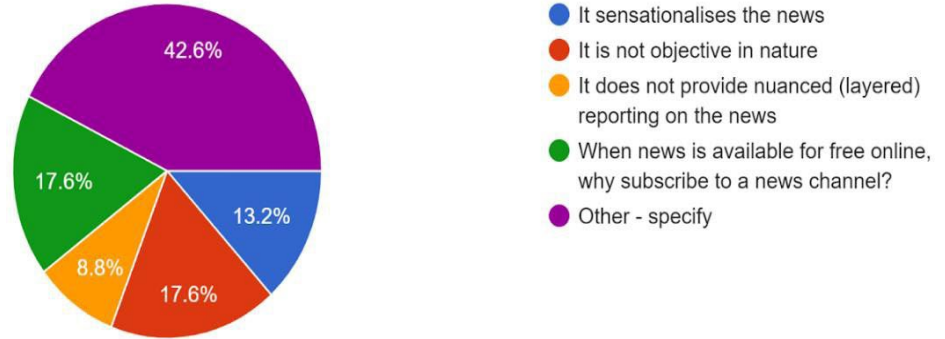


Figure 9 Reasons for Non-Consumption of News on Television, From Respondents Who Do Not Use This Medium for News

6.3. ATTITUDE TOWARDS NEWS CONSUMPTION ON ONLINE MEDIA

More than 80 percent of the respondents said they use online media for news consumption.

Among those who do not use the online media, more than 40 percent cited the fact that they were generally light news consumers. Another 27 percent said they do not trust news from online media.

Figure 10

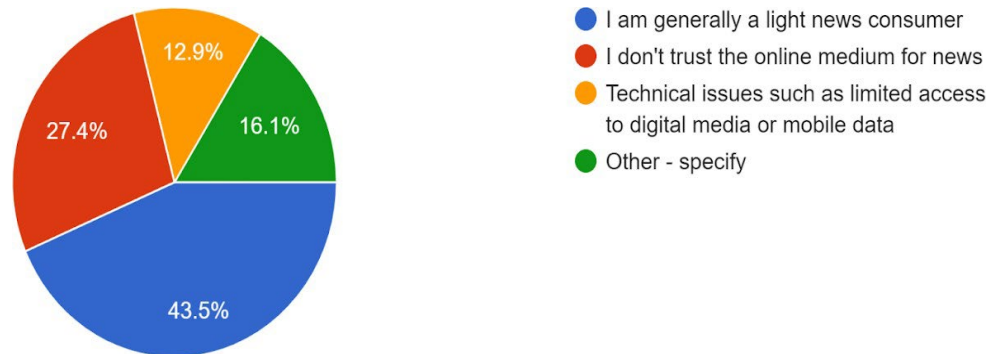


Figure 10 Reasons for Non-Consumption of News on Online Media, From Respondents Who Do Not Use This Medium for News

Among users of online media for news, social media was the most common point of access (66 percent). Another 16 percent said they consumed news online through the websites and e-papers of mainstream news publications.

The most common reason cited for accessing use through social media was that it was less time-consuming than other modes.

Figure 11



Figure 11 Reasons for Consumption of News on Social Media

Among social media platforms as access points for news, the preference by far was for Instagram, followed by YouTube, and the most common reasons given were: visually interesting presentations (29 percent), and personal comfort with the platform (21 percent).

Figure 12

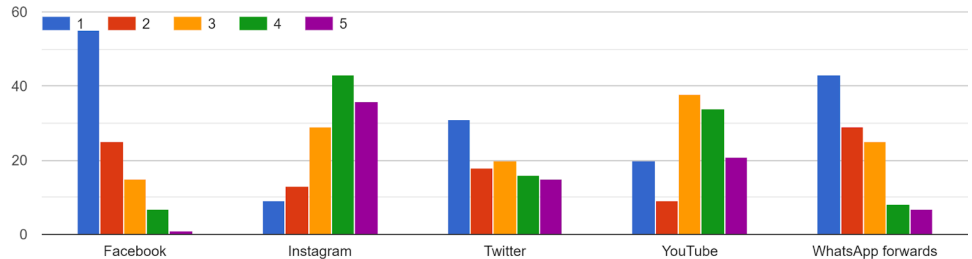


Figure 12 Preference for the Various Social Media Platforms for News (5 Being the Strongest)

More than 51 percent of the respondents said they did not use news apps. Among those who do use it, the most common reason (24 percent) was that the process was quick.

39 percent of the respondents said they did not use the Google news aggregator. As for usage, the most common reason given (22 percent) was that the algorithm fed users news stories based on their interests.

About 12 percent of the respondents said they never fact-check news they get on social media or on WhatsApp, while 19 percent said they always fact-check news they receive. Around 57 percent said they sometimes did a fact-check. Those who did carry out fact-checks did so most commonly through other social media platforms (30 percent) or fact-checking tools such as Google Lens and Google Reverse Image Search (22 percent).

Figure 13

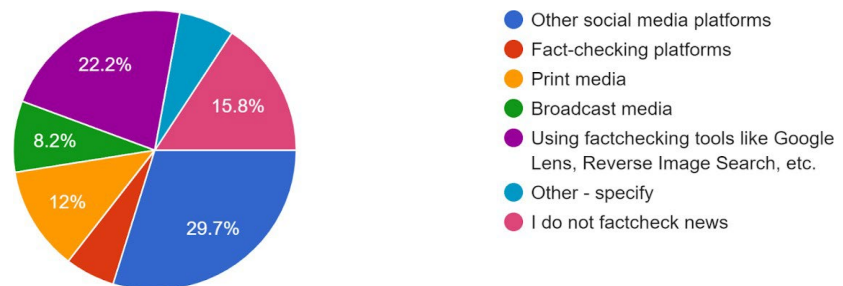


Figure 13 Preferred Modes for Fact-Checking News Received on Social Media or Whatsapp

Entertainment (87 percent), education (80 percent) and crime (72 percent) were the top genres of news that the respondents said they were most likely to consume.

6.4. ATTITUDE TOWARDS PAYWALLS ON ONLINE MEDIA

Most respondents assessed the print medium to be the most trustworthy source of news. Websites and e-papers of mainstream publications also scored well on the trust quotient. The respondents also seemed to have a good opinion about the trust quotient of news from social media, while WhatsApp forwards as sources of news did not score well on trustworthiness.

Figure 14

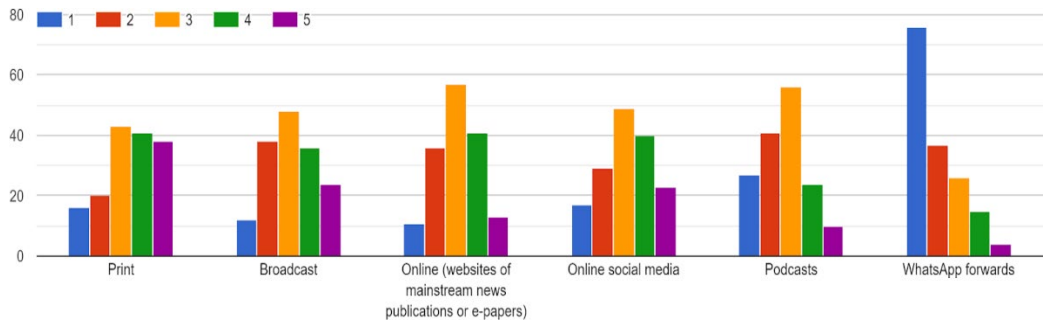


Figure 14 How Trustworthy are the Various Media as News Sources?

The majority of the respondents (87 percent) said they would not pay to access stories hidden behind paywalls. The most common reason given was that the same news story was likely available elsewhere for free (42 percent). Another 32 percent said they did not believe in paying for news.

Figure 15



Figure 15 Reasons Given for Unwillingness to Pay for Stories Blocked Behind Paywalls.

For the same top reasons, a majority of respondents (74 percent) they would not be willing to subscribe to the e-paper of a mainstream news publication.

Respondents were asked if they believed news consumers must sacrifice any news attribute if news was to remain free. Around 30 percent said they believed they did not have to sacrifice anything in order to receive free news. Around 21 percent said they believe truthfulness of news could be sacrificed in a free news ecosystem, and 14 percent said they did not mind even if there was such a sacrifice, as they were confident, they could apply their internal filters as savvy news consumers so that they were not misled.

Figure 16

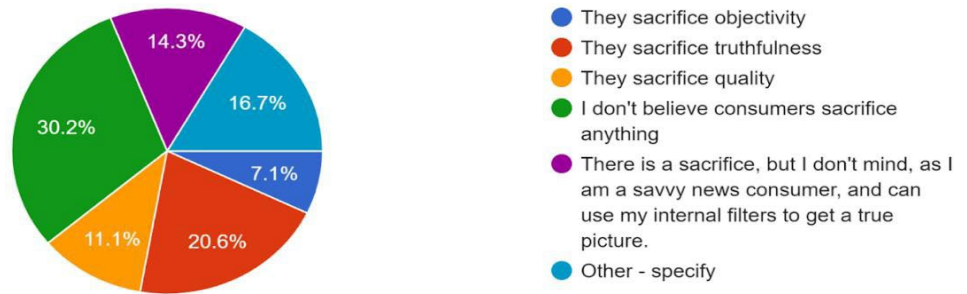


Figure 16 Opinions About the Intangible Cost of Free News

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the Uses and Gratifications perspective, it is interesting to note the reasons for news consumption behaviour given by respondents who describe themselves as 'light' news consumers. For news publishers seeking a consumer base for the present and future, this group is impossible to ignore, as, according to the study, light and moderate news consumers make up almost 80 percent of the respondent group.

The view expressed by light news consumers that the news was boring, depressing, or difficult to understand could offer food for thought for publishers, as solutions definitely suggest themselves to these problems. Gratifications could also arise from visual interest and popular, familiar modes of presentation, as suggested by respondents who cited the afore-mentioned reasons for their preference for news consumption on Instagram and YouTube, among social media or video sharing platforms.

As for uses, a major reason cited by light news consumers was that the news was not useful in their daily lives. A values and lifestyle analysis of potential young consumers could help publishers target them with news they might consider useful. On the other hand, targeted awareness campaigns could also be undertaken on the usefulness of the news on offer. This could also target the attitude expressed by some respondents that they are powerless to effect changes, and so do not see the point of consuming news.

In an era of algorithm-driven social media, light, moderate and heavy news consumers are subject to 'incidental news' rather than intentionally-sought news [Boczkowski et al. \(2017\)](#). Of course, what appears on one's content feed on social media platforms is not completely incidental, but the outcome of the news sources and accounts that one follows. It is also driven by one's browsing history and genre preferences captured by algorithms. Therefore, the Two- Step Flow theory also finds application here. The effect of the apparently incidental news exposure is amplified when it is mediated or posted by social media accounts that one tracks.

Other interesting findings include the fact all news media enjoy more or less the same perception of trustworthiness, with print media enjoying the perception of highest trustworthiness. In this scenario, most respondents (87 percent) say they would not pay to access stories hidden behind paywalls. In response to this, it would perhaps be a valuable exercise to engage in campaigns to illustrate the merit in paying for news, just as one would, for any other commodity. The need for such an exercise is underlined by the fact that 30 percent of respondents said they do not believe consumers sacrifice anything – quality, truthfulness, or objectivity – if they fail to pay for news. Keeping the Uses and Gratifications perspective in mind, the

usefulness of professional, high- quality news, funded by consumer revenue, could perhaps be highlighted in a concerted campaign.

Contrary to traditional wisdom, television shows a strong presence as a news access medium for the young respondents, perhaps due to incidental exposure to television news consumed by family members. While TV news records low trustworthiness among respondents, its large, mass audience sizes can perhaps be tapped to carry out awareness campaigns on news literacy.

8. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While some broad indications of young consumers' attitudes towards news have been obtained through this study, and much deeper understanding can be arrived at only through in-depth interviews and focus group studies. The social dynamics as well as technological algorithms of social media merit deeper study so that these patterns can be tapped for effective delivery of news to young consumers.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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