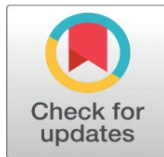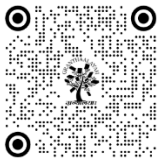# THE USE–TRUST LOOP: REEL CULTURE, SEMI-NEWS NARRATIVES, AND CREDIBILITY IN HYPERLOCAL JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of short-form videos, or reels, has transformed the news ecosystem, particularly in regional contexts. This paper explores the relationship between frequency of reel use and perceptions of credibility—a dynamic conceptualized here as the use–trust loop. Drawing on a mixed-methods study conducted in Gorakhpur, India, the research combines survey responses from 200 participants, content analysis of 100 reels, and interviews with 12 founder-editors of hyperlocal outlets. Findings reveal that reel consumption is near-universal, with 92% of respondents watching daily, and that higher levels of use correspond to greater trust. Content analysis shows a significant presence of semi-news narratives, blending humor and information, which audiences find both engaging and credible. Platform hierarchies place YouTube and Instagram reels as more trusted than WhatsApp forwards, highlighting the mediating role of algorithms. The study concludes that credibility in reel-based journalism is constructed less through verification and more through repetition, presence, and community embeddedness. These insights contribute to ongoing debates about digital trust, infotainment, and the future of hyperlocal journalism in India.

Keywords: Reel Culture, Semi-News Narratives, Use–Trust Loop, Credibility, Hyperlocal Journalism, Gorakhpur, Digital Media, Infotainment, Platformization

1. INTRODUCTION

Journalism in India has increasingly been redefined by digital convergence, as hyperlocal outlets draw upon affordable technologies and social media systems to serve underserved audiences (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021). In places such as Gorakhpur, digital news innovators have used experimental formats—initially blogs, then Facebook pages, and more recently short-form video reels—to attract audience interest and survive in extremely resource-scarce settings (Rao, 2019; Banerjee, 2020).

Reels—on WhatsApp forwards, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts—are no longer the exclusive provenance of entertainment. They now circulate rapidly as bearers of local news, civic complaints, and even political commentary (Napoli, 2019; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). These visually arresting, short-form snippets flourish on platform logics of virality and algorithmic boost, but their emergence poses urgent concerns regarding credibility and journalistic integrity (Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2018).

At the core of this transformation is a paradox: although reels are highly consumed, their perceived credibility is moderate. However, with greater consumption comes greater trust—a phenomenon this research refers to as the use–trust loop. In Gorakhpur, interviews with founder-editors reveal that reels are not merely an editorial preference but a survivalist response, mediating between audience needs for brevity and the outlet's requirement for visibility and monetization (Carvajal, García-Avilés, & González, 2012; Deuze & Witschge, 2018).

This cycle disrupts traditional assumptions about journalism, where credibility was thought to be generated by fact-checking, editorial control, and institutional credibility (Vos & Singer, 2016). Rather, in the reel environment, credibility is socially constructed through habitual reproduction and repeated use. The more people watch reels, the more credible they find them to be—a result consistent with international literature on media normalization and audience habituation (Radcliffe, 2012; Nielsen, 2016).

This shift is especially significant in Gorakhpur since hyperlocal sites already function under vulnerable conditions—sparse revenues, unclear professional roles, and significant reliance on founder-editors (Kumar, 2021; Rao, 2019). In incorporating news within reels, these sites increase their audience but also risk diminishing journalism to half-news stories, where satire, infotainment, and commentary flourish alongside reporting (Ali, 2019; Briggs, 2012).

This article explores the use–trust cycle of Gorakhpur's hyperlocal reporting by questioning: Does exposure to reels over time increase perceived credibility, and how does this cycle realign the lines between entertainment and journalism?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Semi-news stories may be characterized as hybrid media products that mix factual reportage with entertainment, humor, or commentary. They are a blurred area between news and infotainment, intended more to attract attention than to communicate detailed information (Briggs, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012).

Infotainment, which has been termed as the intersection of news and entertainment, has been condemned for watering down journalistic seriousness but lauded for engaging content (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

Use-trust loop, understood here, is a process where repeated exposure to reels makes audiences view them as ever more credible. This is consistent with psychological explanations of the "mere exposure effect," where trust increases from familiarity (Zajonc, 2001), as well as evidence that audiences tend to trust "the news they use" on a regular basis irrespective of its institutional source (Strömbäck, Tsfati, Boomgaarden, Damstra, Lindgren, & Vreese, 2020).

2.1. TRUST AND CREDIBILITY IN ONLINE JOURNALISM

Trust has always been at the heart of the legitimacy of journalism. Conventional theories associate credibility with editorial checks, accuracy, and institutional sources (Vos & Singer, 2016). In online settings, though, credibility is more relational and socially constructed in terms of familiarity and repeated exposure (Napoli, 2019).

Global research supports that regular news consumption promotes feelings of reliability (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In India, for instance, studies have indicated that trust in hyperlocals is frequently based not on institutional power but on embeddedness in the community as well as the transparency of founder-editors (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021).

2.2. INFOTAINMENT AND SEMI-NEWS DYNAMICS

Semi-news stories are intertwined with the emergence of infotainment in digital media. Scholars contend that infotainment is not a lapse in journalistic values but a strategic adjustment to reach fragmented populations in market competition (Briggs, 2012; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). In the Indian vernacular sphere, these strategies tend to deploy humor, cultural idioms, or dramatization to enhance shareability (Banerjee, 2020).

But these forms threaten to undermine journalism's epistemic credibility. In prioritizing interest over checking, semi-news storytelling makes routine the fuzzy lines between fact and entertainment, leaving viewers uncertain where credibility is (Radcliffe, 2012).

2.3. ALGORITHMIC MEDIATION AND REELS

Digital platforms have a determining influence on what the audience actually sees. Algorithms function to favor content that provokes engagement, so reels are systematically favored in news feeds (Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2018). Algorithmic reinforcement loops ensue, where repeated exposure boosts perceived familiarity and, as a result, trust. As Napoli (2019) points out, platform dynamics increasingly control visibility and consequently credibility.

This trend is particularly observed in reel culture, with news bytes—if often no more than 60 seconds—normalized as legitimate forms of news based solely on their prevalence.

2.4. HYPERLOCAL JOURNALISM IN INDIA

In India, hyperlocal sites occupy a gap left vacant by the mainstream media. They are delivering community-based reporting, usually run by founder-editors with multiple hats: reporter, marketing manager, and broker to the community (Ali, 2019; Rao, 2019). Research indicates that their credibility is based on community trust, not institutional one (Kumar, 2021).

Although extensive work has been done on the hybridity and challenges of hyperlocal journalism in India (Banerjee, 2020; Rao, 2019), sparse work has been conducted to understand how these publications transition to specifically short-form reel formats and the ways in which audiences attribute credibility to them in these environments.

2.5. THE RESEARCH GAP

There has been research into infotainment (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018), hyperlocal journalism trust (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021), and the influence of algorithms on news dissemination (Helberger et al., 2018; Napoli, 2019). The convergence of reels, semi-news stories, and credibility is less researched.

Particularly, the process by which repeated consumption of reels builds trust—the use–trust loop—has never been systematically examined in India's hyperlocal contexts. This paper fills that lacuna by exploring how Gorakhpur's hyperlocal shops and their users navigate trust in reel-based journalism.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research used a mixed-methods design, which integrated a survey of viewers, a content analysis of reels, and interviews of founder-editors of hyperlocal news outlets in Gorakhpur. The use of this triangulated design helped to obtain information about both the behavior of audiences and also from producers, as well as analyze the content itself.

3.2. SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

Survey: A purposive sample of 200 participants was drawn from the city of Gorakhpur and surrounding areas. Students, young professionals, and local residents aged 18–40 were included, as youth are the most active reel consumers.

Content Analysis: Hundred reels were gathered from local digital sources that were engaged on Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp in 2022–2023. The sample has been planned with the intent to cover the diversity of local news formats disseminated through short-form videos.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 founder-editors. They were selected because of their central role in both producing reels and shaping audience engagement strategies.

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

Survey Instrument: Participants responded to standardized questions on their usage of reels, such as frequency of use, preferred platform, and reasons for using reels. They were also requested to provide ratings of the credibility of reels and to note if they viewed "semi-news" content—news combined with humor, commentary, or entertainment.

Content Analysis: The chosen reels were coded into categories:

Hard news (politics, civic affairs, crime).

Soft news (culture, lifestyle, events).

Semi-news narratives (satirical or infotainment-style reporting).

Localized info and alerts: Community news

Interviews: Founders were questioned regarding their reasons for embracing reel formats, their views on audience trust, and if semi-news strategies were by design or an unintended result of pressures from the platforms.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

Survey Data: Results were presented in frequencies and percentages. For instance, the number of people who preferred reels compared to extended news, or how credibility scores differed by platform. Rather than sophisticated statistical modeling, focus was on detecting general patterns of audience behavior.

Content Analysis: Reels were analyzed for spread across categories, which assisted in demonstrating which forms of content saturated local short-form journalism.

Interview Data: Responses were coded thematically to capture repeating patterns in editors' descriptions of trust, audience tastes, and pressures related to the application of short-form formats.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation was secured, and informed consent was achieved for all respondents. Anonymity was provided for survey takers, and founder-editors where confidentiality was sought were assigned pseudonyms.

4. RESULT

The survey results indicate that reel consumption is nearly universal in Gorakhpur, particularly among younger audiences. Out of 200 respondents, 92% reported watching reels daily, with an average of seven reels consumed per day. Age differences were evident: 95% of those aged 18–25 consumed reels daily compared to 85% of respondents aged 26–40. As one 21-year-old student explained, "If I miss the morning reels, I feel like I've missed what's happening in the city."

When questioned what their preferred medium for local news was, 72% picked reels, followed by 18% preferring long videos and just 10% using print or online articles. One 24-year-old

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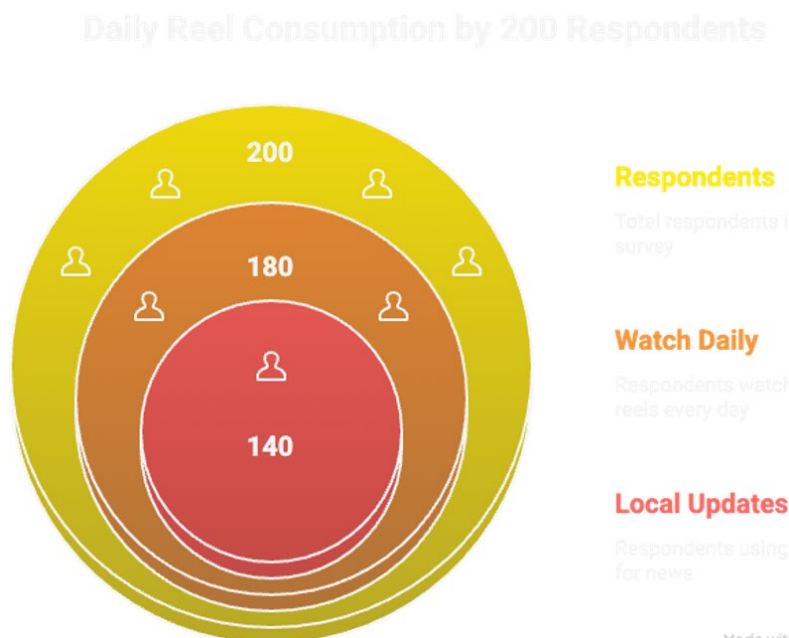
professional pointed out, "Reels are quicker. I don't have the patience for a 10-minute news video." This highlights the centrality of reels as the most prevailing portal for local information.

Perceptions of credibility were not clear-cut. 28% of them scored reels as very credible on a five-point scale, 22% as reasonably credible, and 35% as roughly credible. On the other hand, 10% rated them as somewhat credible, and 5% confessed that they were not at all credible. A 19-year-old respondent captured this uncertainty: "Even if reels are not 100% precise, they are real enough because they are local."

The hierarchy of credibility on the platforms showed more subtleties. YouTube Shorts was the most trusted platform (44%), followed by Instagram Reels (36%), whereas WhatsApp forwards were the least trusted ones (20%). People tended to be skeptical about WhatsApp, tagging along misinformation. A 27-year-old teacher justified, "WhatsApp is full of fake news. But YouTube reels feel more authentic."

Content analysis of 100 reels gave further insight. 40% of the sample comprised hard news, with 30% consisting of soft news. Semi-news stories, blending satire, mimicry, or humour with news content, were 20%, with community updates making up the remaining 10%. Founders freely admitted this strategy: "If we tell it with humour, people remember and share it. If we tell it seriously, they ignore it," a Gorakhpur-based editor said.

The most striking trend was that of the frequency of usage and trust—the use–trust loop. The light users (1–3 reels per day) had a mean rating of trust at 2.8, the moderate users (4–6 reels per day) rated credibility at 3.2, and the heavy users (7 or more reels per day) rated credibility at 3.8. As one 22-year-old interviewee encapsulated, "I know reels are not 100% truth, but since I see them every day, I believe them more than long news." This observation illustrates the way that frequency of exposure seems to make reels seem plausible even while the audience continues to recognize their imperfections.

5. DISCUSSION

The outcomes of this research depict the manner in which reel-based journalism has become an integral part of audience daily media routines in Gorakhpur. Reels are not only a form of entertainment but also a prominent source of local news. With 92% of respondents viewing reels every day, the dominance of the format indicates that short-form video has reshaped the way communities consume journalism in local contexts.

5.1. TRUST AS HABITUAL, NOT INSTITUTIONAL

One of the most valuable findings is the use–trust loop. Those audiences who had higher frequencies of consumption of reels had greater credibility ratings, even though they all agreed that there were inaccuracies. This resonates with Zajonc's (2001) mere exposure effect, whereby familiarity breeds trust. It also resonates with Strömbäck et al. (2020), who assert that individuals will tend to trust the news that they habitually use irrespective of its institutional basis. In Gorakhpur's case, credibility seems to be more about routinized use and less about verification.

5.2. SEMI-NEWS NARRATIVES AS A CREDIBILITY STRATEGY

The ubiquity of semi-news narratives makes credibility notions even more complex. Content analysis revealed that news was incorporated with humor or entertainment in one out of every five reels. Creators conceded that such strategies were intentional efforts to grab attention in a noisy digital environment. This is echoed by Tandoc and Maitra's (2018) formulation of infotainment as a responsive phenomenon to broken attention economies. Although audiences were split on whether such content diluted seriousness, the evidence indicates that semi-news formats are able to maintain engagement without necessarily compromising trust.

5.3. PLATFORM HIERARCHIES AND ALGORITHMIC MEDIATION

The platform hierarchy of credibility—YouTube leading, WhatsApp lagging—highlights how design and reputation of platforms influence audience perceptions. As Helberger, Pierson, and Poell (2018) contend, platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active facilitators of visibility and trust. The desire for YouTube and Instagram suggests that algorithmic reinforcement of reels on these platforms not only increases usage but also increases perceived reliability.

In contrast, WhatsApp's history of misinformation points to the limitations of the use–trust loop when content moves beyond algorithmically curated feeds.

5.4. HYPERLOCAL JOURNALISM AND COMMUNITY TRUST

These tendencies resonate with prior studies of hyperlocal journalism in India in highlighting community-based trust (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021). Founder-editors in Gorakhpur recognized that reels enabled them to amplify civic concerns in formats that appealed to their followers. The transition to short-form styles therefore symbolizes continuity and transformation: whereas the trust capital is based on community embeddedness, mechanisms of credibility become more influenced by digital media and iterative exposure.

5.5. IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM AND RESEARCH

The findings indicate a significant reconsideration of credibility in online journalism. Credibility in the reel ecosystem does not necessarily rest on conventional journalistic principles like verification, accuracy, or editorial control. Rather, credibility seems to develop from a cycle of use, familiarity, and normalization—that is, what we term the use–trust loop. This challenges long-standing assumptions about the conditions under which trust is built and suggests that hyperlocal outlets may prioritize consistency of presence over rigorous verification to sustain credibility.

Concurrently, the results highlight dangers. While repetition and semi-news storytelling can make content seem normal and legitimate, they create room for misinformation to be legitimized by way of habit. Upcoming studies will determine how audiences navigate suspicion in this loop as well as whether interventions, like digital literacy campaigns, are capable of disrupting cycles of misplaced trust.

6. CONCLUSION

This research illustrates how reel-based reporting has become the core of news consumption in Gorakhpur, with reels both controlling audience behaviors and influencing credibility perceptions. The research attests to the occurrence of a use–trust loop, whereby familiarity resulting from repeated exposure to reels builds trust, even with audiences recognizing their limitations. Credibility here is not necessarily constructed primarily through editorial norms but through familiarity and routine, supported by platform logics and social embedding.

The emergence of semi-news narratives also demonstrates how hyperlocal media evolve in attention economies by merging information and entertainment. Although such tactics can be seen as compromising journalistic seriousness, they do extend engagement at little cost to perceived trust. Platform hierarchies in which YouTube and Instagram command credibility with WhatsApp trailing behind show the strong influence of algorithms and reputational environments in structuring audience judgments.

Combined, these results identify a move towards a different dynamic of trust negotiation in regional digital journalism. For hyperlocal media, credibility perhaps no longer relies as much on institutional credibility and more on consistency of presence in daily media routines of their audiences. While this offers scope for engagement, it also poses challenges around disinformation and erosion of journalistic norms. Subsequent study should continue to explore the ways audiences distinguish between credible and non-credible reel content, and if digital literacy can break cycles of misplaced trust.

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