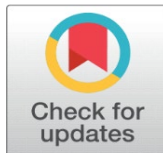


BEYOND THE HEADLINES: MEDIA DEPENDENCY AND SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS CONSUMPTION AMONG YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In this digital age, social media platforms have emerged as a dominant source of news, particularly among youngsters. This study explores the perception and usage of social media as a source of news among the college students in Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India. Quantitative research is designed using the framework of Media Dependency Theory (MDT), and data was collected through a structured survey. 192 respondents (83 females, 109 males) were selected using convenience sampling. The study investigated the relationship between demographic factors (age, gender, education), trust in social media news, frequency of news access, device/platform preference, and behavioral engagement. Data was analyzed using SPSS, including descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests. Results showed that younger users (below 24) were significantly more likely to trust and depend on social media for news. Males and undergraduates demonstrated higher platform usage and engagement. The findings support the propositions of Media Dependency Theory, highlighting how frequent use, trust, and platform integration into daily routines contribute to cognitive and behavioral media dependency. The study concludes by finding that while social media is a convenient and habitual news source for youth, its influence on perceptions and behavior raises important questions about media trust and the need of digital literacy.

Keywords: Social Media News, Media Dependency Theory (MDT), News Credibility, Digital Literacy, News Literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

In this digital age, social media platforms have become major source of news, especially for youth. With the ubiquity of smartphones and the growing personalization of content, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are not only tools for social interaction but have emerged as significant sources of news, especially for younger demographics [Gottfried and Shearer \(2016\)](#), [Shearer and Mitchell \(2021\)](#). For many users, the consumption of news via social media is no longer a conscious effort but a byproduct of their daily digital routines, often characterized by incidental exposure and habitual scrolling [Fletcher and Nielsen \(2018\)](#). Despite the increasing reliance on social media for news, its credibility and

trustworthiness remain contested. Numerous studies have shown that news accessed via social platforms is generally perceived as less trustworthy than traditional media such as television or print newspapers [Park et al. \(2020\)](#), [Nielsen and Schröder \(2014\)](#). This paradox of high usage but low trust is further complicated by the echo chambers and community structures that shape users' exposure to news content on platforms like Facebook [Schmidt et al. \(2017\)](#). Such dynamics reinforce selective exposure and filter bubbles, wherein users are more likely to encounter news that aligns with their existing beliefs or is shared within their social networks [Bergström and Jervelycke \(2018\)](#). Younger users, particularly teenagers and college students, tend to prefer "lighter" forms of news engagement, such as liking or sharing posts, rather than engaging in deep, critical analysis of content [Larsson \(2017\)](#). Their news consumption is often driven by factors such as habit, ease of access, and peer influence, with opinion leaders playing a significant role in shaping what information is considered important or credible [Bhagat et al. \(2022\)](#). Moreover, social media platforms influence the type and quality of news engagement through their perceived affordances, including personalization, network visibility, and content persistence [Dvir-Gvirsman, et al. \(2023\)](#). Research has also demonstrated that increased social media use is linked to a global decline in trust in traditional journalism, especially among users who rely heavily on platforms like Facebook for news [Park et al. \(2023\)](#). Exposure to misinformation, online hostility, and negative perceptions of media can further undermine public trust [Anderson et al. \(2016\)](#), [Csarnó et al. \(2022\)](#). Still, many users, particularly youth report feeling more informed, even if their actual political or social knowledge is limited [Leonhard and Wolf \(2020\)](#).

In light of the existing tensions on usage, trust, and perceived engagement among youth in social media, this study seeks to investigate the perceptions and patterns of social media as a news source among online users, with a focus on teenagers and college students in Coimbatore city. Grounded in Media Dependency Theory [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), the research aims to explore how demographic factors (such as age, gender, and education), usage habits, and trust levels shape individuals' dependency on social media for news. Through quantitative analysis, this study intends to contribute to the growing discourse on the evolving relationship between youth, digital platforms, and news in the contemporary media landscape.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to examine the extent to which individuals rely on social media platforms for news consumption, and how this dependency influences their trust in news, access frequency, engagement behavior, and platform preferences. Guided by Media Dependency Theory [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), the study aims to analyze the role of demographic characteristics (age, gender, education) in shaping media dependency patterns. Specifically, the research investigates users' perceptions of the credibility of news on social networking sites, the frequency and context of online news access through mobile apps, web portals, and social media, the types of news content most commonly consumed, and the behavioral engagement with news content such as liking or interacting with news-related posts on social media platforms. This study builds on the foundational premise of Media Dependency Theory that the more individuals depend on media to fulfill their informational, entertainment, or social needs, the more influence that media has on their attitudes and behaviors [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), [Loges and Ball-Rokeach \(1993\)](#). Given the increasing role of social media as a news source,

this research explores how digital media environments have reshaped news consumption patterns and trust dynamics, particularly among diverse user demographics.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MEDIA DEPENDENCY THEORY

Media Dependency Theory (MDT) is the foundational framework for this study, first introduced by [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#). The theory posits that the influence of media on individuals is directly proportional to the degree of dependency the audience has on the media to achieve their informational, affective, or behavioral goals. Media dependency is especially heightened during periods of social change or disruption, when individuals are more reliant on media for understanding their environment and making decisions [Ball-Rokeach \(1985\)](#), [Lowrey \(2004\)](#). In essence, MDT explains how people develop dependencies on media based on three key elements: the individual's personal goals (e.g., information, entertainment), the availability and usefulness of media in achieving those goals, and the broader social environment. These dependencies influence users' beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and even their susceptibility to misinformation, particularly in digital spaces [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), [Wang et al. \(2015\)](#). Within the context of this research, social media is examined as a powerful, ubiquitous form of media that significantly shapes how teenagers and young adults engage with news. As prior studies show, social media dependence can stem from habitual usage and emotional reliance, often evolving into psychological dependency [Wang et al. \(2015\)](#). The affordances of social platforms, such as personalization, ease of access, social validation, and constant availability, make them an attractive and regular news source, particularly for youth [Dvir-Gvirsman, et al. \(2023\)](#). Furthermore, MDT has been applied in studies analyzing media behavior during crises. For example, [Lowrey \(2004\)](#) found that individuals' perception of threat and prior media usage patterns influenced their media dependency during the 9/11 attacks. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media dependency increased among individuals seeking real-time updates and clarity, often from digital and social media platforms [Ferreira et al. \(2020\)](#), [Lin et al. \(2023\)](#). Media Dependency Theory also explains how the perceived credibility and usefulness of a media platform affect the continuity of its use. [Carillo et al. \(2017\)](#) demonstrated that dependency contributes to users' intention to continue using ubiquitous media platforms due to increased perceived usefulness and fulfillment of expectations. In the current study, college students' trust in social media news, their frequent engagement (liking, reacting), and preference for mobile apps all reflect the elements of this dependency loop. Thus, MDT provides a robust framework for analyzing the relationship between user demographics (e.g., age, gender, education), social media use, trust in news, and behavioral engagement. It offers insight into how digital natives in Coimbatore rely on social media not just for news but as a primary information system embedded in their daily routines, shaping how they perceive the world around them.

Building upon the foundational principles of Media Dependency Theory [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), this study operationalizes the theory through six core constructs: media system activity, audience characteristics, nature of media use, dependency relations, cognitive effects, and behavioral effects. Each construct is reflected through measurable variables within the study's design, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how dependency on social media for news develops among college students. Media system activity is captured by examining the frequency with

which participants access news through social media, mobile apps, and web portals. These platforms represent the evolving media environment in which users habitually engage with news content. By measuring how often respondents use these digital platforms for news, the study evaluates the availability, accessibility, and dominance of certain media systems in users' daily routines.

The construct of audience characteristics is addressed by collecting demographic information such as age, gender, and educational qualification. These variables are essential for understanding how individual traits influence media dependency. Previous research and the study's findings suggest that younger users, particularly those in their teens and early twenties, as well as males and undergraduate students, show higher reliance on social media as a news source. The nature of media use is examined through variables including participants' level of trust in news shared on social networking sites, their primary purpose for using social media (e.g., for news, entertainment, or social interaction), and the types of news they prefer (e.g., entertainment, political, or health-related content). These factors provide insight into the motivational and psychological elements of media use, showing whether social media fulfills users' informational, expressive, or social goals.

The construct of dependency relations is reflected in users' preferences for particular devices and platforms such as mobile phones versus laptops as well as the specific times they access online news, such as during the evening or night. It also includes their self-reported reliance on social media for staying informed. These variables help determine how embedded social media is in users' information-seeking behavior, and how its perceived utility reinforces habitual usage. Cognitive effects are captured through users' perceptions of the credibility of news on social media, as well as their psychological responses such as liking, reacting to, or mentally engaging with news posts. These cognitive responses reflect how trust, belief, and interpretation of information are shaped by frequent media exposure. Finally, behavioral effects are measured through observable actions such as how often users read news, like posts, or share news content on social media. These behaviors represent the outcome of media dependency and demonstrate how cognitive trust translates into practical, repeatable media interaction. Altogether, these constructs provide a robust framework for understanding the formation of media dependency among digital natives. They also informed the structure of the questionnaire and guided the statistical analysis conducted using SPSS, which employed cross-tabulations and chi-square tests to identify significant associations. This approach ensures that Media Dependency Theory is not only theoretically integrated but also practically applied to assess how college students in Coimbatore rely on and interact with social media as a primary source of news.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the extent of dependency on social media as a news source among youth, focusing on how this dependency is influenced by demographic factors, trust in social media news, access behavior, and user engagement. A structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising closed-ended and multiple-choice questions adapted from validated prior studies served as the primary data collection tool, capturing information on participants' demographics, online news access patterns, platform and device usage, and trust and engagement with social media news. The research targeted college students in Coimbatore, India, a demographic selected for their high digital literacy and frequent use of social media. A total of 192 students (83 females, 109 males)

participated, selected via non-probability convenience sampling due to ease of access within college campuses. The study was grounded in Media Dependency Theory [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#), which posits that individuals' reliance on media increases its influence, particularly when media use is tied to needs for information, orientation, or entertainment. Within this framework, the study explored independent variables such as age, gender, education, type of news preferred, device used, time of access, and social media use purpose; dependent variables including trust in social media news, frequency of access, and behavioral engagement (liking, sharing, interacting); and mediating factors like platform type, frequency of platform use, and credibility perception. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26), involving descriptive statistics to summarize general patterns, and cross-tabulations with Chi-square tests (at a significance level of $p < 0.05$) to identify associations between demographic characteristics and dependent variables, thereby uncovering patterns and relationships that align with the theoretical model and research objectives.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The focus of this study was to examine the extent to which individuals rely on social media platforms for news consumption and how this dependency is shaped by demographic factors such as age, gender, and education, along with media access behavior and engagement patterns. The interpretation of results, based on cross-tabulations and chi-square tests, offers strong support for Media Dependency Theory (MDT), which posits that increased reliance on a medium enhances its influence on user perceptions and behaviors.

Table 1

Table 1 Demographics and Trust in Social Media News				
Crosstab Variables	χ^2 (Chi-Square)	df	p-value	Interpretation
Age \times Belief in Social Media News	22.201	6	.001	Trust varies significantly with age; younger users show more trust.
Gender \times Belief in Social Media News	22.975	2	.000	Males trust social media news more than females.
Education \times Belief in Social Media News	21.816	6	.001	UG-educated respondents trust social media news more.

[Table 1](#) shows that age, gender, and education qualification are significantly associated with belief in news from social networking sites. Age is a key factor, as younger age groups particularly those below 18 and between 19–24 are more likely to trust news from social media compared to older individuals ($\chi^2 = 22.201$, $p = .001$). Gender also plays a role; males are significantly more likely than females to believe in the credibility of news shared on social networking sites ($\chi^2 = 22.975$, $p = .000$). Furthermore, education level influences trust, with undergraduate (UG) students showing greater belief in social media news than those with higher qualifications ($\chi^2 = 21.816$, $p = .001$).

Table 2

Table 2 Media Usage Behaviour and Dependency				
Crosstab Variables	χ^2 (Chi-Square)	df	p-value	Interpretation
Age \times Frequency of Reading News	24.568	9	0.003	Reading frequency differs by age; youth read more.

Gender × Device Used	14.991	3	0.002	Males favor mobile; females use laptops slightly more.
Age × Device Used	26.446	9	0.002	Younger respondents use mobile more.
Age × Type of Online News	40.403	18	0.002	Preferred news type varies with age.

Table 2 highlights how media usage behaviors vary across demographic groups. Age is significantly related to how often individuals read news, with younger respondents tending to read news more frequently ($\chi^2 = 24.568$, $p = .003$). In terms of device usage, younger users predominantly use mobile phones, while older users show a more varied device preference ($\chi^2 = 26.446$, $p = .002$). Gender differences are also present, with males favoring mobile phones more than females, who use laptops more frequently ($\chi^2 = 14.991$, $p = .002$). Additionally, preferred types of news differ by age, with younger audiences preferring entertainment and pop culture news over political or business news ($\chi^2 = 40.403$, $p = .002$).

Table 3

Table 3 Access Patterns and Platform Dependency				
Crosstab Variables	χ^2 (Chi-Square)	df	p-value	Interpretation
Age × Time of Access	31.345	12	.002	Youth access news mostly at night.
Age × Mobile App Use	34.086	12	.001	Youth depend more on mobile apps.
Age × social media for News	31.035	9	.000	Youth use social media more for news.

Table 3 presents the access patterns and platform dependency. Time of day for accessing online news varies by age, with younger users tending to access news more in the evening and at night ($\chi^2 = 31.345$, $p = .002$). Similarly, younger users show higher dependency on mobile apps for news access, using them more frequently than older groups ($\chi^2 = 34.086$, $p = .001$). The frequency of using social media specifically for news is also significantly higher among younger age groups ($\chi^2 = 31.035$, $p = .000$), indicating their strong reliance on digital platforms.

Table 4

Table 4 Engagement with News Content on Social Media				
Crosstab Variables	χ^2 (Chi-Square)	df	p-value	Interpretation
Age × Liking News Posts	30.029	12	0.003	Younger users engage (like) more often.
Gender × Liking News Posts	15.337	4	0.004	Males engage slightly more.
Education × Liking a Post on social media	22.518	9	0.007	Higher education relates to higher engagement.

Table 4 focuses on engagement with news content on social media. There is a significant association between age and the frequency of liking news-related posts, with younger users engaging more frequently ($\chi^2 = 30.029$, $p = .003$). Males are also more likely to engage with news posts than females ($\chi^2 = 15.337$, $p = .004$), and education level affects interaction, with undergraduate users liking posts more often than their postgraduate peers ($\chi^2 = 22.518$, $p = .007$).

Table 5

Table 5 Trust and Media Dependency Behaviours				
Crosstab Variables	χ^2 (Chi-Square)	df	p-value	Interpretation
Trust \times social media for News	24.564	6	.000	More trust = more usage of social media for news.
Trust \times Liking News Posts	39.240	8	.000	Trust increases engagement (liking behaviour).
Trust \times Mobile App Use for News	36.695	8	.000	More trust = more frequent use of mobile apps.
Trust \times Web Portal Use for News	27.453	8	.001	Trust relates to broader platform use.

Table 5 explores the link between trust in social media news and media dependency behaviours. Those who believe in the credibility of social media news are significantly more likely to use social media platforms to access news ($\chi^2 = 24.564$, $p = .000$), frequently use mobile apps for this purpose ($\chi^2 = 36.695$, $p = .000$), and engage more actively with news content, such as liking or reacting to posts ($\chi^2 = 39.240$, $p = .000$). These results affirm that higher trust in social media strengthens user dependency on these platforms for news consumption, as predicted by Media Dependency Theory.

6. DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how individuals depend on social media platforms for news consumption and how this dependency varies by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education level, as well as by frequency of access and engagement behavior. The findings strongly support the assumptions of Media Dependency Theory (MDT), which posits that the more people rely on media to fulfill their informational, affective, or social needs, The higher the media's potential to affect people's thoughts and behaviors [Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur \(1976\)](#). The study revealed some significant findings that younger age groups, particularly those under 24, are significantly more likely to trust news from social networking sites and use them frequently for news access, however, this finding contrasts with broader international research that identifies a paradox: youth often access social media for news but simultaneously express lower trust in its content [Park et al. \(2020\)](#), [Nielsen and Schröder \(2014\)](#). This discrepancy may reflect regional differences in platform familiarity, local media environments, or perceived relevance of peer-shared content. In the context of Coimbatore's digitally active student population, trust could stem from habitual exposure and peer validation within social networks. This aligns with previous research by Pew Research Center [Shearer and Mitchell \(2021\)](#), which found that nearly half of U.S. adults aged 18–29 often get their news from social media platforms, reflecting a generational shift in news consumption habits. Similarly, [Newman et al. \(2023\)](#) in the Digital News Report highlighted that younger users are increasingly bypassing traditional news websites in favor of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, driven by mobile convenience and algorithmic personalization. Additionally, this study found gender differences in trust and engagement, with males more likely than females to trust and interact with news content on social media. This supports [Tsfati and Cappella \(2003\)](#) argument that media trust is not evenly distributed across audiences and can vary by sociocultural factors, including gender and age. [Tandoc et al. \(2019\)](#) also emphasize that men are more likely to share and engage with

political and hard news on social platforms, potentially explaining the higher interaction rates found among male respondents. Education level also significantly influenced trust, with undergraduate students showing more reliance on social media for news than those with postgraduate qualifications. While this aligns with [Flanagin and Metzger \(2007\)](#) findings that lower levels of education may correlate with higher trust in user-generated content, this does not necessarily reflect a lack of critical thinking. Instead, the difference may stem from other factors, such as the higher frequency of social media usage among undergraduates, greater exposure to peer-shared content, or their tendency to value immediacy and accessibility over traditional verification norms. Therefore, trust in social media news may reflect platform familiarity and usage patterns rather than a simple lack of media literacy. In this context, educational background may mediate how individuals evaluate the credibility of information from digital sources. Patterns of news consumption in this study show that younger users not only trust but also actively engage with social media news, accessing it during evenings and nights and frequently using mobile apps. This echoes [Hermida et al. \(2012\)](#), who proposed that mobile social news consumption is transforming users into “prosumers” who not only receive but also interact with news content. Engagement metrics like liking, sharing, and commenting reinforce users’ dependence on platforms for not just information but also social and emotional connection. Importantly, this study found that those who trust social media news are significantly more likely to access it regularly and engage behaviorally by liking and reacting to news posts, suggesting a reinforcing feedback loop between trust and dependency. This affirms [Loges and Ball-Rokeach \(1993\)](#) extension of MDT, which emphasizes how trust and perception of media reliability increase users’ media-system dependency, particularly during periods of informational uncertainty or institutional distrust. In sum, the findings of this study provide empirical support for the growing body of research that identifies social media as a dominant and trusted source of news among younger audiences, shaped by demographic and behavioral factors. While these results are specific to a student population in Coimbatore, they still raise important implications for media literacy, journalism practice, and platform accountability especially within youth-dominated digital environments.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into the perception and usage of social media as a news source among youth, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study employed a non-probability convenience sampling method, which may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the selected sample of college students in Coimbatore. The overrepresentation of youth and students also means the findings may not reflect the behaviors or attitudes of older or working populations. Second, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in recall. Third, although the study explored behavioral engagement (e.g., liking or reading news posts), it did not incorporate deeper content analysis or qualitative methods that could capture motivations, sentiments, or the impact of misinformation more robustly. Finally, the study’s cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe changes in media dependency over time, particularly in rapidly evolving digital environments.

8. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the perception and dependency of youth on social media platforms as a source of news, with a focus on college students in Coimbatore. Grounded in Media Dependency Theory, the research explored how demographic factors such as age, gender, and education alongside behavioral engagement and trust, shape users' reliance on social media for news consumption. Among the surveyed college students in Coimbatore, younger users particularly those under 24 showed significantly higher trust and dependency on social media for news compared to older respondents in the sample. Males and undergraduate students also demonstrated greater usage frequency and engagement. Behavioral indicators such as liking news posts, using mobile apps, and accessing news during the evening or night further emphasized habitual and affective media dependency. Media Dependency Theory was successfully operationalized through constructs such as media system activity, cognitive effects, and behavioral responses, and the theory's premise was validated by the data. SPSS analysis, including cross-tabulations and chi-square tests, showed statistically significant relationships between demographics and trust, usage frequency, engagement, and platform preference. In conclusion, the study underscores the transformative role of social media in shaping news habits among youth. As digital platforms continue to evolve, it becomes essential to promote media literacy and critical thinking, especially for young audiences who are both highly exposed and highly influenced by online information. Future research could extend this work by including longitudinal studies, diverse populations, or mixed methods to capture deeper nuances in digital news behavior.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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