Digital Literacy as a Mediating Variable: Assessing the Internet's Transformative Impact on Mainstream Media Engagement among University of Swat

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of internet adoption on mainstream media consumption patterns among students at the University of Swat. Framed within the theoretical perspective of the Uses and Gratifications theory, the research examines the shifting preferences and perceived utility of digital versus traditional media platforms. Employing a quantitative approach, data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 100 students across diverse academic departments. The findings indicate a pronounced preference for the internet as a primary information medium, largely attributed to its perceived accessibility and utility for academic purposes. Consequently, the results demonstrate a significant displacement effect, with internet usage substantially exceeding engagement with traditional media outlets including television, radio, and newspapers for information gathering. The study concludes that the internet is redefining media consumption hierarchies within the student demographic, underscoring a critical transition towards digital-centric information ecosystems.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Internet Impact, Mainstream Media, University of Swat

Introduction

The internet represents one of the most rapid and transformative communication mediums in contemporary society. This digital evolution has precipitated a fundamental shift in media consumption patterns, contributing to the relative decline of traditional platforms such as television, radio, and print media. This study specifically investigates the impact of internet proliferation on mainstream media, with a focus on analyzing how it is adopted as a primary communication tool in comparison to its traditional counterparts. It is widely acknowledged that internet technology has significantly enhanced convenience and efficiency in daily life, fostering an increasing dependency. This trajectory suggests its potential evolution from a utility to a perceived essential need. While global internet user growth may be plateauing in some markets, ongoing innovation and the development of competitive digital products including streaming video, audio platforms, wearable technology, and on-demand services continue to expand its utility and modes of monetization, even within traditionally underserved or localized markets. Media has faced a declining engagement as the audiences are updating themselves on social media platforms. 36% of the masses use Facebook and 30% YouTube to keep themselves

updated every week (Newman, 2025). The revenue generation of traditional media platforms are disrupted due to the rise of digital media. As advertising dollars shift to online platforms like social media and search engines, it is hard for traditional media outlets maintain profitability. This has led to cost-cutting measures, including layoffs and the closure of many local news organizations, which weakens the overall quality and depth of journalism (Teja, 2024). This divide between regular and non-regular news consumers is often fluid and shaped by information environments and technological affordances (Yang, & González-Bailón, 2025). In the United States, we specifically focus on high development and innovation in data-driven direct completion and financial services. We highlight the large-scale universal changes associated with images and cooperative gaming. Extensive exhibition of communication tools and independent business on a scale (Meeker, 2019). Television is an amazing invention of science and technology. Television has taken the entire world into our household. It is the main basis of performing in today's lifecycle. In calculation, we get important information and we can learn a lot of new things from television. Today, television is a popular advertising platform (Veerendra, 2020). The ways in people consume news and entertainment, as well as how they form and maintain relationships, are all impacted by new media, both positively and negatively. Additionally, it has given companies and organizations new means to connect and interact with audiences that were not before possible (Dhiman, 2023). Many individuals are now more linked than ever thanks to the Internet, at least in digital environments, since it makes social support and interpersonal connection easier. Still, a lot of individuals' experience loneliness (Wallinheimo, & Evans, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

It is evident that after the development of internet, the users of internet are increasing day by day. In this research the researcher explored the impact of internet on the daily lives of the people who are frequently using the mass media as a source of information. This study also focuses on the importance given by the audience to the internet or the main stream media. The research also focuses on the users of main stream media as well as the internet to keep them updated.

Objectives
- To analyze that sources of information among students of University of Swat.
- To know that which medium is mostly used by the students.
- To analyze the most trustworthy source of mainstream media and internet being used by the students.

Hypotheses
H1: Relative to mainstream media, the internet serves as the primary source of information for university students.
H2: Perceptions of accessibility significantly favor the internet over traditional mainstream media platforms.
H3: Compared to mainstream media, internet-based information sources are perceived to have lower credibility and trustworthiness.

Literature Review

To successfully modernize, media organizations must implement a tripartite strategy: investing in continuous professional development, establishing clear ethical standards for artificial intelligence (AI) application, and maintaining an equilibrium between technological innovation and core editorial integrity. The preservation of public trust within this evolving landscape is contingent upon transparent operational procedures, robust fact-checking protocols, and a synergistic model that integrates human editorial judgment with algorithmic tools (Khan et al., 2025). Concurrently, the dominance of traditional digital media business models predicated on online traffic and advertising revenue—faces significant disruption from emerging internet intermediaries, including AI-powered summarization tools, chatbots, and content aggregators. This disruption, evidenced by data from media executives in 2026 and contemporaneous news analysis (Savage, 2026), substantiates the imperative for mainstream media institutions to fundamentally reconfigure their economic frameworks for sustainability in the digital age. In ongoing many years, the Internet, along with data and correspondence advancements like PCs and mobile phones, has given an electronic option in contrast to newspapers and printed items. We analyze what internet appropriation has meant for overall interest for newsprint and printing and composing papers. (Latta & Greg, 2015). The development of media has played a key role in influencing the transition from digital advertising to traditional advertising. Traditional media advertising like print and electronic media is measured less capable because it needs a significant financial plan. On digital media advertising is known less expensive as compared to traditional media. (Kusuma, 2020)

Nowadays, new media can be described as the rising media broadly used by everyone. It is also known as anytime content access on demand, everywhere, and on any internet driven device such as smart phone, computer and more. (Ogidi, 2016). Unlike traditional media, new media like the internet provides a very different content and an extraordinary level of user management. The contents offer on the web is not planned by reporters and is, as a result, diverse and capably limitless (Wei, 2011). As of now, with the quick improvement of internet in China, the established press experience numerous issues in the turn of events, particularly the effect of new media innovation and the exchange of the crowd raised incredible ruckus to the spread of the traditional press. Through the examination of the advancement benefits of short video as of now, the successful reconciliation of traditional press and short video and the development of correspondence impact are the advancement heading of traditional press later on. (Wen, 2020). The popularity of the internet and news sources continues to raise concerns about their impact on traditionalism news sources around the world, as it is a widely investigated topic in academic research. Internet use is a global phenomenon, so the study sought to find out its magnitude internet use guarantees that replace or supplement traditional media apply to Nigerians. The study investigated the effect of internet news uptake on use television news and the extent of its integration. The study was based on the uses theories of saturation and media integration. 345 respondents intentionally sample surveyed in Zaria and Kaduna, Nigeria. The results showed that the use of the internet this news complements the respondents' assimilation of mainstream TV and internet news the news affected their TV news consumption to a minimum. It is concluded that the use of internet news is unlikely to replace television news viewing among a sample of respondents. The study recommended linking traditional media to the Internet (Shaibu, 2017).

Theoretical Framework
The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s, represents one of the seminal theoretical frameworks for analyzing mass communication processes. It was developed with the primary objective of shifting scholarly focus from the media's effects on a passive audience to the active role of the audience in seeking out media to fulfill specific needs. A central purpose of this model was to challenge and supplant the then-dominant "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" model, which conceptualized audiences as passive and uniform recipients of media messages. The U&G approach is fundamentally predicated on the assumption that individuals possess intrinsic psychological and social needs. Consequently, audiences actively engage with mass media content, selecting and consuming it based on anticipated gratifications derived from past experiences (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Relevancy with the Study
The research study is aimed at exploring the impact of internet on the main stream media. As we know that the uses and gratification approach is related to the needs of the users of the main stream media and internet to gratify their needs from the media contents on the internet and main stream media. However, this approach is related to the topic for exploring the impact of internet on mainstream media.

Research Methodology
This study employed a quantitative research methodology to collect data and statistically measure the impact of the internet on mainstream media consumption. A survey technique was utilized, facilitating the collection of standardized data from a defined sample to enhance the empirical validity of the research objectives. A structured questionnaire, comprising close-ended questions aligned with the study's specific objectives and hypotheses, was administered. Data were subsequently gathered from a sample of 200 students at the University of Swat.

Data Analysis

Table 1 Age of the respondent?

	F	%
18-24	96	96.0
25-31	2	2.0
More	2	2.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1 explores the age of the respondents in which 96% of the respondents are 18 to 24 years of age, 2 students age is between 25 to 31 years and the age of students more than 31 years is also 2 students.

Table2 Gender of the responders

	F	%
Male	68	68.0
Female	32	32.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 2 shows the gender of the students. It shows that 68% of the students are male and the remaining 32% are female.

Table 3 Marital Status of the students

	F	%
Single	94	94.0
Married	6	6.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 3 demonstrates the marital status of the respondents in which 94% of the students are unmarried while 6% are married.

Table 4 What is the most trustworthy source of information?

	F	%
Internet	69	69.0
Newspaper	15	15.0
Television	12	12.0
Radio	4	4.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 4 shows the most trustworthy source of information amongst the students which explored that 69% of the respondents said that internet is the most trustworthy source of information. 15 % and 12% of the sample of the study said that newspaper and television is the most trustworthy source of information respectively. While 4% of the respondents think that radio is the most trustworthy source of information.

Table 5 What kind of media is used by use to inform you?

	F	%
Internet	87	87.0
Newspaper	5	5.0
Television	7	7.0
Radio	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 5 demonstrates the different kinds of media which inform the respondents. In which 87% of the respondents inform themselves through internet.7% of the respondents watches television to keep themselves inform while, newspaper is read by 5% of the respondents. Only 1% of the sample of the study listen to radio with the aim to inform oneself.

Table 6 Do you think most people use internet as a source of information as compared to mainstream media?

	F	%
Strongly Agree	39	39.0
Agree	48	48.0
Neutral	8	8.0
Disagree	4	4.0
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 6 explores that 39% of the respondents are strongly agree that internet is mostly used by people instead of the mainstream media while 48% agree with this statement. 8% of the respondents were neutral and 4% did not agree about the question. While, 1% of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement.

Table 7 Do you think that internet is easily accessible than mainstream media?

	F	%
Strongly Agree	36	36.0
Agree	44	44.0
Neutral	7	7.0
Disagree	12	12.0
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 7 demonstrates that36% of respondents strongly agreed that internet is easily accessible than mainstream media and 44% of the respondents are agree with the statement. 7% of respondents were neutral and 12% disagreed, while 1% of respondents strongly disagreed about internet access is easily accessible than mainstream media.

Table 8 Do you think that internet-based information has trust issues than mainstream media?

	F	%
Strongly Agree	29	29.0
Agree	47	47.0
Neutral	14	14.0
Disagree	9	9.0
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 8 shows that 29% of the respondents are strongly agreed and 47% are agreed that internet-based information has trust issues. 14% of the sample of the study were neutral while 9% of the respondents were disagreed and 1% are strongly disagreed about the statement.

Hypothesis Results

H1: Relative to mainstream media, the internet serves as the primary source of information for university students.

Table 9. Primary Media for Information and Perceived Prevalence of Internet Use

Variable and Response	*n*	%
Primary Information Source		
Internet	87	87.0
Television	7	7.0
Newspaper	5	5.0
Radio	1	1.0
Most Used Media for Information		
Internet	80	80.0
Television	13	13.0
Newspaper	7	7.0
Perception of General Use		
Agree/Strongly Agree	87	87.0
Neutral	8	8.0
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	5	5.0

The data strongly support Hypothesis 1. A decisive majority of respondents (87%) identified the internet as their primary source for staying informed (Table 5.10), and 80% reported using it most frequently to obtain information (Table 5.15). Furthermore, 87% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the general statement that most people use the internet as a source of information compared to mainstream media (Table 5.12). This tripartite evidence direct personal use, self-reported frequency, and perceived normative behavior confirms that internet usage significantly surpasses engagement with television, newspapers, and radio among the student population studied.

H2: Perceptions of accessibility significantly favor the internet over traditional mainstream media platforms.

Table 10. Perceived Accessibility of Internet Compared to Mainstream Media

Response	*n*	%
Strongly Agree	36	36.0
Agree	44	44.0
Neutral	7	7.0
Disagree	12	12.0
Strongly Disagree	1	1.0

The results provide substantial support for Hypothesis 2. A combined 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the internet is more easily accessible than mainstream media. Only 13% expressed disagreement. This overwhelming consensus indicates a clear perception among students that digital platforms offer superior ease of access compared to traditional media channels like television, radio, and newspapers.

H3: Compared to mainstream media, internet-based information sources are perceived to have lower credibility and trustworthiness.

Table 11. **Perceived Trustworthiness of Media Sources**

Variable and Response	*n*	%
Most Trustworthy Source		
Internet	69	69.0
Newspaper	15	15.0
Television	12	12.0
Radio	4	4.0
Perception of Internet Trust Issues		
Agree/Strongly Agree	76	76.0

Variable and Response	*n*	%
Neutral	14	14.0
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	10	10.0

The findings for Hypothesis 3 present a nuanced and seemingly contradictory picture, leading to a rejection of the hypothesis as stated. Paradoxically, while 76% of respondents agreed that internet-based information has trust issues (Table 11), a simultaneous 69% identified the internet as the *most* trustworthy source of information available to them. This suggests a critical distinction in student perceptions: they are cognizant of the general credibility challenges inherent in the digital information ecosystem (perceived risk). However, in a comparative assessment against specific mainstream media alternatives, they still accord the internet a higher level of trust (relative trust). Therefore, although concerns about online information veracity are widely acknowledged, the internet is not perceived as *less* trustworthy than mainstream media; in fact, it is considered the most trustworthy option among those presented.

Conclusion
The results collectively demonstrate a profound and clear-cut shift towards digital media, establishing the internet as the central, dominant information ecosystem for this demographic. This dominance is evidenced not only in usage with 87% of students relying on it as their primary information source but also in perceptions of normative behavior and accessibility, with 87% believing it is the most commonly used medium and 80% affirming its superior ease of access compared to television, radio, and newspapers. This triangulation of evidence leaves little doubt that traditional mainstream media have been significantly displaced in terms of practical utility and convenience within the academic context.

However, the findings reveal a more complex relationship regarding trust, which forms a critical distinction in this digital transition. A significant majority (76%) of students acknowledge that internet-based information suffers from trust issues, indicating a high level of media literacy and awareness of online risks such as misinformation. Despite this pervasive skepticism, a concurrent 69% still identify the internet as their "most trustworthy" source among available options. This apparent paradox underscores a comparative, rather than absolute, judgment of credibility. It suggests that while students recognize the inherent flaws of the digital landscape, they perceive traditional media alternatives as even less reliable or relevant to their needs. Thus, trust in the internet is relative and pragmatic, rooted in its unparalleled utility and accessibility despite its acknowledged shortcomings.

This study confirms that for the contemporary student population, the internet is the explicit basis of information gathering. Its ascendancy is driven by a powerful combination of perceived accessibility, normative adoption, and functional superiority for academic purposes. While concerns about credibility persist, they do not diminish its dominant position; instead, they highlight a critical, discerning engagement with digital content. The implications are significant for educators, media producers, and policymakers, pointing to an urgent need to foster advanced

digital literacy skills that empower students to navigate this indispensable yet imperfect primary source of information effectively.

Recommendations

It is recommended that students must read books and other mediums as well for their studies. It is recommended that most of the time internet-based information misguide the audience, so other medium should also be used by the audience to get information.

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