RESEARCH PAPER

From Screens to Livelihoods, The Social and Economic Dimensions of Digital Media Use in India

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ABSTRACT

Purpose for the study
India is the world's second-largest online market after China, yet there have been studies on digital media's usage but not on its impact its affect of economic and social life of the people. Most studies measure usage frequency or focus on a single platform, also most of the study is there have not been many studies based on usage of digital media in India. This study examines the social, informational and economic dimensions of digital media use together, using Indian primary data.
Design/methodology/approach
I have used qualitative and quantitative methodology to get to the conclusion, fir the same a descriptive, cross-sectional survey was conducted with 500 adult digital media users (253 women, 247 men) in the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Respondents were selected through multistage stratified random sampling across Delhi's 11 districts and five colony types. Data from a structured, pilot-tested questionnaire were analysed in IBM SPSS v22 using chi-square tests, t-tests, Pearson correlation, one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD, and multiple regression.
Findings
All five null hypotheses were rejected. Frequency and duration of use differed significantly by age and gender ($p < .001$), with 18–25-year-olds the most engaged. Digital media use correlated positively with social connectivity and with awareness of current affairs, health and safety. Knowledge, professional use and entertainment together explained 42.5% of the variance in everyday decision-making. Digital economic activity explained 74.2% of the variance in self-reported financial wellbeing.
Originality/value: The study offers a multidimensional, India-specific evidence base. It links digital media use to social and economic outcomes within one framework, and informs policymakers, educators and platforms working on digital inclusion.
Keywords: digital media; social media; digital economy; financial wellbeing; social connectivity; digital divide; India

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I. INTRODUCTIO.N

In less than a decade, the smartphone has become India's newspaper, classroom, marketplace and bank. Digital media now shapes how Indians communicate, learn, decide and earn, across age groups, income levels and regions. India is the second-largest online market after China, with more than 574 million active users. At the start of 2023, about 692 million people used the internet, a penetration rate of roughly 48%. Mobile connections stood at 1.10 billion, about 77% of the population.

Two forces drove this growth. The first is policy: the Digital India programme, launched in 2015, and BharatNet, which is extending broadband to rural areas. The second is the market: low-cost smartphones and some of the world's cheapest mobile data. Indians now spend about 2.4 hours a day on social media and video

platforms. Regional-language platforms such as ShareChat and Moj are helping rural users join the digital mainstream.

The economic stakes are large. Indian e-commerce was worth about US$75 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach US$200 billion by 2026, a compound annual growth rate of 20–22%. Online advertising is projected to grow at 15.6% a year, from ₹41,000 crore in 2023 to ₹85,000 crore in 2028. The gig and creator economy is expanding. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) apps such as Google Pay and WhatsApp Pay are extending financial inclusion to households that were previously outside formal finance.

The social stakes are equally large. Around 398 million young Indians use social media. For them it offers self-expression, identity formation and peer connection. It also brings risks, including anxiety, low self-esteem and poor concentration (Chassiakos et al., 2016; Uhls et al., 2022). Misinformation, privacy breaches and cybercrime have grown alongside usage.

1.1 Need for the study

Four concerns motivate this study. First, nearly half of India's population is still offline, and inclusive access policy needs evidence on who benefits and how. Second, heavy use among young people raises questions about mental health and academic performance. Third, small businesses, gig work, e-commerce and digital payments are changing livelihoods, but their effect on household financial wellbeing is rarely measured. Fourth, problems of trust and safety are growing with usage.

The research gap is clear. Most studies examine only usage frequency or a single platform. Few examine the social, cognitive, informational and economic dimensions of digital media together, and fewer still do so with Indian primary data. This study addresses that gap through a stratified survey of 500 digital media users in Delhi.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review draws on about 90 studies published between 2001 and 2024. They are organised into five themes: social impact, economic impact, political dynamics, challenges, and future trends. Table 1 summarises the themes.

2.1 Social impact of digital media

Early sociological work framed the internet as a force that reshapes social relations, community and inequality (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Later scholars argued that digital media needs its own theory, because it changes how information, relationships and power are organised (Schroeder, 2018). Ethnographic approaches show that these changes are cultural as well as technical (Coleman, 2010).

Recent studies link digital media to identity formation, youth activism, digital literacy and social capital (Zhang et al., 2024; Kolotouchkina et al., 2023; Globokar, 2018). In the Indian context, Nedungadi et al. (2018) argue that Digital India can include rural communities only if a structured digital literacy framework is in place. Fuchs (2014) adds a critical view: social media users also act as unpaid "prosumers" whose activity creates value for platforms.

2.2 Economic impact and the digital economy

Bukht and Heeks (2019) provide a widely used framework for defining and measuring the digital economy. Building on such frameworks, studies show that digital media supports micro and small enterprises, strengthens SME financial health and contributes to economic growth (Sruthi et al., 2023; Gosal & Nainggolan, 2023; Pang et al., 2022). Philbin et al. (2022) show how digital transformation can help SMEs achieve sustainable development. Akhtar et al. (2023) highlight social media analytics as a tool in the digital economy. Shukla et al. (2020) identify digital financial literacy as an important enabler of these benefits.

2.3 Political dynamics

A third strand examines the mediatisation of politics and online public discussion (Nwaoboli, 2023; Amoncar, 2020). Studies in India and South Asia examine how digital platforms shape political communication (Downey & Neyazi, 2014; Mushtaq & Baig, 2016). Howard (2005) draws attention to the political economy of media ownership, which shapes whose voices are amplified online.

2.4 Challenges and issues

The literature consistently identifies four challenges. The digital divide excludes those without access or skills (Singh & Zarger, 2021). Misinformation undermines trust, although Guess et al. (2020) show that a digital media literacy intervention improved discernment between mainstream and false news in both the United States and India. Heavy use is associated with poorer sleep and wellbeing among children and adolescents (Chassiakos et al., 2016). Overuse among young people remains a concern for families and educators (Uhls et al., 2022; Sharma & Banerjee, 2022).

2.5 Future trends

Forward-looking studies focus on digital transformation (Kraus et al., 2021), the Internet of Things, and AI-driven and influencer marketing (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Lupton (2020) and Evans et al. (2022) point to digital media's growing role in health and behaviour change.

Table 1. Thematic summary of the literature

Theme	Key studies	Main takeaway
Social impact	Zhang et al. (2024); Kolotouchkina et al. (2023); Globokar (2018); Nedungadi et al. (2018); Schroeder (2018); Fuchs (2014)	Digital media shapes identity, youth activism, digital literacy and social capital. Digital India can include rural communities if a literacy framework is in place.
Economic impact	Sruthi et al. (2023); Akhtar et al. (2023); Gosal & Nainggolan (2023); Pang et al. (2022); Bukht & Heeks (2019); Shukla et al. (2020)	Digital media supports micro and small businesses, SME financial health and growth. Digital financial literacy is a key enabler.
Political dynamics	Nwaoboli (2023); Amoncar (2020); Mushtaq & Baig (2016); Downey & Neyazi (2014); Howard (2005)	Mediatisation of politics, online public discussion, and the political economy of media ownership.
Challenges	Uhls et al. (2022); Sharma & Banerjee (2022); Singh & Zarger (2021); Guess et al. (2020); Chassiakos et al. (2016)	Digital divide, misinformation, effects on sleep and wellbeing, and overuse by youth.
Future trends	Philbin et al. (2022); Dwivedi et al. (2021); Kraus et al. (2021); Lupton (2020)	Digital transformation, IoT, and AI-driven and influencer marketing.

2.6 Research gap

The review reveals a pattern. Most studies examine one dimension, such as wellbeing, commerce or politics, or one platform. Very few test social and economic outcomes within a single framework using Indian primary data. Evidence linking digital economic activity to household financial wellbeing is especially thin. This study is designed to fill these gaps.

3. OBJECTIVES, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Objectives

1. To study the magnitude and degree of penetration of digital media in India.
2. To assess the impact of digital media on people's lives.
3. To assess the impact of social media on people's lives.
4. To compare the roles of social media and digital media in connecting individuals with social issues.
5. To study the growth and performance of the digital media industries.

3.2 Conceptual framework

The framework links two sets of independent variables to a set of outcomes, while holding contextual factors constant.

- Independent variables (social factors): age, gender, education, occupation, income and zone of residence.
- Independent variables (economic factors): employment or economic activity, entrepreneurial activity, and monthly online spending.
- Dependent variables: frequency and duration of use, platform preference, perceived utility, knowledge and awareness, social connectivity, decision-making, and financial wellbeing.
- Control variables: location, digital literacy and internet access.

The framework reflects the review's central insight: social and economic effects of digital media are connected and should be studied together.

3.3 Hypotheses

- H_o1: Age and gender have no significant association with the frequency or duration of digital media use.
- H_o2: Knowledge, educational or professional use, and entertainment do not significantly predict decision-making.
- H_o3: Digital media use has no significant relationship with social connectivity or awareness.
- H_o4: Awareness does not differ significantly by preferred media type.
- H_o5: Digital economic activity has no significant relationship with financial wellbeing.

3.4 Assumptions

The study assumes that respondents reported honestly. It treats Delhi's social and economic diversity as a reasonable microcosm of urban India. It also treats Likert-scale data as suitable for parametric tests, a common practice in social science research.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

The study used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach. This design suits the aim of measuring patterns of use and testing associations between digital media use and social and economic outcomes at one point in time.

4.2 Population, sample and sampling

The population comprised digital media users aged 18 and above living in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. The final sample was 500 respondents (253 women and 247 men). This size gives a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error.

Respondents were selected through multistage stratified random sampling in three stages:

1. Stratification by Delhi's 11 revenue districts.
2. Stratification by colony type: planned colonies, urban villages, resettlement colonies, unauthorised colonies and slums.
3. Random selection of households from Resident Welfare Association (RWA) lists, with one respondent per household.

Stratifying by colony type ensured that low-income and informal settlements were represented alongside planned middle-class areas.

4.3 Research tool

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended and Likert-scale items. It had five sections: demographics, usage patterns, social effects, economic effects, and privacy and trust. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 50 respondents and refined before the main survey.

4.4 Data collection

A mixed collection mode was used to reduce coverage bias. Urban, literate respondents completed the questionnaire through Google Forms. Respondents in low-income areas were interviewed face to face.

4.5 Data analysis

Data were entered in Microsoft Excel and analysed in IBM SPSS v22. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) summarised the sample and usage patterns. Inferential tests were matched to each hypothesis: chi-square tests, one-sample and paired t-tests, Pearson correlation, one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests, and multiple regression.

4.6 Ethical considerations

All respondents gave informed consent and were told they could withdraw at any time. Responses were anonymised and stored securely. The study received ethics clearance from the university.

5. RESULTS

All five null hypotheses were rejected. Table 2 summarises the tests; the subsections below report each result.

Table 2. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Test	Key statistics	Decision
H_o1: Age and gender vs. frequency and duration of use	Chi-square	Age: χ^2 = 172.32 and 142.96; gender: χ^2 = 42.47 and 38.09; all $p < .001$	Rejected
H_o2: Knowledge, professional use and entertainment vs. decision-making	Multiple regression	$R^2 = .425$, $F = 121.98$, $p < .001$	Rejected
H_o3: Use vs. social connectivity and awareness	Pearson r; paired t-test	$r = .210$ (connectivity), .435 (current affairs), .257 (health and safety); $t = -3.47$, $p = .001$	Rejected
H_o4: Awareness by preferred media type	One-way ANOVA, Tukey HSD	Health/social $F = 15.79$; civic $F = 2.77$ ($p = .041$); consumer $F = 33.90$	Rejected

Hypothesis	Test	Key statistics	Decision
H_o5: Digital economic activity vs. financial wellbeing	Pearson r; multiple regression	$r = .293$ and .280; $R^2 = .742$, $F = 714.88$, $p < .001$	Rejected

5.2 Perceived benefits and decision-making

Respondents rated time-saving as the most important benefit of digital media (M = 2.86), followed by knowledge (M = 2.74) and entertainment (M = 2.73). Digital media also supported learning: 47% of respondents said it gave them better access to learning resources, and 44.2% used it to learn new skills.

A multiple regression tested whether knowledge, educational or professional use, and entertainment predicted decision-making about shopping, lifestyle and work. The model was significant ($F = 121.98$, $p < .001$) and explained 42.5% of the variance ($R^2 = .425$). H_o2 was rejected.

5.3 Social connectivity and awareness

Digital media use correlated positively with social connectivity ($r = .210$), awareness of current affairs ($r = .435$), and awareness of health and safety ($r = .257$). The strongest link was with current affairs. A paired t-test also showed a significant difference ($t = -3.47$, $p = .001$). H_o3 was rejected.

5.4 Awareness by preferred media type

One-way ANOVA showed that awareness differed significantly by respondents' preferred media type. The largest differences were in consumer awareness ($F = 33.90$) and health and social awareness ($F = 15.79$). Civic awareness also differed, though more modestly ($F = 2.77$, $p = .041$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests identified which media groups differed. H_o4 was rejected.

5.5 Digital economic activity and financial wellbeing

Digital economic activity correlated positively with financial wellbeing ($r = .293$ and $r = .280$). In the regression model, digital economic activity explained 74.2% of the variance in self-reported financial wellbeing ($R^2 = .742$, $F = 714.88$, $p < .001$). This was the strongest result in the study. H_o5 was rejected.

6. DISCUSSION

The results show that digital media in urban India is no longer just a channel for entertainment. It works as social and economic infrastructure, shaping how people learn, stay informed, make decisions and earn.

6.1 A young, engaged, but unequal user base

The strong associations of age and gender with use confirm that digital media's reach is uneven, even within a single city. The high engagement of 18–25-year-olds supports concerns about youth overuse raised by Chassiakos et al. (2016) and Uhls et al. (2022). The higher use among women in this sample is notable. It suggests that, in an urban setting with affordable access, digital media may be narrowing some gender gaps rather than widening them. This finding deserves testing in rural settings, where the gender digital divide is usually wider (Singh & Zarger, 2021).

6.2 From information to decisions

Respondents valued time-saving above knowledge and entertainment. This points to a utilitarian relationship with digital media, built around convenience in shopping, payments and services. The regression result shows that this utility translates into decisions: knowledge, professional use and entertainment together explained 42.5% of the variance in everyday decision-making. Digital media thus shapes not only what people know, but what they choose.

6.3 Awareness and social connectivity

The positive links with social connectivity and awareness support the view that digital media builds social capital and civic knowledge (Schroeder, 2018; Nedungadi et al., 2018). The strongest correlation, with awareness of current affairs ($r = .435$), suggests that digital platforms are now a primary news source for many users. This raises the stakes of misinformation. The finding that awareness varies by preferred media type reinforces the case for media literacy interventions of the kind Guess et al. (2020) found effective in India.

The weaker effect for civic awareness ($F = 2.77$) than for consumer awareness ($F = 33.90$) is also telling. It suggests that digital media is currently more effective at informing people as consumers than as citizens.

6.4 Digital economic activity and financial wellbeing

The study's strongest result is the link between digital economic activity and financial wellbeing ($R^2 = .742$). It provides household-level evidence for what macro studies of the digital economy have argued (Bukht & Heeks, 2019; Pang et al., 2022). It is consistent with research on digital media's benefits for SMEs (Philbin et al., 2022) and the role of digital financial literacy (Shukla et al., 2020). Online selling, gig work, digital payments and online spending appear closely tied to how secure households feel financially.

Taken together, the results support the study's central argument. Social and economic effects of digital media are intertwined and are best understood within one framework.

7. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Practical implications

- For users: evaluate information before relying on it, and pay closer attention to privacy and online security.
- For educational institutions: teach digital literacy, including how to identify credible sources and recognise misinformation, and integrate digital resources into teaching.
- For businesses and platforms: build user-friendly interfaces, provide transparent information, secure transactions, and invest in user trust.
- For policymakers: support digital inclusion, online safety, consumer awareness and secure digital payments, and reduce barriers of skill and access.

7.2 Theoretical implications

The study contributes an integrated framework that tests social and economic outcomes of digital media together. Its results suggest that single-dimension models, which study only wellbeing or only commerce, miss how closely these outcomes are linked.

7.3 Limitations

The design is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported data, so the results show associations, not causation. The sample is limited to Delhi. Although Delhi is socially and economically diverse, the findings may not generalise to rural India or to other states. Treating Likert-scale data as interval data for parametric tests is common practice but remains an assumption.

7.4 Directions for future research

- Use larger samples covering multiple states.
- Run longitudinal studies to test causal pathways.
- Analyse specific platforms separately.
- Include digital literacy, misinformation and privacy as study variables.
- Compare urban and rural populations.
- Build detailed models of digital economic behaviour.

8. CONCLUSION

Digital media is now built into everyday life in urban India. This study of 500 users in Delhi finds that use differs significantly by age and gender, with 18–25-year-olds the most engaged. Users value digital media first for saving time, then for knowledge and entertainment. Its use is positively associated with social connectivity and with awareness of current affairs, health and safety.

The economic findings are the most striking. Knowledge, professional use and entertainment together explain 42.5% of the variance in everyday decision-making. Digital economic activity explains 74.2% of the variance in financial wellbeing.

These results show that digital media's social and economic dimensions cannot be separated. As India works to bring its remaining offline population online, the evidence argues for pairing access with digital literacy, online safety and secure digital finance. Only then can digital growth translate into broad-based social and economic wellbeing.

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