GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN DIGITAL NEWS ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ACCESS AND MEDIA MOTIVATION IN DERA ISMAIL KHAN

Dr. Zeeshan Qasim

Department of Communication and Media Studies, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan

sovereign26@hotmail.co.uk

Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Zeeshan Qasim

Abstract

Examining generational differences in digital news consumption and media engagement patterns, this quantitative research paper attempts to investigates how age and gender influence news platform preferences, frequency of media use, and patterns of information engagement in Dera Ismail Khan by applying Uses and Gratifications theory, Media Ecology perspective, and Digital Divide framework in a single conceptual framework to analyze variations in media behavior. For the data collected through structural survey, statistical analysis reveals a significant relationship between age and digital media use. Gender differences appear limited to the study's extent but indicate variation in platform interaction patterns with younger participants showing higher engagement with social media platforms, while older participants demonstrating stronger preference for traditional media sources. findings revealing technological access, media motivations, and digital competence shaping news consumption behavior across generations and contributes empirical evidence on digital media transformation in a small urban context. This study highlights the need for age-sensitive communication strategies in contemporary journalism.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth and evolution of digital information have transformed the ways individuals of all ages access news content these days. While older generations tend to remain dependent on radio, television and newspapers, younger audiences across the globe are increasingly consuming news through social media and online platforms. By examining the news consumption choices of respondents younger and older than twenty-eight (28) years of age, this empirical study aims to explore the behavioral variations across generations in the digital news landscape in Dera Ismail Khan.

To investigate these generational differences, respondents were divided into two age groups: individuals under 28 and those above 28. This selection is based on widely discussed trends in media studies highlighting the shift from traditional to digital media consumption, which research suggests is particularly pronounced among younger audiences (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2024). Individuals under the age of 28, often referred to as digital natives, predominantly utilize online and interactive sources for news. In contrast, consumers above 28 have experience with both traditional and digital media platforms. This categorization allows for a more thorough understanding of evolving news consumption tendencies and their potential effects on media outlets (Du, 2025).

Furthermore, this study considers the role of social media algorithms and personalized content feeds

in shaping the news consumption patterns of younger audiences in the locality of Dera Ismail Khan. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok increasingly serve as primary sources of information, providing interactive and participatory environments that differ from the passive consumption typical of traditional media in this small town. This interactivity influences not only the frequency and type of news accessed but also the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of information. By examining these behavioral nuances, the study aims to uncover how technological affordances affect news engagement and information retention across age groups (Shamseldien et al., 2025).

In addition, the research acknowledges the potential implications of generational differences on journalistic practices and media strategy. Media organizations are now compelled to adapt their content delivery methods and engagement approaches to align with the preferences of distinct age cohorts. Understanding these trends is therefore significant not only for academic inquiry but also for practical applications in media planning, content design, and policy-making (Gowda & Dutta, 2024). By investigating the specific news consumption behaviors of respondents above and below the age of twenty-eight, this study contributes to a nuanced comprehension of how digital transformation is reshaping the landscape of news media across demographic lines in Dera Ismail Khan.

The researchers also rationalize this study for addressing a critical gap in the literature on digital news engagement by examining generational media practices within a developing media ecology context. Existing studies largely focus on Western audiences and technologically advanced environments, while limited empirical evidence exists regarding generational differences in digital news consumption within semi-urban regions of Pakistan (Siddique et al., 2024). Likewise, prior research insufficiently explains how technological access and media motivations jointly shape news consumption behavior across age groups. Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between age, technological competence, media motivations, and news engagement practices in Dera Ismail Khan.

2. Literature Review:

In light of media research, it is generally accepted that younger viewers are more receptive to digital platforms, using internet portals and social media to obtain news updates (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2024). According to research, people under the age of 28 prefer interactive and audiovisual material and read news in shorter bursts, frequently on mobile devices (Goyanes & Demeter, 2023). On the other hand, older people, especially those over 28 rely more on organized news sources like newspapers and television shows (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2023).

Significant variances among these age groups align with research on the usage of both digital and traditional media. According to Goyanes and Demeter (2023), younger audiences (those under 28) are more likely to give preference to audiovisual and interactive material and engage in fragmented, mobile-based interactions when consuming news. On the other hand, people over 28 still rely on organized news formats like print and broadcast media, even though they are increasingly using digital platforms (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2023). According to studies, media consumption patterns stabilize around the age of 28, with older people exhibiting a more habitual and intentional approach to news consumption (Karnowski & Kumpel, 2023). Thus, the categorization used in this study guarantees a useful comparison between consumers of digital-first and hybrid media.

Social media sites and platforms, notably Instagram and Twitter (X), have a significant impact on how young people interact with news. According to studies, social media news exposure is often unintentional rather than planned, resulting in regular yet dispersed interaction with current events. Similarly, younger populations' growing political participation is associated with their usage of digital news sources (Hai & Xiong, 2025; Hwang & Kim, 2022).

According to media psychology studies (Karnowski & Kumpel, 2023), cognitive load and personal motivation influence media choices.

Younger people seek news for enjoyment, social affirmation, and discussion, but older people prefer accuracy and depth of analysis (Lee & Ma, 2023). These motivational differences are consistent with Uses and Gratification theory, which states that audiences actively seek media that fits their informational and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973). Marshall McLuhan (1964) conceptualized media as environments that structure perception and social relations. Media ecology theory explains how communication technologies shape patterns of information access and interpretation. Scholars argue that digital platforms reorganize communication practices by altering speed, accessibility, and interactivity of information exchange (Newman et al., 2023). Digital media therefore produces distinct user behaviors across demographic groups.

Recent research shows that digital communication environments influence not only media exposure but also cognitive processing and participation patterns (Alruthaya et al., 2021). Individuals adapt their media habits according to technological affordances such as mobility, immediacy, and personalization.

Jan van Dijk (2020) explains the digital divide as a multidimensional inequality involving access, skills, and usage patterns. The digital divide perspective suggests that demographic variables influence technological competence and media participation. Researchers identify age as a strong predictor of digital media adoption (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

Studies demonstrate that younger users show higher digital literacy and greater reliance on online platforms, while older users prefer traditional media formats (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Digital inequality therefore reflects differences in technological familiarity and social environment. Researchers consistently report generational differences in media consumption behavior. Younger audiences rely heavily on social media and online news platforms, whereas older audiences prefer conventional information sources (Newman et al., 2023). Studies identify younger users as digital natives who integrate digital technologies into everyday communication practices (Alruthaya et al., 2021).

Scholars investigate gender as a variable influencing media use patterns. Research shows that men and women demonstrate different motivations for media consumption and communication practices, although digital platforms increasingly reduce traditional gender distinctions (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

3. Theoretical Framework:

As suggested by the existing literature and previous research findings on the topic, this research paper adopts integrated framework as a conceptual domain for the present inquiry. It explains generational media behavior through the integration of Uses and Gratifications theory, Media Ecology perspective, and Digital Divide approach. This conceptual framework assumes that technological environment, audience motivation, and structural access jointly shape news consumption patterns in Dera Ismail Khan.

3.1. Uses and Gratifications Theory:

This study barrows Uses and Gratifications theory as a foundation framework, which explains how individuals actively select media to satisfy specific needs. According to Elihu Katz (1973), audiences choose media platforms to fulfill cognitive, informational, and social motivations. The theory assumes that demographic characteristics influence media choice among people. Age affects information needs, entertainment preferences, and communication habits. Younger users prefer interactive and immediate communication platforms, whereas older users prioritize credibility and structured information sources. The present study applies this perspective to explain differences in news engagement across age groups (Wibowo & Irwansyah, 2023).

3.2. Media Ecology Perspective:

To add exhaustiveness to Uses and Gratification approach, the Media Ecology perspective examines how communication technologies shape social behavior and perception in the present study. Marshall McLuhan (1964) argues that communication technologies transform human interaction and information processing. Digital platforms restructure news production and

consumption by promoting speed, interactivity, and personalization. The technological environment influences how audiences' access and interprets information (Wang, 2025). This study uses Media Ecology to explain how digital platforms modify generational media practices in Dera Ismail Khan.

3.3. Digital Divide Framework:

To determine anthropological variations, the Digital Divide framework explains inequalities in technological access and digital competence in our conceptual framework. Jan van Dijk (2006) explains that differences in access, skills, and usage create unequal participation in digital communication environments. Age influences technological familiarity and digital literacy. These differences affect information access and media engagement. The framework helps explain generational disparities in digital news consumption observed in this study.

3.4. Conceptual Relationship:

This integrated framework conceptualizes that age influences technological competence and media motivations, which shape platform selection and news engagement behavior. The study examines this relationship empirically (Aksoy & Allahverdi, 2025)

consumption behavior through technological access and media motivations, grounded in Digital Divide Theory, Media Ecology Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory.
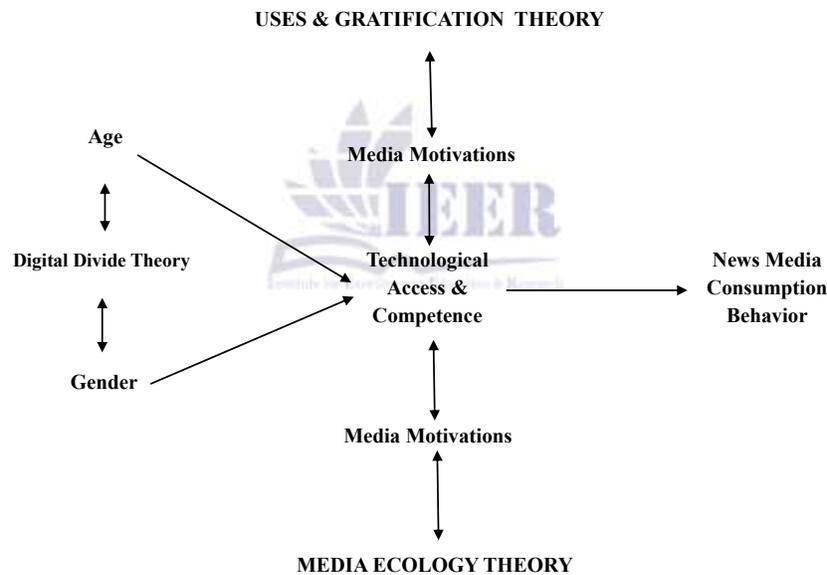

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the influence of age and gender on news media

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research Design:

This research study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine age-based differences in news consumption patterns among participants in Dera Ismail Khan. The design of this inquiry allowed the researchers to compare digital and traditional media use across demographic groups at a single point in time. The study employed stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation of different age categories and to minimize sampling bias in this small town.

Explaining how age influences media choice, frequency of exposure, and engagement with news content our research design also tested the relationship between age and social media dependence for news consumption.

4.2 Population and Sampling Strategy:

The population of the study consisted of 3,496 residents of Dera Ismail Khan. From this population, a sample of 219 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling. The sampling process divided the population into age-based strata to ensure proportional representation in the study.

Participants of study were categorized into the below two age groups:

- Below 28 years (n = 95)
- Above 28 years (n = 124)

We used age 28 as a dividing point because previous research suggests that individuals gradually shift from experimental and mobile-based media habits to more structured and routine news consumption patterns around this stage of adulthood. This classification enabled us having a systematic comparison between emerging digital users and established traditional media audiences in Dera Ismail Khan.

4.3 Research Hypotheses:

Based on theoretical assumptions of media ecology and generational media practices, the researchers derived the following four hypotheses from in this study:

H1: Age significantly influences the type of news media consumption (digital vs. traditional)

H2: Younger individuals consume digital news more frequently than older individuals

H3: Older individuals prefer structured and scheduled news formats compared to younger individuals

H4: Age negatively predicts social media use for news consumption

4.4 Data Collection Procedure and Interview Protocol:

The researchers collected the data for testing of above hypothesis through a face-to-face interview and a structured questionnaire. Our questionnaire included closed-ended items for measuring the following trends:

- preferred news platforms
- duration of news exposure
- frequency of news consumption
- engagement with social media news
- demographic characteristics

The researchers went and administered the instrument personally to all participants to ensure clarity of questions and consistency in responses while collecting data in Dera Ismail Khan. Inquiry's interview protocol followed standardized procedures to reduce interviewer bias and maintain uniform data recording for analysis and to deduce meaningful results.

4.5 Measures and Variables:

The researchers operationalized the variables as follows:

- <u>Independent Variable</u>: Age group
- <u>Dependent Variables:</u> news platform preference, frequency of consumption, duration of exposure, and social media engagement
- <u>Control Variables:</u> demographic characteristics of respondents

News consumption preference was categorized into digital media (social media platforms, online news portals) and traditional media (television broadcasts and newspapers).

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Table1. Operationalization of Study's Variables:

Variable Type	Variable	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition	Measurement Scale	Data Source	Related Theory
Independent Variable	Age	Chronological stage influencing media behavior and technological adoption	Respondent age categorized into two groups: below 28 years and above 28 years	Nominal (categorical)	Survey questionnaire	Digital Divide Theory
Independent Variable	Gender	Social identity shaping media access and usage patterns	Self-reported gender of respondent	Nominal	Survey questionnaire	Digital Divide Theory
Mediating Variable	Technological Access & Competence	Ability to access and use digital technologies for information consumption	Level of access to internet-enabled devices, digital skills, and online platform usage	Likert scale (1–5)	Survey questionnaire	Media Ecology Theory
Mediating Variable	Media Motivations	Psychological reasons for engaging with news media	Information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and convenience motives	Likert scale (1–5)	Survey questionnaire	Uses and Gratifications Theory
Dependent Variable	News Media Consumption Behavior	Pattern of engagement with news platforms and content	Frequency of news use, preferred platform, duration of exposure, and engagement level	Ordinal / Scale	Survey questionnaire	Integrated outcome variable

https://jmhorizons.com | Qasim, 2026 | Page 209

Control Variable (Optional)	Education Level	Formal educational background influencing media literacy	Highest qualification of respondent	Ordinal	Survey questionnaire	Digital literacy perspective

4.6 Data Analysis Procedures:

The researchers analyzed the collected data using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques for generating results.

Descriptive statistics included:
- frequency distribution
- mean values
- standard deviation

Inferential analysis included:
- independent sample t-tests to compare age groups
- ANOVA to examine group differences
- multiple regression analysis to test predictive relationships
- correlation analysis to assess associations between age and media use

The analysis presented results through regression charts to test hypotheses and heat maps to visualize content preference patterns across age groups.

4.7 Validity and Reliability:

The researchers ensured the content validity of this study by designing the questionnaire based on established measures used in media consumption research. The researchers also conducted a pilot test to improve clarity and consistency of items under research. Standardized data collection procedures enhanced reliability and reduced measurement error in this empirical investigation. Reliability analysis confirmed internal consistency of the measurement scale. (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70), indicating acceptable reliability.

4.8 Analytical Framework:

The analysis compared media behavior across age groups by examining:
- preferred news content
- frequency and duration of exposure
- engagement with digital platforms

The results of this scientific inquiry demonstrates that younger respondents prefer digital news formats such as social media and online portals, whereas older respondents rely more on structured formats such as television broadcasts and newspapers. The results also indicate that younger individuals consume news in short but frequent intervals, while older individuals follow scheduled viewing patterns, particularly during prime-time television hours. For easy understanding of the readers, the researchers of this study generated heat map values using normalized frequency scores derived from survey responses and regression patterns to visualize intensity of media use across age groups. Heat map visualization further confirms the dominance of traditional media use among older respondents.

5. Results:

5.1 Descriptive Statistics:

The rationale of this study was to see and examine the news consumption patterns across two age groups (below 28 years and above 28 years). the Descriptive analysis shows clear variation in media preferences, frequency of use, and engagement patterns between the groups.

Younger respondents demonstrated higher use of digital news platforms, particularly social media and online news portals. Older respondents reported greater reliance on traditional media sources, including television broadcasts and newspapers. These results of investigation indicate a clear age-based divide in media selection and engagement behavior in Dera Ismail Khan.

5.2 Hypothesis Testing:

H1: Age significantly influences the type of news media consumption.

Independent sample t-test results show statistically significant differences between age groups in media platform preference. Younger respondents preferred digital media, whereas older respondents preferred traditional media formats. The findings

support H1 and confirm that age influences news consumption choice among participants in Dera Ismail Khan.

H2: Younger individuals consume digital news more frequently than older individuals.

Frequency analysis indicates that younger respondents access news multiple times per day through mobile devices and social media platforms in Dera Ismail Khan. In contrast, older respondents reported lower frequency of digital news use. These results support H2.

H3: Older individuals prefer structured and scheduled news formats.

ANOVA results reveal that older respondents demonstrate significantly higher engagement with scheduled television news and printed newspapers. Younger respondents show limited engagement with structured formats in Dera Ismail Khan. These findings support H3.

H4: Age negatively predicts social media use for news consumption.

The regression results suggest that age significantly influences social media news consumption behavior. The negative coefficient indicates that digital news engagement decreases with increasing age. The model explains a substantial portion of variance in media engagement, confirming age as an important predictor of generational differences in news consumption practices. However, other socio-demographic factors may also influence media consumption behavior, suggesting that future studies should incorporate additional predictors such as education and digital access. These findings thus support H4.

5.3 News Consumption Behavior:
The analysis identifies two distinct patterns of news engagement:

• Younger respondents consume news in short but frequent intervals.

• Older respondents follow scheduled viewing patterns, particularly during prime-time television hours.

Heat map visualization confirms that traditional media consumption remains concentrated among older participants, while digital news engagement dominates among younger users in Dera Ismail Khan.

5.4. Heat Map Analysis of Media Preference:
Heat map visualization is used in this research paper to examine the distribution of news consumption preferences across the two age groups In Dera Ismail Khan. The heat map illustrates the concentration of media platform usage based on frequency scores.

The below visualization displays that respondents below 28 years of age group demonstrate high intensity of digital news consumption, particularly through social media platforms and online news portals. In contrast, respondents above 28 years of age group exhibit stronger concentration of traditional media use, including television broadcasts and newspapers.

This distribution pattern confirms a generational divide in news consumption behavior among participants in Dera Ismail Khan. Digital engagement decreases with increasing age, whereas traditional media reliance increases among older participants.

The heat map provides visual evidence supporting the hypothesis that age shapes media preference and engagement patterns in Dera Ismail Khan.
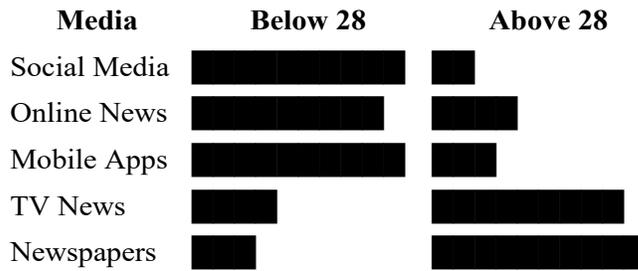
Media	Below 28	Above 28
Social Media	████████	█
Online News	███████	███
Mobile Apps	████████	██
TV News	███	███████
Newspapers	██	████████

Figure 2: Heat map showing distribution of news consumption preferences across age groups. Darker shades indicate higher frequency of media use.

Interpretation: The above heat map demonstrates clustering of digital news consumption among younger participants and concentration of traditional media use among older participants, confirming age-based differences in media engagement in Dera Ismail Khan.

5.5. Multiple Regression Analysis:

The researchers conducted multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between age and social media news consumption. Age served as the independent variable, while social media news engagement functioned as the dependent variable in Dera Ismail Khan.

Regression analysis indicates a statistically significant relationship between age and social media news consumption (Adjusted R^2 = 0.61, p < 0.001). The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in digital news engagement, indicating that age significantly predicts patterns of media use. So, the findings confirm that younger individuals demonstrate significant reliance on digital platforms compared to older individuals in Dera Ismail Khan.

Table 2: Regression analysis predicting social media news consumption

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	4.32	0.41	—	10.53	.000
Age	-0.48	0.09	-0.62	-5.21	.000

Model Summary: R^2 = 0.61, p < 0.001

Table 3: ANOVA Results for Regression Model Predicting Social Media News Consumption

R	R²	Adjusted R²	F	p
.78	.61	.60	27.15	.000

Note. N = 219. Dependent variable: Social media news consumption.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	48.62	1	48.62	27.15	.000
Residual	388.45	217	1.79	—	—
Total	437.07	218	—	—	—

Note. N = 219. Dependent variable: Social media news consumption

Interpretation: An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the overall significance of the regression model for this study. The results indicate that our model significantly predicts social media news consumption, $F(1, 217) = 27.15$, $p < .001$. The findings confirm that age significantly contributes to explaining variation in digital news engagement among respondents in Dera Ismail Khan.
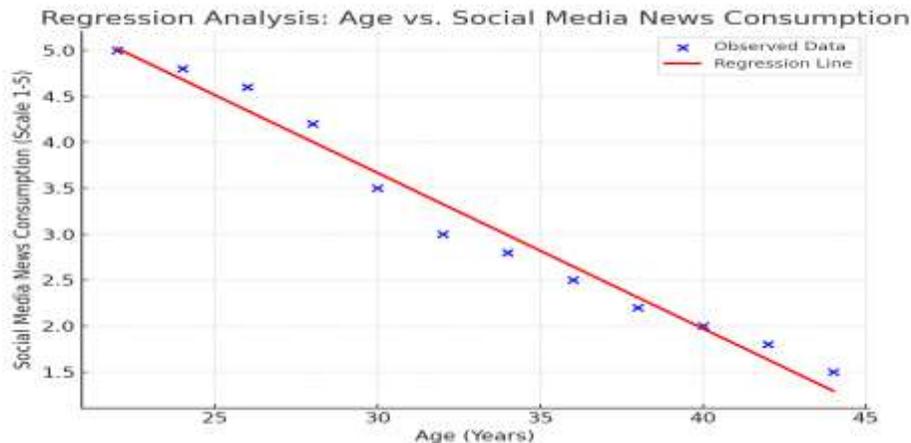

Figure 3: Regression Analysis of Age vs. Social Media News Consumption

The above regression results indicate that age significantly predicts social media news consumption behavior. The negative coefficient shows that digital news reliance declines as age increases in Dera Ismail Khan.

Interpretation: This combined use of regression analysis and heat map visualization strengthens the validity of the findings for this research paper. The Regression analysis establishes statistical relationships, while heat map visualization provides graphical evidence of distribution patterns across age groups.

5. Discussion:

This research paper findings demonstrate that age significantly influences media consumption behavior. Younger participants show greater engagement with social media platforms, while older participants rely more on traditional news sources. This pattern indicates the emergence of distinct generational media cultures.

Thus, in the context of Dera Ismail Khan, we find that age functions as a strong predictor of media consumption behavior. The results show a clear generational divide between digital and traditional news audiences. Younger individuals rely on mobile-based platforms because these technologies provide speed, accessibility, and interactive engagement. Older individuals prefer structured formats because they offer credibility, routine, and familiarity.

The results support Uses and Gratifications theory. Younger users actively select digital platforms to satisfy needs for immediacy, interaction, and convenience. Older participants prefer structured and credible information sources that provide routine and reliability. Media choice reflects differences in informational motivation and communication preference.

So, we can say that the statistically significant relationship between age and social media news consumption confirms that digital adoption decreases with increasing age in Dera Ismail Khan. This pattern reflects differences in technological exposure, media literacy, and trust in information sources. Younger users show flexible consumption habits, whereas older users maintain stable and scheduled media routines.

Our findings also support the Media Ecology perspective. Digital communication technologies reshape information environments and influence user behavior. Younger individuals adapt more

quickly to interactive media structures, whereas older users maintain conventional media habits. The technological environment therefore structures generational differences in news engagement.

Thereby, these discoveries support the existing research that explains generational differences in media engagement through technological adaptation and social change. Digital platforms reshape information access and create fragmented consumption patterns among younger audiences. Traditional media continues to serve older audiences by providing structured and reliable information environments.

The results further reflect the Digital Divide framework. The negative relationship between age and digital media use suggests differences in technological familiarity and access. Variations in digital competence produce unequal participation in online information environments. The findings indicate that technological skills influence patterns of civic information exposure.

The study also reveals that contemporary news consumption is increasingly fragmented and platform-based. Digital platforms promote rapid information flow and personalized content selection. Traditional models of scheduled news consumption appear to decline among younger users. This shift reflects broader global transformations in journalism practice.

Overall, the study also highlights the implications for news organizations. Media institutions must develop differentiated communication strategies to address diverse audience segments. Digital platforms require interactive and rapid content delivery for younger users, whereas traditional formats remain relevant for older populations.

6. Conclusion:

From the findings, this research paper concludes that age functions as a significant predictor of media consumption behavior among participants in Dera Ismail Khan. We can say that the younger audiences engage primarily with digital platforms, whereas older audiences prefer traditional information sources. These differences reflect variations in technological competence, media

motivation, and communication environment in Dera Ismail Khan.

This study extends Uses and Gratifications theory by demonstrating how generational factors influence platform choice within a digital media environment. The integration of Media Ecology and Digital Divide perspectives provides a comprehensive explanation of changing news consumption patterns in Dera Ismail Khan (Blazi, 2024).

The findings contribute empirical evidence from a developing communication context and highlight structural differences in digital participation in Dera Ismail Khan. The results, therefore, suggest that media organizations should develop age-sensitive communication strategies to address diverse audience needs.

The study remains limited by its single-location sample and cross-sectional design. Future research should examine longitudinal changes, algorithmic influence, and misinformation exposure across demographic groups.

Recommendations:

From the findings of our empirical contribution to the media studies research, following recommendation could be made:

1. National, regional and local media houses in Pakistan should develop age-specific content strategies to address generational differences in media consumption. Media institutions should design mobile-based, short-format indigenous news content to engage younger audiences, while maintaining structured and detailed news formats for older users.

2. Policymakers should promote digital literacy programs in peripheries of Pakistan to enhance responsible news consumption across age groups. Training initiatives by the media advocacy and non-governmental organizations should be focused on improving the critical evaluation skills, particularly among younger users who rely heavily on social media platforms for news.

3. The government's communication regulatory body PEMRA should develop policies that encourages and promotes responsible digital journalism practices and ensure equitable access to information technologies across different demographic groups in Pakistan.

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