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To Evaluate The Understanding Of Media Literacy Among Youth In Shimla District Of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: This study highlights the critical need to enhance media literacy among youth in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, where young individuals increasingly engage with diverse digital platforms. Shimla is the capital of Himachal Pradesh, is a well-known hill city famous for its cool climate, scenic beauty and colonial architecture. Once the summer capital of British India, Shimla now attracts visitors for both its natural charm and historical significance.

The findings reveal a moderate level of media literacy overall, with notable gaps between urban and rural youth. Urban participants and those with education in humanities or journalism show stronger skills in analyzing and evaluating media. In contrast, rural youth often lack access to varied media sources and the critical tools to assess them. Only 37% of respondents could reliably distinguish between true and false information, despite high digital engagement.

These results highlight the urgent need for educational reforms. Integrating media literacy into the curriculum, especially in rural schools and colleges, can help bridge both digital and analytical divides. Community awareness campaigns and specialized teacher training in media pedagogy are also essential to build critical thinking skills among youth.

By examining the media habits and evaluative abilities of young people in Shimla, this study offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers and organizations committed to fostering a more informed and responsible generation of media users. In an age of digital influence, media literacy is not just important it is essential.

Keywords: Literacy, Digital literacy, Youth, Urban-rural, Critical thinking, Misinformation.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Digital Age and the Importance of Media Literacy

We live in a time where media surrounds us everywhere from the mobile phones in our hands to the televisions in our homes and the social media platforms we scroll through daily. Information is just a click away. But not all information is correct or trustworthy. In this digital age, media literacy the ability to access, understand, evaluate and create media messages have become an essential skill. For young people, especially, who are constantly interacting with online content, media literacy is crucial. They receive news, entertainment, opinions and advertisements from multiple sources some reliable, some not. Without proper understanding, youth can become victims of fake news, misinformation, propaganda and harmful online trends. Therefore, knowing how to think critically about media messages is not just helpful; it is necessary.

1.2 Understanding Media Literacy

Media literacy involves several key skills:

- **Accessing media:** Using tools like the internet, TV and Newspapers.
- **Analyzing content:** Asking questions like "Who made this?" and "What is the message?"
- **Evaluating credibility:** Judging if a news source is trustworthy or biased.
- **Creating media:** Sharing or producing content responsibly like posts, blogs or videos.

Globally, education systems are starting to realize the importance of teaching these skills. Countries like Finland and Canada have integrated media education into their school curricula. India, too, is catching up through digital literacy missions and campaigns. But there is still a long way to go, especially in smaller cities and rural areas.

1.3. Why Focus on Shimla?

Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh, is known for its educational institutions, diverse population and a mix of urban and rural cultures. According to the 2011 Census, Shimla has a literacy rate of over 84%, which is higher than the national average. This makes it an ideal place to study media literacy.

Shimla also presents a unique case: While many parts of the city are urban and well-connected digitally, several regions within the district are still semi-urban or rural with limited access to digital tools and internet services. This diversity gives us a chance to understand the urban-rural divide in media literacy. By studying Shimla, we can gain deeper insights into how geography, education and infrastructure affect media literacy among youth.

1.4. The Youth and Media Relationship

Youth between the ages of 18 and 25 are among the most active consumers of media. This age group includes college students, job seekers and young professionals. They are at a stage where their beliefs, opinions and identities are still forming and media plays a big role in shaping these.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram and Snapchat are part of their daily lives. While these platforms offer entertainment and social interaction, they also expose users to:

- Political propaganda
- Hate speech and cyber bullying
- Fake news and misleading advertisements
- Unrealistic beauty standards and lifestyle expectations

Many youth are unaware of how to critically judge the content they consume or share. This lack of media literacy can lead to harmful decisions, including believing conspiracy theories, spreading rumors, or being influenced by unhealthy online challenges.

1.5. Gaps in Existing Research

While media literacy has been widely discussed in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, very few studies focus on hill states or semi-urban regions like Shimla. Most national programs are not customized to address the specific needs and challenges of youth in smaller districts. Some government initiatives, like the Digital India Mission and the National Education Policy 2020 and media literacy. But there is limited follow-up on how these are implemented in colleges and universities in Himachal Pradesh. Moreover, local factors like limited access to fast internet, availability of trained teachers and language barriers further complicate the situation. This makes it essential to carry out region-specific research that takes local challenges and strengths into account.

2. Literature Review

Media literacy has garnered attention globally as an essential 21st century skill, yet in India, its academic and practical exploration remains limited, especially in semi-urban and rural contexts. The literature reviewed for this study focuses on three broad themes: global perspectives on media literacy, the Indian context and region-specific gaps related to Shimla Himachal Pradesh.

2.1 Global Perspectives on Media Literacy

Internationally Media literacy has been emphasized by organizations like UNESCO, which defines it as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across various contexts (UNESCO 2021). Scholars such as Hobbs (2010) have highlighted the role of media education in fostering critical thinking and civic engagement among youth. Studies in countries like the United States, Finland and Canada demonstrate how curriculum-integrated media literacy programs enhance analytical and ethical engagement with media (Livingstone & Helsper 2007).

2.2 Indian Context of Media and Digital Literacy

In India, media literacy has predominantly been studied in the context of digital literacy. The National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) launched by the Government of India in 2014 aimed to digitally empower at least one person in every household. While this initiative improved access to technology, its integration with media literacy remains underdeveloped. ER Publications (2023) and ARF Journals (2022) reported that awareness about digital tools has increased, yet the ability to critically assess media content remains superficial. Most of these studies are concentrated in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, leaving out smaller towns and rural areas.

2.3 Youth Media Usage in India

Youth are at the center of digital media consumption in India. Sharma (2020) explored the social media usage patterns among young adults in Himachal Pradesh and found that platforms like Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp dominate their daily media diets. However, critical thinking skills regarding misinformation and media manipulation were found to be limited. According to Kumar (2022), rural women in Shimla district face barriers not only in accessing digital content but also in comprehending media messages effectively.

2.4 Region-Specific Literature and Gaps

There is a glaring lack of empirical studies focused on Media literacy in Himachal Pradesh. The Himachal Pradesh State Digital Literacy Report (2024) highlights the government efforts to increase technological access, but little is known about how these developments translate into media competency among the youth. Few studies, such as those by Singh and Chauhan (2021), touch upon media exposure among students in small towns like Solan and Mandi but do not offer insights into analytical capabilities. Furthermore, a review of thesis and dissertations submitted to Himachal Pradesh University reveals a limited number of academic works addressing Media literacy. Existing literature often emphasizes usage and exposure rather than understanding or critical engagement.

2.5 Theoretical Frameworks Referenced in Literature

This study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), which explains why people engage with certain media; the Critical Media Literacy Model (Kellner & Share, 2007), which emphasizes critical analysis of media content; and the Digital Divide Theory, which contextualizes the disparities in access and skills.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the youth consume media in urban and rural area of District Shimla.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of educational background on media literacy.
3. To evaluate the youngsters ability towards judging fake news and biased information.

By using a **mixed-method approach** combining surveys, interviews and group discussions we aim to present a comprehensive picture of media literacy in this region.

4. Relevance and Significance

This study is important not just academically, but also socially and culturally. Understanding how Shimla's youth interact with media can help policymakers, educators and NGOs to:

- a) Design better education programs.
- b) Create digital campaigns to fight misinformation.
- c) Empower youth to become responsible media users and creators.

Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh, represents a unique blend of urban and rural environments. The district has a literacy rate of over 84%, with several educational institutions catering to diverse populations. Despite this, there is limited empirical research on how young people in Shimla engage with media. In the long run, improving media literacy can lead to a more informed, tolerant and democratic society one that can tell the difference between fact and fiction and make decisions based on truth, not manipulation. Media literacy has become a fundamental skill in the digital age, enabling individuals to critically engage with information disseminated through various media platforms. As misinformation spreads rapidly and media shapes opinions and behavior, it is vital to equip youth with the skills to navigate this complex landscape. This study aims to understand the current state of media literacy among Shimla's youth, identify influencing factors and provide recommendations for enhancing these skills through educational and policy measures.

5. Methodology

To understand the current status of media literacy among youth in Shimla, a mixed-methods research design was implemented. This approach allowed for triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings.

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted both descriptive and exploratory research designs. The descriptive component aimed to document existing media usage and awareness levels, while the exploratory component sought to understand the underlying reasons for observed patterns, such as urban-rural divides and educational influences.

5.2 Sampling Strategy

A stratified random sampling method was employed to select aged 18 to 25 from various parts of Shimla district. This approach ensured representation from urban and rural populations. The sample included: College and University students. This stratification was essential to identify disparities in media literacy due to location, educational level and employment status.

5.3 Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Qualitative Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informants including teachers, journalists, and leaders of youth organizations. These interviews explored perceptions about the role of media literacy and existing challenges in promoting it.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Five FGDs were organized in different parts of the district with youth participants to understand peer influence and content-sharing habits on social media.

5.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative Data: Thematic analysis was applied to interview and FGD transcripts. Coding was done manually to identify recurring themes such as trust in media, misinformation, and influence of educational institutions.

5.5 Limitations of Study

1. The study was limited to one district and thus may not reflect trends in the entire state.
2. There is significant variation in internet access and smartphone availability among participants.
3. Variations in exposure to different types of media (e.g., digital, print, social media) among participants might influence their understanding, leading to inconsistent data.

6. Results

The analysis of data collected from surveys, interviews and focus group discussions yielded several critical insights into the level and dimensions of media literacy among youth in Shimla.

6.1 Media Consumption Patterns

A vast majority 92% of respondents reported using smartphones as their primary device to access media content. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube were the most frequently used. Television and newspapers had limited reach, especially among urban youth. Urban youth exhibited high dependency on social media for news. Rural youth were more likely to use television and local newspapers alongside mobile. 60% of Youth spent more than three hours daily consuming media.

6.2 Awareness of Media Ownership and Bias

About 58% of respondents displayed a basic understanding of media ownership. These respondents could identify that media organizations might have political or corporate affiliations. Only 30% of participants were aware of government regulations on media. Awareness was significantly higher among students pursuing journalism.

6.3 Critical Thinking and News Verification

A key component of media literacy is the ability to distinguish between reliable and misleading content. Only 37% of the participants demonstrated strong skills in verifying the authenticity of news. Participants from urban backgrounds outperformed their rural counterparts. Those with prior exposure to media education or workshops performed better in identifying fake news. Social media trends and peer-sharing were dominant sources of information, often leading to unchecked misinformation.

6.4 Urban-Rural Divide

A notable gap emerged between urban and rural participants in all aspects of media literacy:

- Urban youth scored higher in understanding bias, source verification and identifying misinformation.
- Rural youth reported limited access to diverse media sources and lower digital literacy levels.

6.5 Influence of Educational Background

Students enrolled in humanities courses exhibited a significantly higher ability to analyze and question media content compared to students from science or commerce streams. Institutions that had integrated some form of media education showed better results among their students. Interview responses from educators pointed to a lack of standardized curriculum on media studies in most schools.

6.6 Gender-Based Observations

Female participants were more likely to consume educational and motivational content on social media. Male participants reported higher engagement with political and entertainment news. However, both genders showed similar levels of susceptibility to misinformation. The results highlight a moderate level of media literacy among youth in Shimla, with evident disparities based on location, educational background and access to resources. While access to media is widespread, analytical skills and critical engagement remain underdeveloped.

7. Discussion

The results of this study corroborate national-level findings while offering unique, localized insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding media literacy in Shimla.

7.1 Disparity between Access and Understanding

The ubiquity of smartphones and social media among youth does not equate to critical engagement. While digital access is no longer a major barrier, the understanding and analytical evaluation of content lags behind. This mirrors global concerns where access is easier than ever, but critical analysis remains minimal. The tendency to rely on peer-shared content underscores the importance of social influences on media literacy.

7.2 Educational Gaps and Institutional Challenges

The education system in Shimla shows a lack of structured media literacy programs. Interviews with teachers highlighted several constraints: Lack of formal training in media pedagogy. Overloaded curriculum that leave little room for extracurricular modules. Absence of practical, activity-based learning regarding media analysis. Educational reform is essential to equip students with the tools to engage critically with media.

7.3 Rural Marginalization in Media Education

The urban-rural divide is significant and troubling. Rural youth have less exposure to diverse media, limited digital literacy and minimal training opportunities. Rural schools lack digital infrastructure. Community-based interventions are rarely implemented. Bridging this divide will require targeted investments in rural education and digital literacy campaigns.

7.4 Role of Peer Influence and Trends

The dominance of peer recommendations and online trends in shaping media consumption indicates a need to leverage these channels for positive educational interventions. Social media influencers and peer leaders could be engaged in spreading awareness. Youth clubs and online groups could serve as platforms for promoting media literacy.

7.5 Importance of Multidisciplinary Education

Students from humanities and journalism backgrounds demonstrated stronger media literacy, emphasizing the importance of a multidisciplinary approach. Integration of media education into science and commerce streams can help foster critical skills across disciplines. The discussion highlights the need for an ecosystem that supports media literacy through education, policy and community participation. Addressing the disparities requires coordinated efforts across stakeholders. However Devi et al (2023) found that there is gender inequality in educational and employment also give clues for the improvement of literacy so present study this for improvement of media literacy.

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the growing importance of media literacy in the lives of young individuals, particularly in regions like Shimla where digital access is growing rapidly. While access to media is widespread, the ability to critically evaluate and responsibly engage with media content remains limited. Media literacy among Shimla youth is moderate, with variations based on education and geography. Urban youth and those from arts-related fields show better analytical skills. Rural youth and students from non-humanities backgrounds require more support. A collaborative approach involving educational institutions, policymakers, civil society and digital platforms is essential to bridge the gaps. Introduce structured media literacy modules across all educational streams. Develop capacity-building programs for teachers. Use local youth organizations and influencers for awareness. Expand digital and media literacy to rural areas. Encourage continuous evaluation and policy feedback mechanisms.

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