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### **Rural Indian Adult Populace and Digital Media Use**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Omnipresent and all pervasive- so is the presence of digital media. Until a few years back, digital media like computers, laptops, mobile phone and the internet were a luxury, owned and accessed by a few handful. However, with time, things have changed. Digital media has become an important part of people's lives. However, digital divide - the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not - is also a reality, especially in a developing country like India. While this gap has been breached over time, there are many factors that inhibit the access to and use of digital media. India is only second to China in terms of number of mobile phones and is likely to grow in the coming years. While urban India is expected to see a slowdown, rural India is likely to become the next area of growth in internet and mobile phone penetration. Keeping this in view, this paper attempts to look into the current digital media uses among adult rural users in Assam, a State in the Northeastern part of India and examines the barriers that inhibit digital media use. The key findings indicate that rural Indian populace is catching up with their urban counterparts in digital media use. However, its diffusion and adoption is restricted due to structural and contextual factors such as income, education and language, gender and psychological barriers.

**KEYWORDS:** digital media, rural India, adult digital media users, Assam

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Digital media is omnipresent and all pervasive. What was once considered a luxury is now a part of our everyday lives. India's National Digital Communications Policy, 2018 reports that the country's digital profile and footprint is one of the fastest growing in the world. According to figures, there are over a billion mobile phones and digital identities and half a billion internet users thereby making India's mobile data consumption the highest in the world. Digital media, in its early years, was limited to urban niche audience. However, with the increase in penetration of smartphones in rural areas, improved network access, rise in purchasing power and roll out of cheap data plans by telecom companies, rural India is gradually moving to the helm of digital media activities. Digital India is already unfolding with increased digital democratization and change in the demographics of digital consumption particularly in the rural areas of India. Different reports also indicate a rosy picture as rural India gear up to witness growth in internet and Smartphone penetration and overall digital media consumption in the coming years. Therefore, it is only imperative to assess the current state of affairs in digital media consumption in rural India which is further expected to grow in no time.

North-east India comprises of eight states and is located in the easternmost part of India with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh as its international neighbours. Geographically, the Northeast is connected to the rest of India via a narrow strip of land also called the chicken neck. Also, according to a TRAI report, Assam is at the bottom in terms of tele-density<sup>1</sup>. Due to several factors, the north-eastern part of the country suffered neglect and apathy for a long time. This particular study is therefore significant as it will draw attention of the Centre to the practices, problems and prospects concerning digital media use in Assam, India.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

Digital media and digital technology pervades every aspect of our lives. The ever-increasing presence of digital media in our daily routines and lifestyles is quite evident from the practices we engage in since we wake up in the morning till the end of the day as we lull ourselves to deep slumber. In developing countries, different studies around digital media have spoken about digital divide – a term used to refer to the gap between those who have access to modern information and communication technologies such as computers and internet and those who don't. Studies have often concentrated on the urban-rural divide in terms of digital technology reach and access. However, with the increasing penetration of mobile and internet technologies, one needs to shift their focus from the concept of digital divide to digital media use. This paper is a small part of a doctoral research on digital media literacy and adult users that looks upon skills and practices pertaining to

digital media use among adult users and attempts to gauge digital media literacy through a qualitative study.

This paper looks into the digital media uses among adult rural users in Assam, India and also examines the barriers that inhibit their use of digital media. A study into the uses and existing barriers would go a long way in understanding the adoption of digital media technology by the rural population of the study area and would also aid the country's government in formulating a more grounded approach to their digital India initiatives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Digital media studies are at a nascent stage in India and Assam in particular. Assam is an Indian State situated in the North-eastern part of the country. It is situated along the Brahmaputra and Barak river valleys. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 31,169,272. Comprising 33 districts (as of March 2018), the capital of Assam – Dispur – is located in the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district. Kamrup (Metropolitan) is one of the four districts of the Assam, India which was created after Census, 2001. This district was carved out of the erstwhile Kamrup district. It is one of the most important districts in Assam with the State capital – Dispur – under its jurisdiction. Situated in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, Kamrup (M) consists of only one sub-division i.e. Guwahati.

Kamrup (Metropolitan) has the highest literacy rate in Assam, India. It stands 88.71%. Although the district has the nomenclature of 'metropolitan' affixed to it, the district is not entirely urban as it also comprises of a fairly good share of rural population<sup>2</sup>. Guwahati has become a major hub over the years due to urbanization coupled with immigration from within Assam and outside the State. It has grown as a centre for education, employment, commerce and administration. People from different parts of Assam have migrated to Guwahati in search of employment, commerce and for opportunities of higher education<sup>3</sup>. One of the 33 districts of Assam, India, Kamrup (M) has been chosen as an area of study owing to its highest literacy rate in the State and being a hub of people representing different parts of Assam.

The standard dictionary definition of an adult is any mature and fully developed individual who has reached an age when he or she is legally responsible for his / her actions. According to the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child means every human being below the age of 18 years. This means that an adult is a person who is 18 years and above. In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development includes the ages of 15 to 35 for their Adult Education programme. On the contrary, the voting right for every Indian citizen is fixed at 18 yrs and above. For this study, adult users have been defined as those who are 18 yrs and above and includes

both ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’, terms coined by Marc Prensky in 2001. Digital natives refer to the population born after the 1980s i.e. people who are born into the digital world. Digital immigrants refer to the population born before the 1980s. This category of people are not born into the digital world but have rather adopted aspects of new age technology. The inclusion of both categories of users is expected to give clarity on the range of uses of digital media by the rural populace.

A qualitative approach has been undertaken whereby fifteen (15) rural adult users (18 yrs and above) chosen through purposive sampling with varying degrees of exposure to digital media were interviewed with the help of an in-depth interview schedule. As this paper is a part of a larger digital media literacy study, a minimum educational qualification of Class ten pass has been kept into consideration during selection of respondents.

Emmanouilides and Hammond<sup>4</sup> in their study of internet usage patterns found a trimodal pattern of usage that is stable across waves. They grouped users into three categories – Low (using Internet 1-3 times in the last month), Moderate (4-19 times in the last month) and High (20 times and above in the last month). Emmanouilides and Hammond’s trimodal pattern, however, seems outdated at present times. The last two decades have seen an increased internet penetration and use of digital media and decrease in the digital divide. Therefore, the trimodal pattern propounded by Emmanouilides and Hammond has been modified for the current study to fit current times.

- ✓ Limited Exposure (LE) users (digital media use between 0-1 hour on an average in a day)
- ✓ Medium Exposure (ME) users (digital media use between 1-3 hours on an average in a day)
- ✓ Heavy Exposure (HE) users (digital media use above 3 hours on an average in a day)

The respondents were stratified based on age groups. Fifteen respondents – five female and ten male - were spread across five age groups – 18-29 yrs, 30-39 yrs, 40-49 yrs, 50-59 yrs and above 60 years with varying degrees of exposure to digital media and different educational qualifications, occupation, income etc.

## **‘DIGITAL’ TURN IN MEDIA USE**

We live in a digital environment which is ‘widespread, fluid and highly efficient’<sup>5</sup>. We may take its presence for granted, but we are definitely pinched by its absence – so is the affect of digital media on our lives. The world of media and communications witnessed a change from the late 1980s leading to the emergence of the term ‘new media’<sup>6</sup>. New media has been defined as a combination of features and capabilities of different forms of media<sup>7</sup>. Its newness lies in the sense that they are a product of “continuous interweaving of innovative activities, services, systems.” Lievrouw & Livingstone defines new media as those information and communication technologies which include

three main components: 1) the artefacts or devices that enable people to connect and communicate; 2) the practices and activities people involve in by developing and using these devices and 3) the social arrangements that people create thereby<sup>7</sup>. What distinguishes new media from traditional media forms is that it is ever evolving – hybrid technology achieved through the constant merger of old and new technologies and shaped by how people use them. Ubiquity or the state of being everywhere and interactivity thereby allowing end user's participation are also two important characteristics that differentiate new media from other forms of media or the so-called traditional media. New media enabled by Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) have penetrated our lives to such an extent that they have become indispensable.

Scholars used the term 'new media' to describe ICT based on digital code<sup>5</sup>. It was also attributed to the modernist belief of social progress owing to technology. The term new media gained currency due to its 'inclusiveness', in the sense that it generalizes all forms of new media such as the internet, computer mediated communication, digital technologies etc<sup>6</sup>. However, more recently, scholars have found the use of 'new media' problematic as it not 'new' anymore. Lately, the term 'digital media' has come to be preferred over 'new media'. Kaur and Marwaha (2016) define digital media as those media forms which are encoded in a 'machine-readable format' and includes digitized content that can be transmitted over computer networks and the internet<sup>8</sup>. With these insights in view, digital media, in the context of this study, refers to internet use via digital devices such as computers, laptops and mobile media.

Digital media such as computers, laptops, mobile phones and the internet have undoubtedly revolutionized the world. Quick and easy access to information, meeting communication needs, encouraging interactive and participatory culture etc have been some of the key advantages of digital media. The computers came in the 1980s, the World Wide Web and internet connectivity in the 1990s, the new millennium gave users platform to receive, produce and distribute digital content. Café culture was once very popular among people as it provided access to computer and internet at reasonable costs. But with the coming of mobile phones and affordable smart phones, came the concept of mobility and internet services on the go. It further gave a boost to digital media. This has been further accelerated by the stiff competition in the telecom industry and telecom operators offering a range of services including mobile data plans at throwaway rates.

If we look at the Indian scenario, a KPMG report<sup>9</sup> states that India has witnessed a growth in digital access and consumption in 2017 and 2018 following the rollout of 4G, cheap data costs and rapid growth in smart phone penetration. The number of smart phone users in India has grown by 15.6% in 2018 and is expected to reach 490 million by 2022 as reported by a US-based market research firm. A news report<sup>10</sup> estimates that it will be the rural areas that will witness the next wave

of growth in mobile internet users. With 59 per cent penetration, urban India is expected to see a slowdown while rural India gears up to become the next area of growth. KPMG reports that online video consumption is reaching a tipping point with the increase in the number of online video audience and the time spent on digital media by these audiences. While there is an estimated 225 million online video viewing audience in financial year 2018, the numbers are expected to shoot up to 550 million by financial year 2023.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Some of the key findings of the study are discussed below.

1. Communication needs dictate the use of digital media among adult users in Assam, India. The use of instant messaging service such as Whats App is seen to be very high among rural adult users who use it more often for communication with family and friends. However, the use of voice call and video calls services remains to be low among the rural adult users. This is particularly evident in the higher age groups as they are relatively new to the concept of instant messaging compared to their younger counterparts. It is also found that users of the higher age group, who have been recently inducted to the use of services like Whats App, use it only to receive messages and are not comfortable replying back due to lack of know-how and fear of misuse resulting from their lack of knowledge of its use.
2. Entertainment and information need remains the second most popular activity after communication for rural adult users. Online video consumption especially through mobile phones is seen to be high with YouTube – the American video sharing website being popular across all age groups of rural adult users. Interestingly, rural adult users of the older demographics (40 and above) are seen to be spending equal or more time watching online videos in comparison to their younger counterparts.

The ability to look for entertainment in an audio-visual format especially in vernacular languages makes the video sharing site very popular among rural adult users. Not surprisingly, YouTube also serves as a platform for information search for many users. The vernacular language advantage is driving the consumption of YouTube in rural areas. This explains the reason behind many rural users seeking YouTube as a source of information rather than other search engines on topics relevant to them. YouTube has also been a caterer to the culturally diverse populace especially in rural areas who seek content that is rooted in their culture, language and value system.

3. Comedy clips and videos, User Generated Content (UGC), music videos and songs are the most-watched categories of online videos by rural adult users across all age groups. UGC's

consumption is primarily driven by the vernacular language advantage as is evident from the responses of the users.

4. Social networking seems to be low on priority among rural adult users. This is particularly evident in users of age groups 40 years and above. Despite having social media profiles, rural adult users especially of higher age groups admit to using their accounts sparingly due to lack of knowledge on its use. Another major reason behind their low use of social media accounts is the peer factor. The motivation to use social media is low as most of their peers are not on these platforms. There is a co-relation between users with limited educational qualification and social media use as they perceive social media platforms as being 'not good' and 'dangerous' resulting in their low media use.
5. Internet television also has many takers among the rural adult populace. This is particularly evident among women homemakers who tend to miss out on their television programmes due to household chores and other engagements. This is when internet or online television comes to their rescue. The ability to watch their favorite shows, especially the missed out programmes at their own convenience, is what makes them seek internet television on their mobiles phones. Telecom companies offering cheap data plans is a contributing factor to rural populace's increased internet use.
6. It is seen that women especially who are mothers to children in the school-going age group are prone to internet usage primarily for their children's study purposes and school projects. This is one contextual factor that influences women's use of digital media and internet in the rural areas. Keeping up with their children's studies has necessitated rural women to learn the basics of internet usage and use it to their advantage.
7. Not all adult users engage in online or internet banking services. On being quizzed, most users expressed their comfort and faith with the traditional banking system. Even those partially using the internet banking service expressed their fears over potential misuse of data and financial frauds. Online banking phobia is certainly keeping people away from using various online banking services.
8. Among the varied digital media uses, online shopping is one area where rural adult users seem to be catching up. However, this trend is more evident in age groups below 40. However, despite the Indian government's attempts to promote a digital, cashless economy, it is seen that users are more comfortable using the Cash-On-Delivery (COD) option for payments rather than options like internet banking payments and card payments. This is also rooted in their fears about online transactions and their perceptions of it not being completely safe.

9. While women in the family are seen to be engaging in internet use, for the sake of their children, in comparison to their male counterparts, their participation in activities such as online bill payments and the likes is almost non-existent as males take the lead in such activities. With men taking charge of this department, most women in rural areas thereby refrain from even learning how to conduct online transactions.
10. Lack of basic and advanced skills, lack of awareness about uses and benefits, lack of motivation to learn especially among some users of the older age groups, peer factor, fears related to misuse, language factor and gendered practices are the key barriers to limited digital media use among users.

## **CONCLUSION**

Digital media use is no longer a millennial and urban phenomenon in India. The digital revolution has swept users across different age groups in rural areas. The rate at which the diffusion of new media is occurring, it can be expected that the gaps in access will further narrow down.

The basic premise of structural approach to audience formation is that media use is largely determined by elements of social structure and media structure. Social structure comprises social facts such as gender, income, education, place of residence, age etc. Media structure comprises the channel, choices and content available at a given time and place. Media use is influenced by factors like the content on offer, circumstances of the moment (free time, availability to attend etc) and social context such as family and friends<sup>12</sup>. As policymakers continue their efforts towards a Digital India, they need to look into structural factors such as age, gender, context and psychological bearings that affect digital media use by people especially the rural populace who are slowly but steadily catching up with their urban counterparts. Gendered practices come down heavily as a barrier to digital media use. A major factor being income, women are still limited to feature phone use that only capacitates making and receiving calls and SMSs. In most rural households, Smartphone is therefore a men's prerogative as found during the study. Rural women who do have their own Smartphone are restricted by structural factors like education, circumstances (time factor) and social contexts like family and children. Gendered practices like certain household chores are considered to be a woman's bastion, thereby keeping them engaged and, at times, away from digital media use. Language is another important factor that influences their use. However, with vernacular language content being dished out through internet, the structural approach to audience formation holds true with media structures dishing out local and language content. Despite the growth in digital media use by rural populace, there remains a lot to be achieved. There are disparities in use based on age, gender and education. Further, the inherent fear of misuse is something that tends to hold people

back when it comes to using digital media to their advantage. In order to realise the Digital India dream, policy makers need to consider these social, contextual and psychological factors and barriers, which when overcome, will go a long way in empowering rural Indian populace and allow them to take better control of their lives.

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