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From Print to Platform: The Changing Media Preferences of Indian College Students

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Abstract: *College students in India belong to the first generation to grow up with cheap mobile data, low-cost smartphones and a large supply of regional-language video. This article synthesises secondary evidence from Indian and India-specific sources: the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2026 (India), the Kantar–IAMAI Internet in India report, YouGov's urban India media tracking, a CLSA estimate of OTT audiences, a Dentsu Aegis Network India study of urban youth, and student-level surveys conducted in Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Karnataka. The evidence points to a smartphone-centred, video-led media diet in which YouTube is the dominant platform, WhatsApp is a major channel for news, OTT streaming is displacing scheduled television, and podcasts and AI tools are early but growing. Print and television remain present, especially for trust and for older audiences, but they are secondary for the youngest users. The article also notes the limits of the available data: very few sources isolate college students, and several large datasets are urban, online and English-leaning.*

Key Words: *media preference, college students, India, YouTube, WhatsApp, OTT, news consumption, secondary data.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media preference refers to the channels, formats and platforms people choose for information, entertainment and social connection. For Indian college students this choice affects how they follow public affairs, how they study and how universities, including open and distance-learning institutions, can reach them.

India offers a distinctive setting for this question. The country has one of the world's largest internet populations, but access is uneven across states, between rural and urban areas, and across languages (Business Today, 2025). Students therefore do not form one uniform audience: a metro-based undergraduate with a streaming subscription and a first-generation learner in a small town may rely on very different media.

This article asks three questions:

1. Which media types and platforms are most used by young Indians and college students, according to published evidence?
2. How is preference shifting from print and television to digital and on-demand media?
3. What gaps remain in the Indian evidence on college students specifically?

2. METHOD AND SOURCES

The article is based on secondary (desk) research. No new data were collected. All sources used are about India or Indian respondents:

- **News-audience research:** the India chapter of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2026 (Reuters Institute, 2026), and press coverage of its findings (Newslaundry, 2026).
- **National internet-use research:** the Kantar–IAMAI *Internet in India* report, as reported by Business Today (2025).

- **Consumer tracking and industry studies:** YouGov's "The 2024 Media Morph" on urban India (YouGov, 2024; Storyboard18, n.d.), Dentsu Aegis Network India's study of urban youth and OTT (Dentsu Aegis Network India,2020), and a 2026 CLSA estimate of OTT audiences reported by exchange4media (2026).
- **Student-level academic studies:** surveys of college students in Uttarakhand (Datt et al., n.d.), Sivagangai and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu (IRMA International, 2020; Boobalakrishnan et al., 2020), Gurgaon in Haryana ("A Study on Impact of Mass Media," n.d.) and Bengaluru in Karnataka ("Effect of the Consumption of Mainstream Media," 2021), plus a study of news consumption among college students (Granthaalayah Publications, 2023) and an older study of newspaper reading at Chaudhary Charan Singh University ("Newspaper Reading Habits of University Students," 2011).

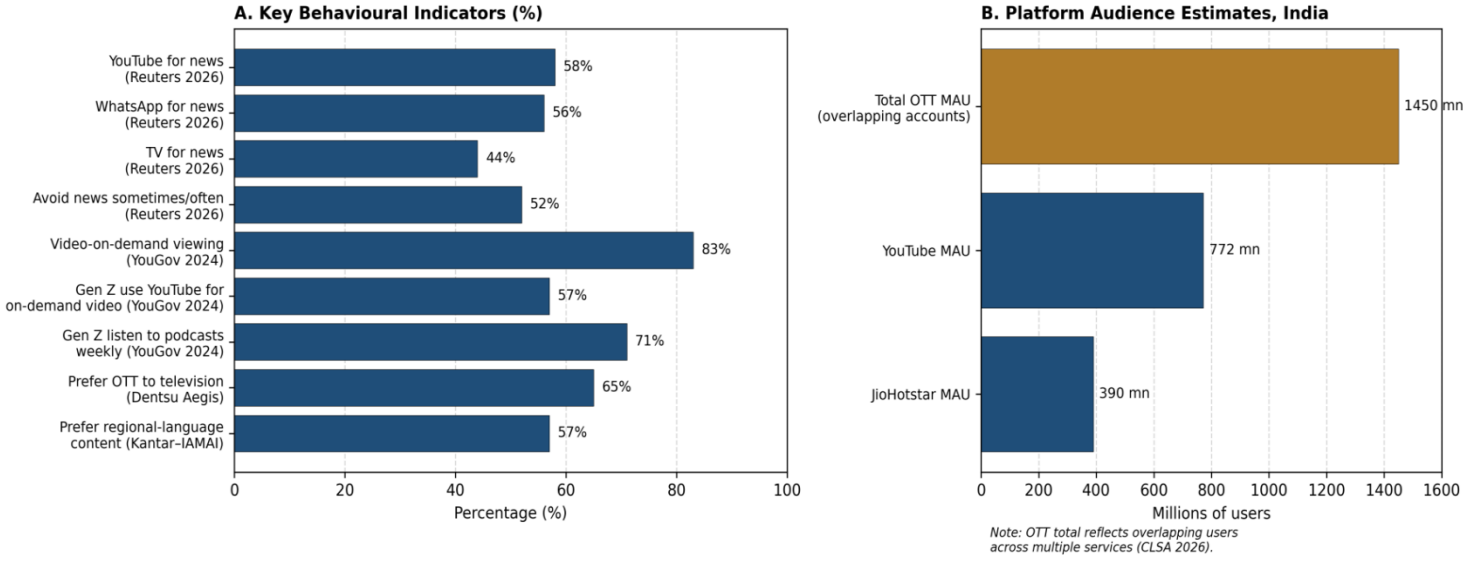
Findings are grouped by theme and compared with attention to sample, region and date.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 Overview of the evidence

Source	Population	Main finding relevant to media preference
Reuters Institute (2026); Newslaundry (2026)	Online Indian news users, largely English-speaking; not nationally representative	YouTube is used for news by about 58%, WhatsApp by 56%, TV by 44%; trust in news 39%; 52% avoid news at least sometimes
Business Today (2025), reporting Kantar–IAMAI	National internet users	Average of about 90 minutes online per day; 286 million have shifted from traditional TV to digital; 57% prefer regional-language content
YouGov (2024)	Urban Indian adults online, N=3,500+	Video-on-demand viewing rose to 83% (from 79% in 2021); 57% of Gen Z use YouTube for on-demand video; 71% of Gen Z listen to podcasts weekly
exchange4media (2026), reporting CLSA	Platform audience estimates, India	About 1.45 billion OTT monthly active users (overlapping); YouTube 772 million, JioHotstar 390 million
Dentsu Aegis Network India (2020)	570 urban Indian youth, mostly Gen Z	65% prefer OTT to television; about half binge-watch 2–3 hours a day
Indian student studies (see Section 2)	Small samples of college students in several states	Heavy mobile use; YouTube seen as accessible and reliable; differences by gender, stream and institution type; concern about time and academic performance

Figure 3.1 Overview of the Evidence on Media Preferences in India



Sources: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2026 (India); YouGov The 2024 Media Morph; Kantar–IAMAI via Business Today 2025; Dentsu Aegis Network India; CLSA via exchange4media 2026.

3.2 YouTube as the common platform

Across sources, YouTube is the single most consistent finding. In the Reuters Institute's India sample, about 58% use YouTube for news, the highest of any platform reported (Reuters Institute, 2026). YouGov's tracking shows YouTube as the leading on-demand video service among urban Gen Z, with usage rising from 49% in 2021 to 57% in 2024, ahead of Disney+ Hotstar (41%) and Amazon Prime Video (35%) (YouGov, 2024). The 2026 CLSA estimate places YouTube at 772 million monthly users, far above any subscription service (exchange4media, 2026).

Student-level evidence agrees. A study from Uttarakhand Open University and Graphic Era Hill University found that platforms were not equally popular among students and that YouTube stood out as both accessible and reliable (Datt et al., 2021). For students, YouTube is likely to serve several roles at once: entertainment, news, exam preparation, skill learning and music.

3.3 WhatsApp and the "news finds me" pattern

WhatsApp is the second-largest news platform in the Reuters Institute's India data, at 56%, up ten points since 2021 (Newslaundry, 2026). The same findings show that 47% of respondents share news through social media, messaging or email (Reuters Institute, 2026). Because WhatsApp is also a family, class and community communication tool, news reaches students through forwards and group messages rather than through deliberate visits to news sites.

Earlier student-focused research points the same way. A study of news consumption among college students, citing a 2022 Mint article, reported that about 72% of Indians access news on smartphones against 35% on computers, with aggregator apps such as Google News (53%), Dailyhunt (25%), Inshorts (19%) and NewsPoint (17%) widely used (Granthaalayah Publications, 2023.).

3.4 Shift from television to streaming and short video

Television is losing intensity rather than disappearing. YouGov reports that heavy TV viewing (six or more hours a week) among urban Indians has declined over three years, while viewing television-style content through video-on-demand services rose from 79% to 83% (YouGov, 2024). The Kantar–IAMAI report estimates that 286 million users have shifted from traditional TV to digital platforms (Business Today, 2025). The Reuters Institute, however, still finds TV used for news by 44% of its India sample, and notes that its sample is likely to under-represent TV and print (Reuters Institute, 2026).

A Dentsu Aegis Network India study of urban youth, conducted around the pandemic lockdowns, found that 65% of Gen Z and millennial respondents preferred OTT to television, and about half spent two to three hours a day binge-watching (Dentsu Aegis Network India, 2020.). The sample (570 respondents, mostly Gen Z) was small and urban, so it shows direction rather than a national figure. At market level, CLSA's 2026 estimate counts about 1.45 billion OTT monthly active users in India, with overlap because many people use more than one service (exchange4media, 2026).

For students, convenience is a plausible driver: one smartphone serves as TV, classroom and library, and on-demand viewing suits irregular timetables.

3.5 Audio and AI: early but growing

YouGov's 2024 report found that 71% of urban Gen Z listen to podcasts weekly, compared with 67% of urban Indians overall. Spotify was used by 44% of Gen Z, up from 33% in 2022, and the leading genres were music, comedy and TV and movies (Storyboard18, 2024). These figures show that audio is a real part of the young urban media diet, though the sample is urban and online.

On AI, the Kantar–IAMAI report found that 39% of Indian internet users find AI tools helpful for productivity and online experiences (Business Today, 2025). The Reuters Institute's India chapter did not report AI-chatbot use for news, and it describes AI adoption in Indian newsrooms as uneven (Reuters Institute, 2026). India-specific data on how college students use AI for information are therefore still thin.

3.6 Where print still matters, and what students say

Print has not vanished from student life. A study of 100 students aged 17–21 in Gurgaon found that two-thirds used mobile phones for more than three hours daily, while about 46% read newspapers and 35% watched TV for roughly an

hour a day ("A Study on Impact of Mass Media," n.d.). A 2011 study of newspaper reading among university students at Chaudhary Charan Singh University covered languages read, time spent and preferred sections, showing that print once held a firm place in campus routines ("Newspaper Reading Habits of University Students," 2011).

Trust is a related factor. The Reuters Institute reports that overall trust in news in India is 39%, down four points on the previous year, and that established print brands such as The Times of India (69%), Hindustan Times (67%), The Economic Times (65%), The Hindu and The Indian Express (63–64%) are the most trusted (Newslaundry, 2026). At the same time, 52% of Indian respondents say they avoid news sometimes or often (Reuters Institute, 2026). Print therefore retains trust value even as digital platforms gain reach.

Student-level studies also record concerns. The Sivagangai study of 112 college students found that respondents linked social media use with wasted time and weaker academic performance (IRMA International, 2020). A study of mainstream media and internet use among college students in Bengaluru found significant differences by gender, stream of study (arts versus science) and type of college (government versus private) ("Effect of the Consumption of Mainstream Media," 2021). A Coimbatore study of 507 college students found no significant differences by age or education level in time spent on social media, and a significant gender difference only for weekday use (Boobalakrishnan et al., 2020). These studies use local samples and should be read as indicative.

3.7 Language, region and the digital divide

Indian media preference cannot be understood without language and access. The Kantar–IAMAI report finds that 57% of users prefer regional-language content, and that about 41% of the population remains offline, mostly in rural areas, citing lack of awareness, affordability and lack of local-language content as the main barriers. It also reports wide differences between states: penetration is above 70% in Kerala, Goa and Maharashtra but about 43% in Bihar and 46% in Uttar Pradesh (Business Today, 2025). For a university with students across several states, this means that mobile and regional-language formats matter, and that some learners may still depend on offline or low-bandwidth media.

4. DISCUSSION

Smartphone-first media diet. The smartphone is the common device for video, news, messaging, study and entertainment, so "media preference" is increasingly a choice between apps rather than between print, radio and TV (Business Today, 2025; "A Study on Impact of Mass Media," 2013).

Concentration on a few platforms. YouTube and WhatsApp are the most consistently reported platforms for young Indians, with OTT services and podcast apps as strong secondary channels (Newslaundry, 2026; YouGov, 2024).

Trust and reach diverge. Digital platforms reach students widely, but legacy print brands remain among the most trusted news sources, and many Indians avoid news altogether (Newslaundry, 2026; Reuters Institute, 2026). Reach does not equal trust.

Diversity within the student population. Language, region, gender, stream of study, institution type and rural or urban location all shape preference, as the Bengaluru, Coimbatore and Kantar–IAMAI evidence suggests (Boobalakrishnan et al., 2020; Business Today, 2025; "Effect of the Consumption of Mainstream Media," 2021).

Implications for educators. Short, mobile-friendly video, regional-language material and messaging-app distribution are likely to reach students well, but this should be tested with each institution's own learners. Media-literacy teaching is relevant because news often arrives through forwards, aggregators and creators of uneven reliability.

5. LIMITATIONS

- Very few large sources report on college students as a group. Most use age bands, generations or the general internet-user population, so they are proxies.
- The Reuters Institute India sample is online, largely English-speaking and not nationally representative; it likely under-represents TV and print and gives no India-specific age breakdown on the pages reviewed (Reuters Institute, 2026).

- YouGov covers urban online adults (YouGov, 2024), and the Dentsu study is a small, urban sample conducted around the pandemic lockdowns (Dentsu Aegis Network India, 2020.).
- CLSA user counts overlap across platforms and come from a different method than survey data, so they cannot be compared directly with survey percentages (exchange4media, 2026).
- Several student studies use small, local convenience samples and span different years.

6. CONCLUSION

Secondary evidence indicates that Indian college students live in a smartphone-centred, video-led media environment. YouTube is the most widely used platform, WhatsApp is a leading route to news, OTT services are displacing scheduled television, and podcasts and AI tools are emerging. Print and television remain relevant, particularly for trust, and the digital divide means that regional and rural students may have very different media access. At the same time, high news avoidance, modest trust and students' own concerns about time and academic performance show that high use is not the same as uncritical or uniformly beneficial engagement.

Future research should use student-specific, multi-state samples in several languages, combine media-use data with learning outcomes, and track the growth of AI tools among Indian students.

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