Coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 in Select Newspapers and Digital Media: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

By 2030, India is projected to have a population of 140 million students prepared for enrollment in universities for higher education, according to the UK India Business Council's report titled "Beyond the Top 200 – Effective International Collaboration for Indian Higher Education" (TOI, 12 Oct 2022). The undergraduate medical education sector in India exhibits a significant demand-supply disparity that necessitates sustained focus. The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET(UG)) serves as the sole criterion for the selection of students into Medical, Dental, and allied sciences following the completion of the All-India Senior School Certificate Examination, often referred to as the Class 12th board examinations.

The NEET(UG) test is administered by the National Testing Agency (NTA), an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Successfully passing the NEET(UG) examination is essential for studying undergraduate programs in India, such as MBBS, BDS, and Ayush (alternative medicine) disciplines. The Indian government has mandated that all those seeking to pursue a medical education must pass the NEET(UG) examination. NEET(UG) is the exclusive national undergraduate medical entrance examination that governs admissions to various institutions in India. These comprise around 542 medical colleges, 313 dentistry colleges, 914 AYUSH institutes, and 47 colleges for Veterinary Sciences (BVSc and AH). NEET(UG) has being administered from 2013. Since 2019, NEET(UG) has been the sole method of selection for students seeking to undertake medical education in India. The NTA administers these examinations in a pen-and-paper format. The examination is offered in multiple Indian languages.

The NEET(UG) examination garners annual attention, not alone for admission-related matters but also for the debates it incites. A significant scandal that surrounded NTA and garnered media attention transpired in 2024. The NTA faced significant criticism, negative media coverage, mockery, and legal challenges due to its mismanagement of the NEET(UG)-2024 examinations. The NTA faced severe criticism for its conduct, allocation of marks, declassification of results, significant discrepancies in scores compared to previous years, and nearly every other facet of its operations.

The NEET(UG)-2024 examination was conducted on May 5, 2024. Shortly after the examinations had place, allegations of paper leaks emerged. The exam results were announced significantly earlier than the scheduled date amid contentious circumstances. Significant discrepancies were observed in the distribution of ranks and associated marks relative to the results of the preceding year. These events provoked ire from both parents and students. The results were announced concurrently with the Lok Sabha

elections, resulting in insufficient media coverage. This presented social media platforms and influencers with a good opportunity to occupy the gap. For a short duration, social media and digital news platforms emerged as the primary news source for NEET(UG)-2024. Limited cable television stations allocated airtime for NEET(UG) examination results. The news was not thoroughly reported by print media. After the fervor surrounding the elections diminished, coverage of the NEET(UG) dispute received attention in both broadcast and print media.

From a media studies standpoint, NEET(UG)-2024 offers an opportunity to examine the portrayal of this debate by print and digital media. It provides insight into the perspective of social media and social media influencers in disseminating news and opinions. Exams, as an emotionally charged topic, impact kids and their anxious parents, while the credibility of the news source, the comprehensiveness of news coverage, the rapidity of news dissemination, and social media discourse contribute to the complexity of the news content. Qualitative content analysis and quantitative methodologies have been employed to underscore the increasing impact of social media and influencers in the domain of news and current events.

Keywords: NEET(UG) – 2024, Newspapers, Digital Media, National Entrance Exams

Aims and Objectives of Study
Aim: To assess the coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 examinations by various media sources and its implication on viewership patterns.

Objectives
1. To analyse the content analysis/time allocation for NEET(UG)-2024 coverage by mainstream media and social media.
2. To investigate, by quantitative analysis, the role of social media, including influencers, in covering NEET(UG)-2024.
3. To assess the changing news consumption dynamics of audiences.

Scope of Study
The scope of the study is restricted to coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 examinations commencing from 05 May 2024 until the Supreme Court ruling on 08 August 2024. The research has been limited in scope to draw valuable lessons from the research project within the allotted period. It includes the most circulated English language daily, the most watched English digital native news channel and the most viewed social media influencer on the related topic within India to conduct a content analysis study.

Hypothesis of Study
The questionnaires were circulated to test two hypotheses. These are:

Hypothesis 1. Traditional and digital media have equally covered the NEET(UG)-2024 controversy (H0) OR Traditional and digital media have not equally covered the NEET(UG)-2024 controversy (H1).

Hypothesis 2. Social media influencers do not play a role in the consumption of news content and in forming opinions (H0) OR Social media influencers play a role in the consumption of news content and in forming opinions (H1).

A Brief Background on the NEET(UG) Examination
A Brief History of India's Medical Schools: The Royal College of Surgeons of England recognized the

three medical degrees given by those universities as early as 1843. They were also listed by the General Medical Council of the United Kingdom.   If you go back to 1933, before the Medical Council of India (MCI was created, the General Medical Council in India was in charge of medical education. Like the General Medical Council in the UK, the Medical Council of India was given powers similar to those of that body. A provincial council was under its control and kept the provincial records and dealt with discipline issues. The Medical Council of India's main job was to make sure that all medical schools in India followed the same basic standards. Besides that, degrees from Indian universities are recognized around the world. The council was empowered to recommend to the Government of India recognition of various medical institutions, whether under the control of the university or of any other autonomous body which, in its opinion, conferred medical degrees or diplomas of the standard considered satisfactory by the council.

A History of the Medical School Entrance Exams for Undergraduates: The Medical Council of India (MCI) brought out the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET(UG)) in 2013 as a national test to get into medical school. It didn't last long, though, because the Supreme Court of India stopped the exam after petitions were made against it. The test started up again in 2016 and was held twice, in May and July, as part of the All-India Pre-Medical Tests (AIPMT). In the end, NEET(UG) took the place of AIPMT in 2017, and state-level medical entrance tests were phased out. NEET(UG) is run by the National Medical Commission (NMC), which was created by the National Medical Commission Act 2019 and went into effect on September 25, 2020. There was no longer a Medical Council of India because of the Indian Medical Council Act of 1956. This caused the Board of Governors to be dissolved. At first, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) was in charge of NEET(UG), but in 2019, that job was given to the National Testing Agency (NTA). After the National Medical Commission (NMC) was created, NEET(UG) became India's only medical entrance exam. From 2020 on, it will replace all other tests, including those for AIIMS and JIPMER. Notably, NEET(UG) is one of 16 national-level tests that NTA gives. Most important entrance exams now use computer-based formats, but NEET(UG) is still the only national-level exam that the National Testing Agency (NTA) gives that uses the OMR format. 11 languages are used for the test: English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Odia, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The National Medical Commission (NMC). Aims of the National Medical Commission are to improve access to high-quality, affordable medical education, make sure there are enough qualified medical professionals in all parts of the country, promote fair and universal healthcare that encourages a community health perspective and makes medical professionals' services available to all citizens; encourage medical professionals to use the latest medical research in their work and to contribute to research; maintain a medical register for India; make sure that all medical services are conducted in an ethical way; and have a good way for people to file complaints. Taking of the NEET(UG) Exam The National Entrance Examination for Medical Courses (NEET(UG)) is an exam that people in India have to take to get into first-year medical programs. As you can see from Figure 2, it's an all-India test that was given by the same people. It was almost time for the test, and parents and kids were both worried about getting their admit cards. Also, students who have finished Class 12th or a similar level. Table 1 shows the possible times for the exam and the issuance of the notice by the NTA. For NEET(UG)-2024, the possible times and notices were not the same.

Table 1. Tentative dates and actual notification for the NEET(UG)-2024 examination (Source: unacademy.com, nta.ac.in)

Event	Tentative Dates	Notification by NTA
NEET(UG)-2024 announcement	2nd week of December 2023	9th February 2024
Start of the NEET(UG) UG 2024 registration	1st week of March 2024 to 1st week of April 2024	9th February to 10th April 2024 (After representation, the date was postponed twice)
NEET(UG) 2024 application correction process	Sometime in the 2nd week of April 2024	26th April 2024
NEET(UG) 2024 admit card	4th week of April 2024	1st - 5th May 2024
NEET(UG) 2024 exam date	5th May 2024 (1st Sunday of May)	5th May 2024 (1st Sunday of May)
NEET(UG) 2024 answer key release	1st week of June 2024	6th June 2024
NEET(UG) 2024 result and final answer key	4th week of June 2024	4th June 2024

Though NTA or the Ministry of Education officials were tight-lipped about the administrative constraints, the paper leak allegations and anomalies in the efficacy of reported results each year indicated a systemic error. Since the reporting of cases was spread out geographically and there were few, these were brushed aside as anomalies or incorrect claims. Through print and digital media, citizens' representations requested an overhaul of the defective mechanism in conducting and publishing NEET(UG) results.
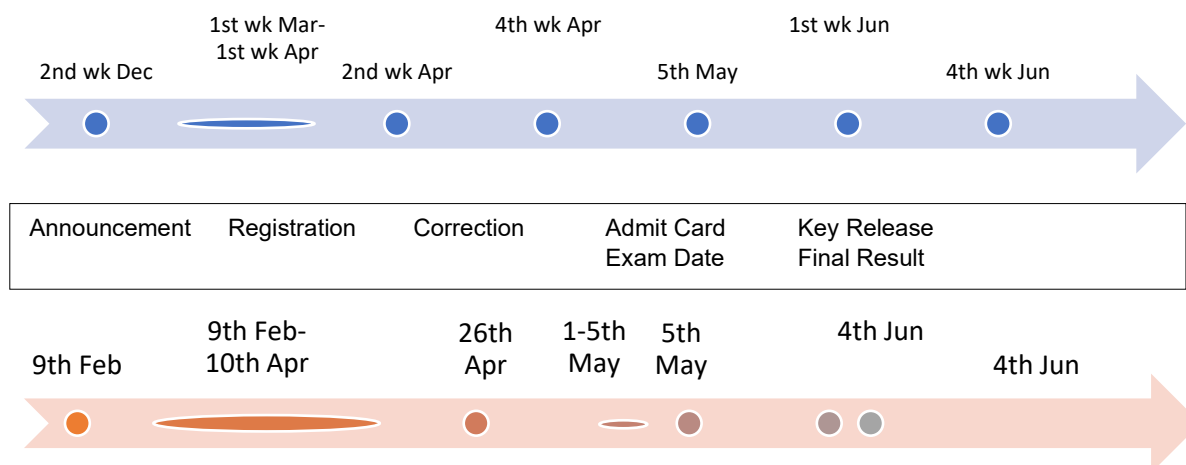
Figure 1. Timeline of Tentative and Notified Dates for NEET(UG)-2024

However, they were all brushed aside. Since NTA did not acknowledge malpractice, there was no requirement to bring the guilty party to book. The system prevailed and maintained the *status quo* from 2019 to 2024. This emboldened the mischief-mongers and criminals associated with NEET(UG) examinations. They spared no effort in monetising the opportunities. Hence, the NEET(UG)-2024 examination witnessed a record number of students taking the examination and increased the probability of large-scale malpractices.

Table 2. Anomalies in NEET(UG) from 2019-2024

Year	Issue	Relief
2019	Leaked QP, Cheating	No action taken
2020	No major controversy	-
2021	Cheating, Incorrect questions	Grace marks are given to affected students
2022	Admit card modified, incorrect language paper issued	Grace marks are given to affected students
2023	No major controversy	-
2024	A major controversy in all aspects of the examination	Intervention by the Supreme Court of India

Review of Literature:

Newspaper Vs Digital Media: Perception and Impact

For the students aspiring to pursue media and dental education, the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-UG is a pivotal exam in India. The understanding of media coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 would significantly help in gaining some perception about the influence of the national-level exam among the students' and parents' groups. This impact is shaped by various factors such as tone of the coverage, the medium used for information dissemination, and the accessibility of the content.

Majorly, the shift from print media to digital media transformed the consumption of the information pattern about NEET (UG)-2024. Digital media is considered to be a media platform offering three different elements

1. Real-time updates
2. Multimedia content, and
3. Personalised information

These elements have made digital media more accessible and engaging for students and parents. Research studies indicate that digital media became the preferred source of news for several students, with a significant decline in the circulation of print media (Madni et al., 2013). The shift is primarily seen among the college-going students, who increasingly hang on to digital platforms for news and updates (Thirumal & P, 2024).

The ability to provide instantaneous updates of Digital Media is very crucial for exams like NEET(UG)-2024, as the timely information becomes an essential factor. However, the concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the information raises concerns as the digital media's rapid dissemination of news would also lead to the spread of misinformation (Huynh et al., 2019).

There is a significant impact of the tone of NEET(UG)-2024 coverage towards shaping the perceptions of the audience who access information through newspapers and digital media. According to some research studies, the tone of educational news coverage is often perceived as negative which can demoralise students and parents (Shine & Rogers, 2021). For example, anxiety and stress are the two major impactful factors primarily seen when the students and parents read or watch negative stories about the exam's difficulty, competition or controversies.

The positive stories about preparation tips, success, and inspirational anecdotes, however, can have the opposite effect, motivating and inspiring students to perform better in the exams (Shine & Rogers, 2021). The news coverage further amplifies the emotional impact based on the type of medium through which the audience consume information. Digital media is considered to enhance the emotional impact of both positive and negative stories due to its interactive and multimedia-rich format (Huynh et al., 2019) (Madni et al., 2013).

The customization and accessibility of Digital Media are the two key factors in determining perceptions of NEET(UG)-2024. The students and parents access information anytime and anywhere from various digital platforms, making the work easier to stay informed about results, exam updates and preparation strategies (Thirumal & P, 2024) (Madni et al., 2013). Furthermore, it also offers personalized content, making users capacitated to filter and prioritise information based on their specific needs and interests (Huynh et al., 2019).

Such accessibility features of digital media, especially accessibility and customisation, would enhance the perceived relevance and usefulness of NEET(UG)-2024 coverage, ultimately making it more engaging and impactful for students and parents. Meanwhile, there is a negative impact when the abundance of information available online would lead to information overload, potentially causing confusion and stress among students and parents (Thirumal & P, 2024) (Madni et al., 2013).

When digital media is turned out to be a dominant resourceful factor to access news, print media yet plays a substantial role in determining perceptions of NEET(UG)-2024. The print media can provide a deeper and balanced view about NEET(UG)-2024 due to its nature to provide structured and curated information, helping to counteract the potential biases and sensationalism often found in digital media (Shine & Rogers,

n.d.). Often, the print media is perceived as more credible and trustworthy when compared to digital media, particularly among older audiences such as parents.

Furthermore, students and parents reflect on and retain information about the exam while accessing information on print media as it has more tangibility and permanence (Thirumal & P, 2024). However, the influence of print media is on a diminishing trend and there is an increasing preference for digital media among younger audiences over a period of time (Thirumal & P, 2024) (Madni et al., 2013).

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Print and Digital Media

Aspect	Print Media	Digital Media
Accessibility	Limited to physical distribution; less accessible for real-time updates.	Highly accessible; available anytime and anywhere via digital devices.
Tone and Emotional Impact	Often perceived as more credible and balanced.	Can be more engaging due to multimedia and interactive features.
Customization	Limited customization; content is curated by editors.	High customization; users can filter and prioritize content based on preferences.
Information Overload	Less likely to cause information overload due to structured content.	Higher risk of information overload due to the abundance of available content.
Credibility	Generally perceived as more credible and trustworthy.	Perceived as less credible due to the risk of misinformation.

Key Differences in the Coverage of NEET(UG)-2024:

In select newspapers and digital media, the NEET(UG)-2024 coverage displays some distinct differences, shaped by factors such as

1. Coverage Strategies and Agenda Setting
2. Audience Demographics and Media Consumption
3. Role of Fact-Checking and Verification
4. Interactivity and Engagement
5. Influence of Media Ownership and Ideology
6. Depth and Breadth of Coverage
7. Technological Advancements and Innovation

1. Coverage Strategies and Agenda Setting

Newspapers and digital media possess varied approaches significantly while covering NEET(UG)-2024, often prioritizing fact-based reporting, concentrating on official announcements, exam schedules, and policy changes. For example, they may dedicate specific sections to educational news, ensuring that readers receive detailed, verified information (Mao et al., 2012). Acting in an opposite direction, the digital media tends to adopt a more dynamic approach, incorporating interactive elements such as live updates,

opinion polls, and social media engagement to foster audience participation (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

In an era when journalism is facing tough challenges, digital media also leverages fact-checking journalism to combat misinformation, a strategy particularly relevant in the context of high-stakes exams like NEET(UG)-2024. Such approach would not only ensure the accuracy of information but also simultaneously builds trust among readers (Alianinggrum et al., 2023). When compared both, the digital platforms are more agile in correcting or updating information in real-time than newspapers, despite a great commitment towards upholding greater accuracy.

2. Audience Demographics and Media Consumption

In shaping the coverage of NEET(UG)-2024, the target audience have a great role to play. Newspapers, which follow traditional formats of news presentation consisting a greater reliability and in-depth analysis, are generally a preferable option for older demographic, including parents and educators (Singh, 2023). On the other hand, digital media targets a younger audience, including students and tech-savvy individuals preferring quick access to information and interactive content (Singh, 2023) (Fichnová et al., 2024). This demographic divide influences the tone and style of reporting. While digital media adheres a more conversational tone, involving videos, social media trends and infographics to engage more younger readers, newspapers often use a formal tone, highlighting detailed analysis and expert opinions (Fichnová et al., 2024) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

3. Role of Fact-Checking and Verification

Misinformation can have serious consequences for students while following news related to exams, particularly in the context of a national entrance exams like NEET(UG), due to which digital media places a strong emphasis on fact-checking. In order to overcome the problems of misinformation, the digital media is employing to the strategies of using AI-powered verification tools and set-up a collaborative platform with fact-checking organisations to ensure the accuracy of information (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021). While newspapers are switching to more traditional fact-checking methods, which can be slower and less scalable compared to digital solutions.

Meanwhile, digital media enhances readers' ability with online and software tools to independently verify information, such as links to official sources or step-by-step guides for fact-checking. This approach not only empowers readers but also fosters a culture of critical thinking and media literacy (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

4. Interactivity and Engagement

One of the key prominent differences between newspapers and digital media is the level of interactivity. Through community-driven content and social media sharing, and, comments and forums, the digital platforms encourage active engagement of the audience (Fichnová et al., 2024) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021). This interactivity would evolve in the form of live Q&A sessions with experts, student testimonials, or crowdsourced tips for exam preparation gaining a better understanding about exams like NEET(UG).

In contrast, newspapers typically offer a more passive experience, with limited opportunities for reader interaction. However, some newspapers are beginning to bridge this gap by directing readers to online forums or social media groups for further discussion (Mao et al., 2012).

5. Influence of Media Ownership and Ideology

Digital media incorporates diversified perspectives, particularly platforms with a global audience outreach, including international comparisons and expert opinions at a global level. Such approach can

lead to a more holistic understanding of the exam's implications from audience or readers end (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

The coverage of information associated with national-level or state-level exams has a large influence in the context of ownership and ideological leanings of media outlets. For instance, digital platforms may highlight success stories and inspirational narratives while newspapers drive by public-service approach may prioritize coverage associated with challenges faced by underprivileged students (Mao et al., 2012) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

6. Depth and Breadth of Coverage

There is a difference between the newspapers and digital platforms in the depth and breadth of their coverage. Newspapers providing in-depth analysis include expert opinions, historical context and policy implications and this makes the content a more valuable resource for readers seeking comprehensive information (Mao et al., 2012). Digital media, despite having a great capability of in-depth reporting, tends to focus on brevity and accessibility. Audience were offered with concise summaries and bullet-point updates that cater to the shorter attention spans of online readers (Fichnová et al., 2024) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

Additionally, digital media often supplements its coverage with multimedia content, such as videos, podcasts, and infographics, which can enhance the reader's understanding of complex topics related to NEET(UG)-2024 (Fichnová et al., 2024) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

7. Technological Advancements and Innovation

The quality of reporting is improved by the integration of technology; however, it also enables media outlets to reach a wider audience helping the information gain more accessibility to all stakeholders (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

Digital media leverages cutting-edge technologies to enhance the coverage of the entrance exams. For example, AI-powered chatbots can provide personalized advice to students, while data analytics can offer insights into exam trends and performance metrics (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021). Newspapers, while slower to adopt such technologies, are beginning to incorporate digital tools into their reporting, such as interactive graphs and searchable databases (Mao et al., 2012).

Table 4: Key Differences in Coverage of NEET(UG)-2024

Aspect	Newspapers	Digital Media
Coverage Strategy	Focus on fact-based reporting, official announcements, and policy changes	Incorporates interactive elements, live updates, and social media engagement
Audience Demographics	Targets older demographics, including parents and educators	Targets younger audiences, including students and tech-savvy individuals
Fact-Checking	Relies on traditional fact-checking methods	Employs AI-powered tools and collaborations with fact-checking organizations

Aspect	Newspapers	Digital Media
Interactivity	Limited interactivity, with some online forums for discussion	Encourages active engagement through comments, forums, and social media sharing
Ownership Influence	Coverage may reflect the ideological leanings of the publication	Often incorporates diverse perspectives, including international comparisons
Content Style	Formal tone with in-depth analysis	Conversational tone with multimedia content, such as videos and infographics
Technological Use	Limited use of technology, with some interactive tools	Leverages AI, data analytics, and multimedia content for enhanced reporting

Challenges in Accurate Reporting on NEET(UG)-2024 by Newspapers and Digital Media

The accurate reporting on NEET(UG)-2024 by newspapers and digital media presents a complex landscape of challenges that impact the quality and reliability of coverage. These challenges stem from structural, technological, and ethical issues that both traditional and digital media platforms face in the modern era. Below is a detailed analysis of these challenges and their implications.

Challenges Faced by Newspapers

1. Decline in Reading Culture and Revenue

Newspapers are grappling with a decline in reading culture, as digital media has become the preferred source of news for many. This shift has led to reduced circulation and revenue, making it difficult for newspapers to allocate sufficient resources to cover events like NEET(UG)-2024 comprehensively. The pressure to reduce production and distribution costs further exacerbates the challenge of delivering timely and accurate updates (Hassan et al., 2023).

2. Competition from Digital Media

The rise of digital media has intensified competition for newspapers. Digital platforms offer real-time updates, interactivity, and multimedia content, which traditional newspapers struggle to match. This competition forces newspapers to compromise on quality to maintain relevance, potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of their NEET coverage (Saragih & Harahap, 2020).

3. Resource Constraints

Newspapers often lack the resources to invest in advanced technologies or hire specialized journalists. This limitation can hinder their ability to provide detailed, data-driven coverage of NEET(UG)-2024, particularly in analyzing the exam's implications across different regions and demographics (Åkesson & Thomsen, 2015).

Challenges Faced by Digital Media

4. Pressure for Real-Time Reporting

Digital media platforms face immense pressure to deliver news instantaneously. This pressure often leads to superficial reporting, as journalists may prioritize speed over accuracy. In the context of NEET(UG)-

2024, such practices could result in incomplete or misleading information being disseminated to the public (Shyam., 2024).

5. Influence of Algorithms and Metrics

Digital media platforms are heavily influenced by algorithms that prioritize content based on clicks, shares, and likes. This metrics-driven approach can lead to sensationalism and clickbait headlines, which may undermine the credibility of NEET(UG)-2024 coverage. Additionally, the reliance on algorithms can create an echo chamber effect, limiting the diversity of perspectives in reporting (Shyam., 2024).

6. Ethical Challenges and Misinformation

The rapid dissemination of information on digital platforms has given rise to ethical challenges, including the spread of fake news and unverified reports. For NEET(UG)-2024, this could manifest in the form of unverified rumors about exam leaks, question paper discrepancies, or policy changes, which could cause confusion and anxiety among stakeholders (Triwulan et al., 2024) (Adiba & Imansari, 2023).

7. Dependence on Social Media

Digital media's reliance on social media platforms for news dissemination introduces additional challenges. Social media platforms are often plagued by misinformation and lack the gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional journalism. This can lead to the amplification of unverified news about NEET(UG)-2024, further complicating the media landscape (Adiba & Imansari, 2023).

Challenges Specific to NEET(UG)-2024 Coverage

8. Diverse Linguistic and Regional Needs

NEET(UG)-2024 is conducted in multiple languages, and the exam's implications vary across different states and regions in India. Newspapers and digital media must cater to diverse linguistic and regional needs, which can be resource-intensive. Additionally, the exam's current format, which is only conducted in English and Hindi, may marginalize students from other linguistic backgrounds, further complicating accurate reporting (Shanbhag, 2016).

9. Technological Adaptation

The digitalization of media has necessitated the adoption of new technologies for reporting. However, the transition to digital platforms is not without challenges. Newspapers and digital media must invest in multimedia storytelling, data visualization, and real-time updates to effectively cover NEET(UG)-2024. This requires significant technological expertise and resources, which many outlets lack (Kafedjiska, 2023) (Fidler, 1994).

10. Maintaining Editorial Independence

Both newspapers and digital media face economic pressures that can compromise editorial independence. The shift towards revenue models driven by clicks, subscriptions, and advertising can lead to biased or sensationalized reporting on NEET(UG)-2024 to attract larger audiences (T., 2024) (Kafedjiska, 2023).

Impact on Coverage of NEET(UG)-2024

1. Reduced Depth and Quality of Reporting

The challenges faced by newspapers and digital media often result in reduced depth and quality of reporting on NEET(UG)-2024. Critical aspects such as the exam's impact on rural students, gender disparities, and the mental health of candidates may receive inadequate attention due to resource constraints and the pressure to prioritize sensational stories (Hassan et al., 2023) (T., 2024).

2. Increased Risk of Misinformation

The ethical and technological challenges faced by digital media increase the risk of misinformation about NEET(UG)-2024. This can lead to confusion among students, parents, and educators, undermining trust in the media and the exam itself (Triwulan et al., 2024) (Adiba & Imansari, 2023).

3. Fragmented Audience Engagement

The shift to digital platforms has led to fragmented audience engagement. While younger audiences may prefer digital media, older audiences may rely on traditional newspapers. This fragmentation can result in uneven coverage of NEET(UG)-2024, with certain demographics receiving inadequate information (Kafedjiska, 2023).

4. Erosion of Journalistic Integrity

The pressure to produce real-time content and the influence of algorithms can erode journalistic integrity. This may lead to a focus on clickbait headlines rather than factual, balanced reporting, ultimately compromising the credibility of NEET(UG)-2024 coverage (T., 2024) (Adiba & Imansari, 2023).

Strategies to Address These Challenges

1. Investment in Digital Literacy

Media organizations must invest in digital literacy programs to equip journalists with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of digital reporting. This includes training in multimedia storytelling, data visualization, and fact-checking (Kafedjiska, 2023) (Fidler, 1994).

2. Collaboration Between Traditional and Digital Media

Collaboration between traditional and digital media can help address resource constraints. Newspapers can leverage the reach of digital platforms, while digital media can benefit from the credibility and in-depth reporting of traditional journalism (Hassan et al., 2023) (Åkesson & Thomsen, 2015).

3. Adoption of Ethical Reporting Practices

Media organizations must adopt ethical reporting practices, including fact-checking and transparency, to combat misinformation. This is particularly critical for high-stakes events like NEET(UG)-2024, where accuracy is paramount (Triwulan et al., 2024) (Adiba & Imansari, 2023).

4. Diversification of Revenue Models

To maintain editorial independence, media organizations should explore diversified revenue models, such as subscriptions, memberships, and philanthropic support. This can reduce dependence on clicks and advertisements, allowing for more balanced and comprehensive reporting (T., 2024) (Kafedjiska, 2023).

8. Challenges and Limitations

Both newspapers and digital media face challenges in covering NEET(UG)-2024, but the nature of these challenges differs. Newspapers must contend with the constraints of print, such as space limitations and the need for timely updates, which can hinder their ability to provide real-time coverage (Mao et al., 2012). Digital media, on the other hand, must navigate the complexities of misinformation and the need for constant engagement, which can be resource-intensive (Alianinggrum et al., 2023) (Afdhala & Laksmi, 2021).

Despite these challenges, both mediums play a crucial role in shaping public perception and understanding of NEET(UG)-2024, highlighting the importance of responsible and accurate reporting.

The challenges faced by newspapers and digital media in accurately reporting on NEET(UG)-2024 are multifaceted, ranging from resource constraints and technological adaptation to ethical dilemmas and the pressure for real-time reporting. These challenges not only affect the quality of coverage but also

undermine public trust in the media. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of strategic investments, ethical practices, and collaboration between traditional and digital media platforms. By doing so, media organizations can ensure that their coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 is accurate, comprehensive, and accessible to all stakeholders.

Table 5: Comparison of Challenges Faced by Newspapers and Digital Media
This table highlights the unique and overlapping challenges faced by newspapers and digital media in reporting on NEET(UG)-2024, emphasizing the need for collaborative strategies to address these issues.

Challenge	Newspapers	Digital Media
Resource Constraints	Limited resources for in-depth reporting on NEET(UG)-2024	High costs of producing multimedia content and maintaining real-time updates
Competition	Struggles to compete with digital media's interactivity and real-time updates	Pressure to produce viral content to maintain audience engagement
Ethical Challenges	Risk of biased reporting due to economic pressures	Spread of misinformation and fake news
Technological Adaptation	Need to adopt digital tools for effective reporting	Challenges in leveraging algorithms and metrics for balanced reporting
Audience Engagement	Declining readership and fragmented audience	Difficulty in maintaining trust and credibility in a crowded digital space

Data Collection and Data Analysis
Objective -1: Coverage of NEET(UG)-2024 Controversy by Media: Content Analysis
Research Question 1: What is the coverage given to the NEET(UG)-2024 controversy by newsprint (including digital print edition), digital native news channels on the internet, TV news channels and prominent YouTube channels from 04 May 2024 to 08 August 2024?
Press freedom in India is a sensitive topic for discussion. Many observers point towards the World Press Freedom Index 2024, where India is ranked 159 among 161 countries, highlighting the poor state of press freedom. Without delving deeply into the ranking on freedom of the press, one can safely argue that news coverage and reporting in India are quite robust. As per the Office of Registrar of Newspapers for India (all data is as of 31st March 2022), there are 1,46,045 registered publications in India, of which there were 20,278 registered Dailies. The highest number of publications were registered in Hindi (56,052), followed by English (19,929), Marathi (10,380), Urdu (6,946), Gujarati (6,811), Telugu (6,185), Tamil (6,100), Kannada (6,083), Bengali (5,060) and Malayalam (3,497). Also, the location of printing of newspapers is well spread from cosmopolitan cities to smaller towns. This indicates a healthy state for disseminating news and views in regional and colloquial languages, Hindi and English. The Office of Registrar of Newspapers for India collects and collates sales and other figures for newspapers and magazines. It does

not indicate by name the most circulated dailies in India. Similarly, official statistics on most viewed TV channels are unavailable for televised news. Hence, other reliable and universally acceptable sources had to be identified before conducting the content analysis for newsprint/online editions of newsprint and TV/digital TV news for the said research topic. SCImago and Statista are sources referred to in the research for print and TV.

SCImago, a research group from the University of Granada, Madrid, Spain, is dedicated to information analysis, representation and retrieval using visualisation techniques. SCImago's ranking is highly respected in the field of academic research. This platform takes its name from the *SCImago Journal Rank* (SJR) indicator, developed by SCImago from the widely known algorithm *Google PageRank*. This indicator shows the journal visibility in the *Scopus* database from 1996 onwards for various research journals (Source: https://www.scimagojr.com/aboutus). In 2022, SCImago started the SCImago Media Ranking (SMR). They use the SMR to identify news organisations with the most extensive online audiences. As stated on their website, https://blog.scimagomedia.com/category/news/, "SCImago examines the publishing strategies of traditional news outlets on Twitter. SMR is used to identify news organisations with the largest online audiences". As stated by SMR, the data was acquired via Twitter Academic API v2 and the SEMrush platform in early 2023 to cover traffic for 2022. The database includes website audits monitoring a domain's web traffic, with the aggregated data subsequently processed using R packages and Atlas. ti. SMR for 2025 was released on 28 January 2025. India.com and Firstpost are the most viewed digital native channels on the internet. By English newsprint circulation, the *Times of India* ranks the highest with 1.73 Crore readers (Source: Wikipedia and Statista). The data collection period is from 04 May 2024 to 30th Jun2024. Based on circulation figures, the newspaper being reviewed is the Times of India, New Delhi edition. The TV viewership, based on data from Statista for 2023, is CNN News18. The digital native channel on the internet is *india.com*, based on data from the SMR report for 2024. News coverage in the Times of India (ToI) was carried out for the New Delhi edition.

Online Media Coverage: Many social media influencers covered the NEET-2024 fiasco. As one of the prominent undergraduate entrance examinations, NEET is closely followed on social media. Content is created on topics like preparation, conduct, form filling, likely pattern of questions, dissection of results and many other aspects of NEET. Social media platforms like YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, X (earlier Twitter), Instagram, etc., have several influencers and content creators who use NEET as a broad topic and endeavour to increase their subscribers and viewership base. One prominent voice and face of the NEET education content is Mr Alakh Pandey, CEO of Physics Wallah. Physics Wallah (PW), an online education portal, has a strong presence on YouTube. It is ranked in 79th position internationally, with 2.84 billion views for the most viewed channel in the education category. As of 18 March 2025, the PW YouTube channel had 13.4 million subscribers with 1.6k videos uploaded on its channel (Source: socialblade.com). It has a significant presence on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. In addition, Mr Alakh Pandey and many other concerned citizens approached the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, raising concerns about alleged irregularities, question paper leaks, and awarding grace marks in the NEET-2024 examinations. The multiple petitions related to the NEET(UG)-2024 exam, including those alleging paper leaks and irregularities, were all clubbed together for a hearing in the Supreme Court. Given the large population of concerned students, parents and educators, content creators keenly followed the developments, and digital media covered the fiasco in great detail. Data was obtained from socialblade.com, an online tracker on statistics and growth of content creators, for YouTube viewership of PW channel during the hearing of the NEET-2024 case in the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India. The

monthly gained viewership and subscription figures for the PW YouTube channel for July 2024 are shown in **Figures 2 and 3** below.
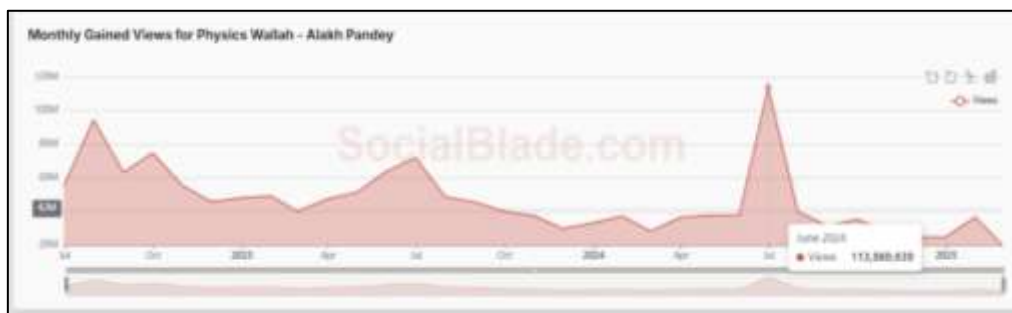

Figure 2. Monthly gained viewership for PW in July 2024
(Source: Socialblade.com)

The spike in subscriber and viewership data for July 2024 concerning the PW YouTube channel shows the ability of the audience to reach breaking news using social media. Such reach and increase in viewership/readership are not seen in TV and print.

Objective 2- To Investigate the Role of Social Media and Social Media Influencers in the Coverage Of NEET-2024 Issues

Figure 3. Monthly gained subscription for PW in July 2024 (Source: Socialblade.com)

Research Question 2: What is the role of social media and social influencers in the coverage of the NEET-2024 controversy?

A questionnaire-based survey method was adopted to ascertain sources of current news preferences based on age, education and gender. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions. Questions one to four established the age, gender, and educational qualification of the respondents. Questions four to six were used to determine the most preferred source of current affairs news and the frequency of news updates. Questions seven to twelve were used to ascertain the knowledge of medical education in India and the NEET-2024 examinations. Questions 13 to 18 were again asked to know the reader preferences for current affairs news. The media sources were broadly classified into newspapers, TV news, online newspapers, social media (including media influencers) and news in short. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms. The data was then transferred to MS Excel. Data analysis was performed after checking the data for completeness and correctness; the data was exported to IBM SPSS software for statistical analysis.
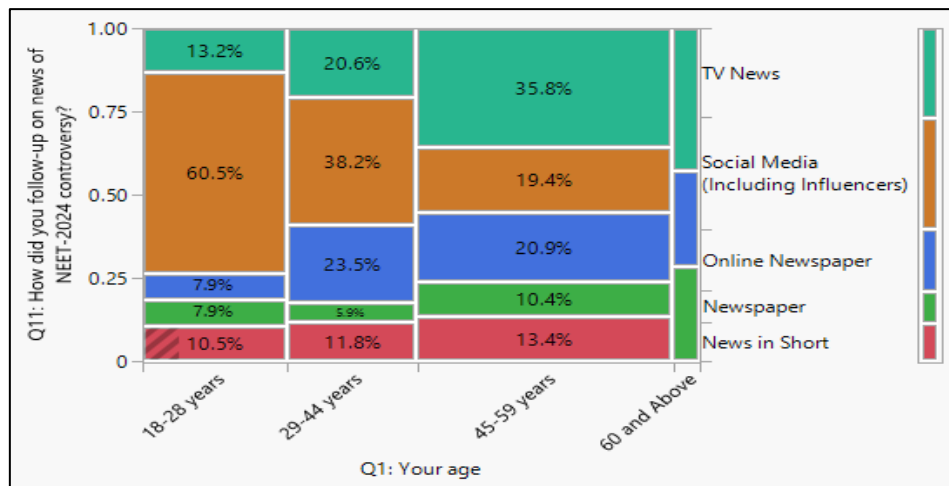
The age, gender and education-wise news consumption of the NEET-2024 controversy is shown in **Figures 4, 5 and 6**, respectively.
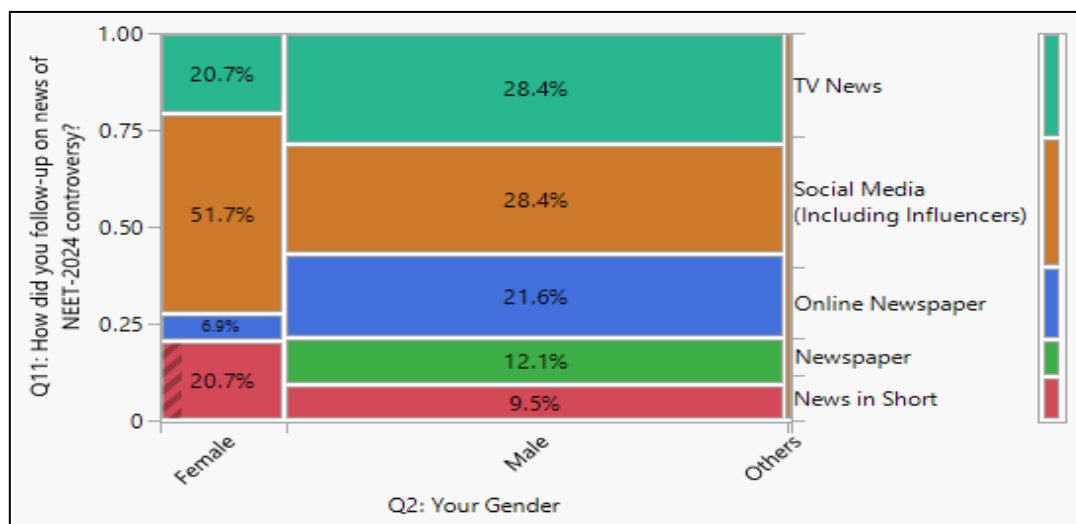

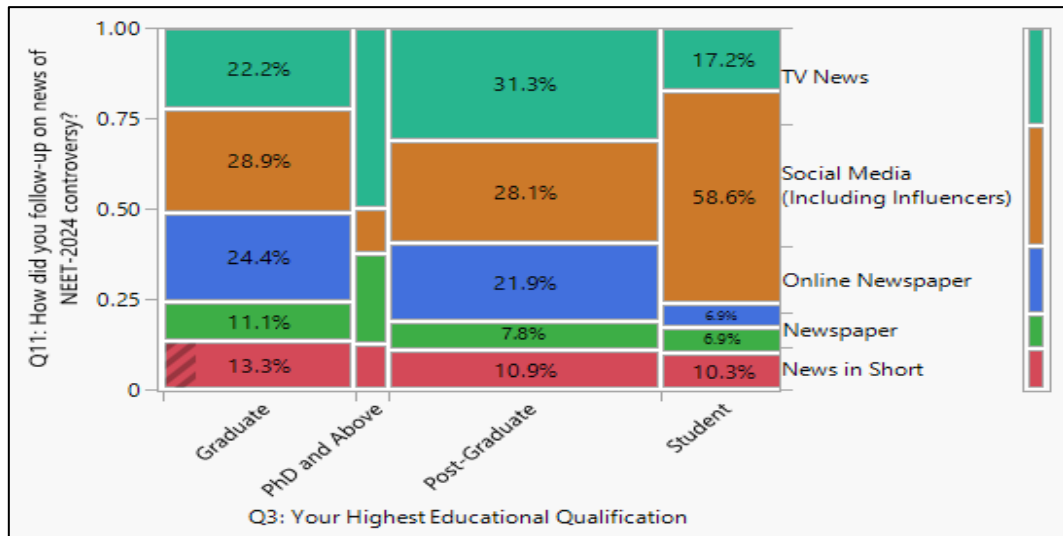**Figure 5. Gender vs Media preference for NEET 2024**

Figure 6. Education vs Media Preference for NEET 2024 Controversy

There is a clear choice in media preference based on age group, gender, and educational status. It is clearly seen that the age group 18-28 (called Gen Z, in common parlance) prefer online news sources for information and updates on current affairs. The choices are more mixed among the 29-44 age group (called millennials) and the 45-59 age group (called Gen X). Both traditional media and digital news sources are utilised for current affairs news. From the answers to questions 11 and 12 and the spike in subscriptions and views for July 2024, as shown in **Figures 2 and 3**, it is quite clear that the age group 18-28 (Gen Z) prefer online influencers and social media-based news sources for the consumption of current affairs news. From answers given to question no. 6 on news value, Gen Z prefers discussion views and interaction. This also reflects the changing contours of news consumption, where the audience acts as citizen journalists and is consistent with choices expressed by the age group 18-28 in the questionnaire survey.

Objective 3- To Assess the Change in News Dynamics of Mainstream Media and Social Media Influencers

The present research project study on the coverage of the NEET-2024 controversy and news consumption patterns based on age, gender and education was carried out in the form of an analysis of responses to a questionnaire. The answers by the respondents are consistent with many other studies performed to study general news consumption patterns in the age of digital and traditional media overlap. This study clearly reveals the difference in news consumption patterns based on the age of respondents. Digital and traditional media, such as online newspapers, news in short, TV, and newspapers, are being accessed in an overlapping manner by audiences. However, the majority of people in the age group 18-28 clearly prefer to access news from social media, including influencers. Female respondents also prefer news from online resources like social media posts, news in shorts and online newspapers. This trend is again consistent with the findings of many marketing surveys and studies. Access to the internet, low data cost for the internet, accessibility to smartphones and handheld devices, the prevalence of social media for access to information and news, shareability, interactive experience, cross-media content, and "pro-am" journalism seem to guide the decisions of Gen Z and women in their preferences.

In addition to the eight traditional news values, engagement, brevity, and speed seem to be the new values that are being added to the existing ones. Major traditional media outlets have adapted to the changing

preferences of audiences. Print media channels are practising social media engagement. Access to cross-media content is also made possible due to rapid developments in technology and communications. Digital native news channels also have high traction among audiences. In India, a digital native Hindi channel called "*Lallantop*" is ranked 5th among the most-watched news channels (data from socialblade.com). It is owned by the India Today group, a media conglomerate in India. The subscriber base and viewership added for the month of July 2024 are shown in **Figure 7**. Lallantop was among the first news media to report on the NEET-2024 controversy. It was relayed on its YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhoglFOTFKc) on 5th June 2024, a day after the NTA declared the results of NEET-2024. It gained over 6.4 lakh views and 4.3k comments. The shareability factor, in addition to the strong emotion it created, made this news viral. Many mainstream media easily missed the NEET-2024 result declaration in the midst of national election results in print and TV.
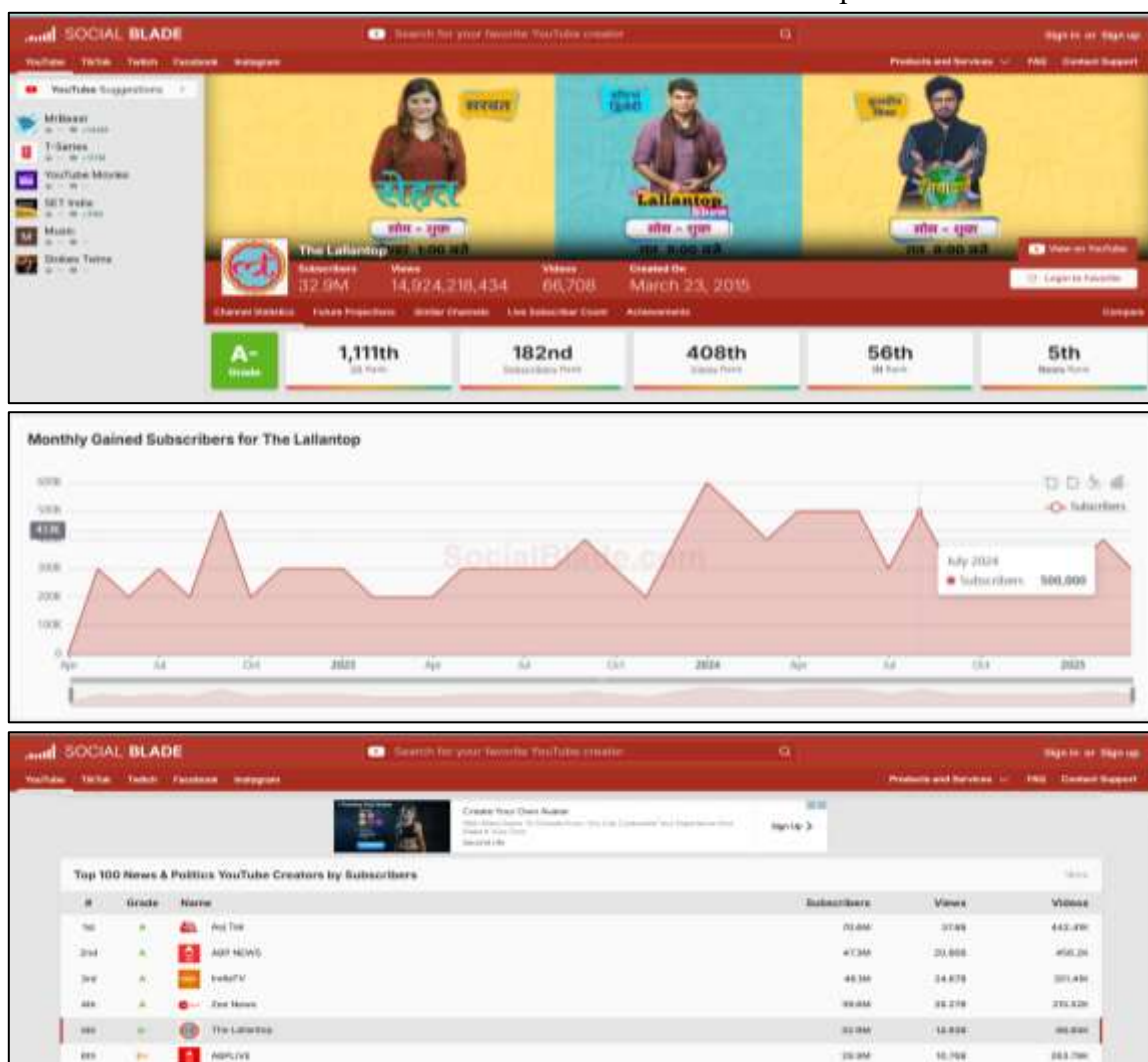

Figure 7. Digital native media *Lallantop* with a subscriber base, subscribers, and ranking

However, digital news broadcasters successfully reached select audiences and made the news viral.

Quantitative Analysis The questionnaire was circulated to various groups on WhatsApp. Respondents were requested to answer the questions completely. 146 complete responses were received. The age,

gender and education-wise distribution of respondents is tabulated in **Table 4**. The respondents in the age group 60 and above were the fewest, consisting of seven responses. Responses were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel to check the data. Further, JMP (Student Edition), a statistical software, was utilised to analyse the various aspects of the questionnaire for quantitative analysis.

Table 6: Age, gender and education-wise distribution of respondents

SL.No	Age Group	Gender		Education			
		Male	Female	Student	Grad	Post Grad	PhD
1	18-24						
2	25-44						
3	45-59						
4	60 and above						

Hypothesis. Two hypotheses were proposed prior to the circulation of the questionnaire. These were: - **Hypothesis 1**. Traditional and digital media have equally covered the NEET(UG)-2024 controversy (H0) OR Traditional and digital media have not equally covered the NEET(UG)-2024 controversy (H1).
Hypothesis 2. Social media influencers do not play a role in the consumption of news content and in forming opinions (H0) OR Social media influencers play a role in the consumption of news content and in forming opinions (H1).
Using Google Forms, Microsoft Excel and JMP student edition, the questionnaire was utilised to check the effectiveness of the hypothesis. Before conducting a hypothesis test, a correlation test was carried out to check the consistency of the participants' answers. **Rank Correlation**. In the questionnaire, there was a requirement to check the consistency of the answers. Questions 11 and 12 were included to ascertain the respondent's answer consistency. The answers to the above questions were grouped into age groups. The number of respondents, based on age, was tabulated using JMP and Microsoft Excel. Since the answers were qualitative choices, Rank Correlation was used to determine the correlation for non-quantitative attributes. The rank correlation is known as the Spearman Rank correlation. It is determined by the symbol ρ (Rho) and is calculated using the formulae: -

$$\rho = \frac{6\Sigma d^2}{N(N^2-1)}$$

Here, 'd' is the difference in the number of responses for questions 11 and 12, and 'N' is the number of observations. In the said case, N=4 (The choices given to respondents). A calculation sheet for each age group is given as **Appendix "F"**. It is observed from the responses that for age groups 18-28 and 45-59, the correlation is +0.4. For age groups 29-44 and 60 and above, the correlation is +1.
Hypothesis Testing. The data on general viewership choices and during the NEET-2024 controversy was determined using a questionnaire. There were 146 complete responses. The age, gender and educational qualification-wise distribution of respondents is given in **Table 4**. The data obtained is non-parametric. That is, we cannot compare it with any existing sample or population data. In such a case, the Chi-Square test can be used to test a hypothesis. The actual and the theoretical frequency can be used to determine the discrepancy. The formula calculates the Chi-square.

$$\chi2 = \frac{\Sigma(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i}$$

Here, χ(Chi) is the value to be determined. Its values for different distributions are given in **Appendix 'H'**. The chi-squared test is a one-tailed significance test. 'O' is the observed frequency. 'E' is the theoretical frequency. The two hypotheses that were tested are given in paragraph 26. Questions 11 and 12 were used to test hypotheses 1, and Questions 5 and 14 were used to check hypotheses 2. The calculation of hypotheses is shown in **Appendix 'G'**. The Chi-square value at a 5% significance level was used in both hypotheses. Since four and five options were given to the respondents in questions 11,12, and 5, 14, the degree of freedom (DOF) was taken to be 3 and 4, respectively. A hypothesis test was conducted on all four questions separately. This gave better confidence in the consistency and relevance of the questionnaire survey and resulting user preferences in the choice of media. The theoretical and experimental values for hypotheses 1 and 2 based on questions 11, 12 and 5,14 are tabulated in **Table 7**.

Table 7: Hypothesis Testing of Research Questions

Hypothesis	Data Source	χ2 (Experimental)	χ2 (Theoretical)	H0	H1
1	Question 11	27.76	9.488	Reject	Accept
	Question 12	68.22	7.815	Reject	Accept
2	Question 5	10.3	9.488	Reject	Accept
	Question 14	43.84	7.815	Reject	Accept

It is evident from the hypothesis testing using the Chi-square test that the null hypothesis (H0) has been rejected in both cases. We can safely state the following: -

1. Traditional and digital media have not covered the NEET-2024 equally.
2. Social media influencers play a role in news content consumption and forming opinions.

The questionnaire-based deductions on changing dynamics of news consumption are in sync with recent studies on the subject.

Conclusion and Discussion

From the answers to the questionnaire, rank correlation analysis, and hypothesis testing using chi-square testing, we have been able to ascertain the following aspects of the changing dynamics of news consumption:

1. News consumption choice varies greatly based on the age and gender of the reader.
2. Social media and digital news are preferred by the age group 18-28 and by female readers. This is more evenly spread among the 29-44 and 45-59 age group male readers. 18–28-year readers (called Gen Z) are "digital natives" and have been extensively exposed to the digital medium since a young age. Also, COVID-19 has accelerated and naturalised the consumption of different content on digital media. The preference of female readers for the digital medium for news consumption needs to be ascertained. The said questionnaire and project work were not designed to differentiate gender-based news consumption.

3. Males aged 29-44 and 45-59 have a more balanced preference for news sources. There is no differentiation based on their academic qualification. These choices may indicate this age group's exposure to print, TV, and radio media in addition to digital news avenues.

4. Only seven respondents were in the age group 60 and above. It was very clear from their responses that their news preference was more traditional. Newsprint and TV news were their source of news.

5. Social media channels and influencers are not generalists in posting content, as is the case with news channels in the digital space. Most social media channels/influencers cater for limited "themes". In the case of NEET-2024, those social media channels/influencers who traditionally hosted content on NEET were the ones who "picked up" the news on NEET-2024 anomalies. This was made possible due to the interactive nature of social media, where followers/subscribers can post comments.

6. Social media channels and influencers generate income by increasing subscribers and views for every content posted on a media platform. Since social media is an environment where discussions and comments are feasible, the content creators can assess the traffic for any posted content. In this manner, the content creators can discern "viral" news. Viral content is a news value for content creators. Taking a "cue" from the viral news, the subject is dissected further to provide content for subscribers and viewers. This enables social media channels/influencers to stay a step ahead of traditional news media in catering for Breaking News.

7. Traditional media has many advantages. Their network of reporters, access to authorities for views and official briefing and verification of news for authenticity are rarely matched by social media channels/influencers. Hence, the trust factor in traditional media is much higher. This may be why age groups 25-44, 45-59 and 60 and above still prefer traditional news sources.

8. Traditional, digital news and social media channels/influencers all have their faithful viewers.

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