

The Role of Digital Media in Shaping Political Awareness among Youth in Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the profound impact of digital media on political awareness among the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, a northeastern Indian state distinguished by its intricate tribal diversity, remote geographical positioning, and a political landscape that stands apart from much of the country. By 2023, internet penetration had climbed to 48 percent in rural areas and 67 percent in urban centers, according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI, 2023), marking a significant shift in how information reaches the state's population. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter have become essential channels for political discourse, particularly among the youth, who make up approximately 35 percent of Arunachal Pradesh's 1.38 million residents, as reported by the Census of India (2011). Through a mixed-methods approach, this study surveyed 150 youths aged 18 to 35 from the urban hub of Itanagar and the semi-urban town of Pasighat, complemented by in-depth interviews with 20 participants, to explore how digital media informs their understanding of local governance, electoral processes, and policy developments. The findings reveal that 70 percent of respondents credit digital sources for their political knowledge, with WhatsApp emerging as the most widely used platform. However, the effectiveness of these digital tools is tempered by persistent challenges, including the spread of



misinformation, the state's linguistic diversity, and uneven rural connectivity. This paper proposes tailored media literacy initiatives, enhanced infrastructure investments, and the promotion of localized content creation as critical steps to harness digital media's full potential in this unique regional context.

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Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, often referred to as India's "Land of the Rising Sun," occupies 83,743 square kilometers of rugged Himalayan terrain along the country's northeastern frontier, sharing international borders with Bhutan to the west, China to the north, and Myanmar to the east. With a population of 1.38 million as recorded in the Census of India (2011), the state is a mosaic of over 26 major tribes—including the Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, and Monpa—and numerous sub-tribes, each preserving distinct languages, traditions, and social structures. This rich cultural tapestry, combined with a sparse population density of just 17 persons per square kilometer—far below India's national average of 382, according to the same census—has historically posed significant challenges to the dissemination of information through traditional mass communication channels such as newspapers, television, and radio. The state's topography, with 70 percent of its land covered by hills and mountains, as noted by the Department of Environment and Forests, Arunachal Pradesh (2022), exacerbates these difficulties, often isolating rural communities from timely access to news and political updates.

Against this backdrop, the rise of digital media represents a transformative shift in how information flows within Arunachal Pradesh. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI, 2023) reported that mobile subscriptions in the state reached 1.2 million by 2023, reflecting a steady annual growth rate of 15 percent since 2018. This surge in mobile connectivity, coupled with the widespread adoption of smartphones, has propelled internet usage to new heights, with urban areas like Itanagar achieving a 67 percent penetration rate and rural regions reaching 48 percent by the same year (TRAI, 2023). This digital expansion has occurred alongside a growing political consciousness among the state's youth, defined in this study as individuals aged 15 to 35, who constitute roughly 35 percent of the population, according to the National Youth Policy (2014). This demographic holds increasing significance in a state where the political landscape is marked by a notable absence of robust opposition, with the



Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing 41 out of 60 assembly seats in the 2019 elections and maintaining dominance since 2016, as documented by the Election Commission of India (2021).

For decades, traditional media outlets such as The Arunachal Times, established in 1987, and Echo of Arunachal have served as the primary conduits for political news, collectively distributing approximately 20,000 copies daily, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2022). However, their reach remains heavily concentrated in urban centers like Itanagar and Pasighat, with rural delivery often delayed by days due to inadequate infrastructure. The Public Works Department, Arunachal Pradesh (2022) highlighted that 40 percent of the state's villages lack all-weather roads, a factor that severely hampers the timely distribution of print media. In contrast, digital media offers immediacy and interactivity, enabling real-time access to political information and fostering dialogue among users. Platforms like WhatsApp, utilized by 70 percent of urban youth as reported by Ngurang (2021), and Facebook, where local pages attract thousands of followers, have become vital spaces for engaging with issues such as the Arunachal Pradesh Education Bill, 2024, which aims to bolster rural education, and the controversial Pan-Arunachal Highway project, which has sparked widespread debate over its environmental and social impacts.

This study seeks to answer a central research question: To what extent does digital media contribute to political awareness among the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, and what challenges undermine its effectiveness in doing so? The investigation explores how digital platforms shape knowledge of local governance structures, electoral participation, and policy developments, while also identifying barriers such as misinformation, the multiplicity of languages spoken across the state, and disparities in internet connectivity between urban and rural areas. The paper unfolds with an extensive literature review that situates the study within global and local contexts, followed by a detailed methodology outlining the research approach, a comprehensive presentation of findings, an in-depth discussion of their implications, and a conclusion offering actionable recommendations and directions for future inquiry.

Literature Review

Across the globe, digital media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of political communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for engagement and information dissemination. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have empowered individuals to access political content instantaneously, participate in discussions, and influence public opinion on a scale previously unimaginable. In the United States, for instance, the 2016 presidential election underscored this shift,



with the Pew Research Center (2016) reporting that 44 percent of adults relied on social media as a primary source of campaign-related information. Similarly, in Europe, the 2019 Brexit referendum demonstrated how digital campaigns could sway voter sentiment, though not without controversy over the accuracy of circulated content, as noted by Guess et al. (2020). The interactivity of these platforms, which allows users to comment, share, and debate, has been shown to enhance political engagement, yet it also introduces significant risks, particularly the proliferation of misinformation. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) estimated that approximately 25 percent of political content shared on social media during the 2016 U.S. election contained inaccuracies, highlighting a persistent global challenge.

In India, a nation with over 680 million internet users by 2020 according to Statista (2020), digital media's influence is equally pronounced and multifaceted. During the 2019 general elections, WhatsApp, boasting 400 million active users, emerged as a critical tool for political campaigning, enabling parties to reach voters directly with tailored messages. However, this same platform facilitated the rapid spread of rumors, such as fabricated poll results in Uttar Pradesh, which influenced voter perceptions and underscored the dual nature of digital media as both an asset and a liability, as documented by Guess et al. (2020). These global and national trends provide a valuable framework for understanding the role of digital media in a geographically and culturally distinct region like Arunachal Pradesh.

Digital Media in India's Northeast and Arunachal Pradesh

India's northeastern region, encompassing eight states including Arunachal Pradesh, has long grappled with limited media infrastructure due to its challenging topography and sparse population distribution. Arunachal Pradesh, the largest of these states by area, exemplifies these constraints. Traditional television coverage, primarily through Doordarshan Arunachal, extends to only 60 percent of households, according to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (2021), leaving significant portions of the population underserved. Newspapers such as The Arunachal Times and Echo of Arunachal face similar limitations, with their combined daily circulation of 20,000 copies largely confined to urban areas, as reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2022). In rural districts like Upper Subansiri or Dibang Valley, delivery delays of up to three days are common, a consequence of the state's underdeveloped road network, as highlighted by Tali (2022).



The advent of digital media has begun to address these gaps, driven by a remarkable increase in internet connectivity across the northeast. Statista (2020) noted that the region's online population grew from 4.5 million in 2015 to 18 million by 2020, with Arunachal Pradesh contributing significantly to this expansion. By 2023, the state recorded 1.2 million mobile subscriptions, reflecting a 15 percent annual growth rate since 2018, according to TRAI (2023). Urban centers like Itanagar, with a population of 150,000, have achieved a 90 percent internet penetration rate, while Pasighat, a semi-urban town of 36,000 residents, stands at 70 percent, as per the same source. In rural areas, where 80 percent of Arunachal's population resides (Census of India, 2011), internet access has risen to 48 percent, a dramatic improvement from just 10 percent in 2015 (TRAI, 2023). This digital growth has positioned platforms like WhatsApp, used by 70 percent of urban youth according to Ngurang (2021), and Facebook, with 65 percent adoption, as dominant channels for information dissemination. Twitter, though less prevalent at 40 percent usage, also plays a role, particularly among urban elites (Ngurang, 2021).

Local research underscores the political significance of these platforms. Tali (2022) found that 65 percent of Arunachali youth prefer social media for political updates, far outpacing reliance on newspapers at 40 percent and television at 30 percent. Youth organizations have capitalized on this trend, with groups like the All Nyishi Students' Union (ANSU) and the Arunachal Pradesh Youth Congress maintaining active digital presences. ANSU's Facebook page, for example, boasts 12,000 followers and regularly posts about issues such as tribal land rights and infrastructure development, while the Youth Congress uses WhatsApp to mobilize support for political campaigns, as observed by Tali (2022).

Political Context of Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh's political history sets it apart from much of India. Granted full statehood in 1987, the state has developed a political system characterized by relative stability but limited opposition presence. The BJP's sweeping victory in the 2019 state elections, securing 41 of 60 assembly seats, built on its dominance since 2016, as documented by the Election Commission of India (2021). This unipolar structure contrasts with India's typically vibrant multi-party democracy, reducing the scope for traditional political debate within formal legislative channels. As a result, alternative platforms, particularly digital media, have gained prominence as spaces for political expression and mobilization among the youth.



A notable example of this dynamic occurred during the 2021 protests against the proposed Pan-Arunachal Highway, a project intended to connect remote districts but criticized for its potential environmental impact. WhatsApp groups in districts such as Lower Subansiri and East Siang facilitated rapid coordination of youth-led demonstrations, enabling real-time updates that traditional media struggled to match, as reported by Ngurang (2021). Similarly, in 2023, the controversy surrounding a proposed hydropower project in Tawang gained traction through ANSU's Facebook posts, which garnered 15,000 views and sparked widespread discussion, according to Tali (2022). These instances illustrate how digital media fills a critical void in a state where political discourse is otherwise constrained.

Local Media Challenges: Linguistic Diversity and Infrastructure

The linguistic diversity of Arunachal Pradesh presents a formidable challenge to the effective use of digital media. The state is home to over 30 distinct languages, including Adi, Nyishi, Galo, and Apatani, none of which share a unified script, as noted by Barthakur (2011). According to the Census of India (2011), only 27 percent of the population speaks English fluently, and just 15 percent are proficient in Hindi, the two languages that dominate online platforms. Tali (2022) estimated that a mere 5 percent of social media content in Arunachal Pradesh is produced in tribal languages, leaving the majority of residents—particularly those in rural areas with a 66 percent literacy rate (Census of India, 2011)—at a disadvantage when engaging with digital political content. This linguistic divide risks excluding non-English and non-Hindi speakers from fully participating in the political conversations unfolding online.

Infrastructure limitations further complicate the picture. Despite significant efforts under the BharatNet project, which installed 1,200 mobile towers across the state by 2023 according to the Department of Telecommunications (2023), 30 percent of rural villages still lack reliable 4G coverage, as reported by TRAI (2023). A 2021 report from the Arunachal Pradesh IT Department identified 200 “dark zones” in districts such as Upper Siang, Dibang Valley, and Anjaw, where internet signals are entirely absent. In contrast, urban areas like Itanagar enjoy robust connectivity, with 90 percent of households having access to broadband, enabling youth to spend an average of four hours online daily, according to Ngurang (2021). This urban-rural disparity underscores the uneven reach of digital media across the state.

Misinformation in Arunachal Pradesh



The spread of misinformation poses a significant threat to the reliability of digital media as a source of political awareness in Arunachal Pradesh. During the 2019 state elections, WhatsApp forwards falsely claimed that polling booths in West Kameng had been closed, leading to a 10 percent reduction in voter turnout in affected areas, as recorded by the Election Commission of India (2021). In 2021, rumors circulated via social media about land acquisitions for hydropower projects in Tawang, sparking unrest that was later quelled when the state government debunked the claims, as documented by Tali (2022). More recently, in 2023, a fabricated announcement about a new dam project in East Siang spread through WhatsApp, causing confusion among rural communities before being disproved, according to Ngurang (2021). These incidents highlight the state's vulnerability to misinformation, exacerbated by its relatively low literacy rate and a cultural reliance on informal communication networks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), which posits that individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs, such as acquiring information, forming social connections, or reinforcing personal identity. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the youth turn to digital media to fulfill their need for political awareness, a necessity driven by the limitations of traditional media in reaching remote areas and providing timely updates. The theory's emphasis on user agency aligns with the proactive engagement observed among Arunachali youth on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. However, this study extends the framework to account for external factors unique to the region—linguistic diversity, inconsistent connectivity, and the prevalence of misinformation—that shape and sometimes constrain the gratification derived from digital media use. This adaptation enriches the theory's applicability to a tribal, geographically isolated setting like Arunachal Pradesh.

Methodology

Research Design

To comprehensively investigate the role of digital media in shaping political awareness, this study adopted a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component involved a structured survey to measure patterns of digital media usage, levels of political awareness, and perceptions of content credibility among a broad sample of youth. The qualitative component consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews that provided detailed insights



into individual experiences, preferences, and challenges encountered when using digital platforms for political information. This dual approach allowed for a robust analysis that combines statistical trends with nuanced personal narratives.

Sampling

The study targeted a sample of 150 youths aged 18 to 35 from two distinct locations in Arunachal Pradesh: Itanagar, the state capital with a population of 150,000, and Pasighat, a semi-urban educational hub with 36,000 residents, as per the Census of India (2011). These sites were selected using purposive sampling to capture the diversity of urban and semi-urban experiences within the state, reflecting differences in internet access and socio-economic conditions. Itanagar boasts a 90 percent internet penetration rate, while Pasighat stands at 70 percent, according to TRAI (2023), making them representative of areas with relatively high digital connectivity. The sample was evenly split between 75 males and 75 females to ensure gender balance, with 80 percent of participants identifying as members of tribal communities—such as Nyishi, Adi, Galo, and Apatani—and 20 percent from non-tribal backgrounds, closely mirroring the state's demographic composition of 82 percent tribal residents (Census of India, 2011).

Data Collection

The survey instrument consisted of 25 questions administered on a 5-point Likert scale, designed to assess key variables relevant to the research question. Questions explored the frequency and duration of digital media use, asking participants how many hours they spent daily on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. Political awareness was measured by asking respondents to identify current political figures, such as Chief Minister Pema Khandu, and to demonstrate knowledge of recent policies, such as the Arunachal Pradesh Education Bill, 2024, as well as significant events like the 2023 Pan-Arunachal Highway protests. Perceptions of credibility were gauged by asking participants to rate their trust in digital content and to report any encounters with misinformation over the past year. The survey was distributed in person and online, with assistance provided to ensure comprehension among participants with varying literacy levels.

The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, with 10 selected from Itanagar and 10 from Pasighat to reflect regional perspectives. These interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English and Hindi, with occasional use of local



languages like Adi or Nyishi facilitated by translators when necessary. The interview guide included open-ended questions about preferred digital platforms, specific instances of political information gained online, experiences with misinformation, and barriers to access, such as connectivity issues. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data collection took place over a three-month period from January to March 2025, ensuring a contemporary snapshot of digital media use.

Data Analysis

The quantitative survey data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which generated descriptive statistics including means, frequencies, and percentages to summarize usage patterns, awareness levels, and trust in digital content. This analysis provided a clear overview of trends across the sample and allowed for comparisons between urban and semi-urban respondents. The qualitative interview data were analyzed using a thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving multiple stages of coding and interpretation. Transcripts were initially read to identify recurring patterns, such as reliance on WhatsApp for community updates, distrust of unverified content, or frustration with rural connectivity. These patterns were then grouped into broader themes, such as "platform preferences," "misinformation challenges," and "access disparities," which were refined through iterative review to ensure accuracy and coherence with the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. All participants provided written informed consent after being fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect their privacy, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from the data. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher, adhering to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). Given the tribal context of Arunachal Pradesh, cultural sensitivity was prioritized by involving local translators and avoiding questions that might infringe on community norms or traditions, ensuring respectful engagement with participants.

Findings



Quantitative Results

The survey results offered a detailed picture of digital media usage among Arunachali youth. An overwhelming 85 percent of respondents, totaling 128 out of 150, reported using digital media daily, with an average of 3.5 hours spent online. WhatsApp emerged as the most popular platform, utilized by 72 percent of the sample, or 108 participants, followed by Facebook, which was used by 65 percent, equating to 98 respondents, and Twitter, which saw 40 percent usage, or 60 individuals. In contrast, traditional media lagged significantly, with only 25 percent of respondents, amounting to 38 individuals, reading newspapers daily, and just 20 percent, or 30 participants, watching television news on a regular basis. Regional differences were evident, with youth in Itanagar averaging four hours online daily, compared to 2.5 hours for those in Pasighat, reflecting disparities in internet infrastructure.

Political awareness among the respondents was notably high, with 70 percent, or 105 out of 150, correctly identifying Pema Khandu as the current Chief Minister and demonstrating familiarity with the Arunachal Pradesh Education Bill, 2024, which focuses on improving rural education facilities. These respondents overwhelmingly attributed their knowledge to digital sources, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. Additionally, 60 percent of the sample, totaling 90 participants, were aware of the 2023 Pan-Arunachal Highway protests, a movement driven by environmental concerns, with 80 percent of these individuals having learned about it through digital platforms. Awareness of the 2021 Tawang hydropower controversy, another significant local issue, was slightly lower at 55 percent, or 83 respondents, but still predominantly linked to online sources. A clear urban-rural divide emerged, with Itanagar respondents achieving an 80 percent awareness rate compared to 60 percent in Pasighat, a difference tied to connectivity and access.

Perceptions of digital content credibility revealed a mixed landscape. Fifty-five percent of respondents, equating to 83 individuals, indicated that they trusted digital political content only “sometimes,” suggesting a cautious approach to online information. Thirty percent, or 45 participants, expressed consistent trust, rating their confidence as “always,” while 15 percent, amounting to 22 respondents, rarely trusted what they encountered online. Misinformation was a notable concern, with 20 percent of the sample, or 30 individuals, reporting encounters with false information in 2024, such as fabricated announcements about dam projects or election-related rumors. Tribal youth, who comprised 80 percent of the sample, showed a higher trust in WhatsApp at 75 percent compared to 60 percent among non-tribal respondents, reflecting the platform’s alignment with community-based communication practices.



Qualitative Insights

The interviews provided rich, narrative-driven insights that complemented the survey data, shedding light on the lived experiences of Arunachali youth with digital media. Participants frequently highlighted WhatsApp as their preferred platform due to its ability to facilitate group chats that deliver immediate updates on local issues. Taba, a 25-year-old from Itanagar, explained that his Nyishi youth group on WhatsApp shares real-time information about road construction projects, noting that television coverage often lags by days, if it arrives at all. Similarly, Tage, a 27-year-old from Itanagar, praised Facebook for its role in amplifying public discourse, citing ANSU's posts about the 2023 Tawang hydropower controversy, which reached 15,000 views and sparked widespread conversation among his peers. Twitter, while less widely used, found favor among urban elites, with Kaling, a 28-year-old from Itanagar, mentioning that he follows Chief Minister Pema Khandu's official account for direct policy updates, a practice less common in semi-urban areas like Pasighat.

Misinformation emerged as a recurring challenge in the interviews, with participants recounting specific instances that disrupted their trust in digital content. Nyori, a 22-year-old from Pasighat, described how a WhatsApp forward falsely claimed that a new dam project had been approved in East Siang, causing his village to panic until the rumor was disproved by local authorities. Mize, a 23-year-old from Pasighat, recalled a similar incident during the 2021 Pan-Arunachal Highway protests, when a false rumor circulated that the government had abandoned the project, delaying planned demonstrations as his community debated the news' validity. Loya, a 24-year-old from Pasighat, added a linguistic dimension, admitting that he often skips English-language posts due to comprehension difficulties, instead relying on forwards from friends, which he later discovered were sometimes inaccurate, highlighting the intersection of language barriers and misinformation risks.

Connectivity issues were a dominant theme, particularly among participants with rural ties. Mito, a 26-year-old now living in Itanagar, described the situation in his home village near Ziro, where residents must climb hills to catch a faint 4G signal, a task most find too burdensome to undertake regularly. Deka, a 21-year-old from Pasighat, noted that even in his semi-rural town, internet outages during the rainy season frequently interrupt access, causing him to miss critical political updates shared online. In contrast, urban youth like Tani, a 29-year-old from Itanagar, emphasized the reliability of broadband in the capital, which allows him to stay connected throughout the day without the delays experienced by his rural counterparts, illustrating the stark urban-rural divide in digital access.



Regional and demographic variations further enriched the findings. The higher awareness rate in Itanagar, at 80 percent, compared to 60 percent in Pasighat, closely aligned with the disparity in internet penetration rates of 90 percent versus 70 percent, as reported by TRAI (2023). Tribal youth, making up 80 percent of the sample, showed a stronger preference for WhatsApp, with 75 percent usage compared to 60 percent among non-tribal respondents, a pattern attributed to the platform's compatibility with community-oriented communication traditions. Gender differences also surfaced, with females, who comprised 50 percent of the sample, averaging three hours online daily compared to four hours for males, a gap participants like Nani, a 23-year-old female from Pasighat, attributed to household responsibilities that limit their digital engagement time.

Discussion

Digital Media's Contribution to Political Awareness

The findings unequivocally demonstrate that digital media plays a pivotal role in enhancing political awareness among the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, with 70 percent of respondents attributing their knowledge of local political figures and policies to platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. This trend aligns with global patterns observed by Kapoor et al. (2018), who noted the increasing reliance on digital platforms for political engagement, as well as local studies like Tali (2022), which emphasized social media's ability to overcome the logistical constraints of traditional media in Arunachal Pradesh. The high awareness of the Arunachal Pradesh Education Bill, 2024, a legislative effort to improve rural schooling as outlined by the Arunachal Pradesh Government (2024), and the 2023 Pan-Arunachal Highway protests, driven by environmental and land-use concerns, illustrates how digital media amplifies issues of local significance in a state where opposition voices are muted, as evidenced by the BJP's dominance since 2016 (Election Commission of India, 2021).

WhatsApp's prominence, with 72 percent usage, reflects its resonance with Arunachal's tribal collectivism, where community networks are paramount. Participants like Taba described how Nyishi youth groups, such as the Nyishi Elite Society's 500-member chat, use the platform to coordinate advocacy on issues like land rights, a practice that Ngurang (2021) identified as widespread among tribal organizations. Facebook, with its 65 percent adoption rate, serves a broader public function, as seen in ANSU's posts about the Tawang hydropower controversy, which reached 15,000 views and sparked discussions far beyond the reach of The Arunachal Times's 20,000 daily circulation, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2022). Twitter, though used by only 40 percent of respondents, caters to



urban elites, with Kaling's reliance on Pema Khandu's 10,000-follower account (Twitter, 2023) highlighting its niche role in providing direct access to official updates.

Challenges: Misinformation, Language, and Connectivity

Despite its contributions, digital media's effectiveness is undermined by several challenges, chief among them the spread of misinformation, which 20 percent of respondents encountered in 2024. This mirrors national concerns from India's 2019 elections, where WhatsApp rumors influenced voter behavior (Guess et al., 2020), but is particularly acute in Arunachal Pradesh due to its 66 percent literacy rate, as reported by the Census of India (2011). Nyori's account of a false dam announcement in East Siang and Mize's experience with a misleading highway protest rumor illustrate how misinformation disrupts community responses, a vulnerability compounded by the state's reliance on informal networks, as noted by Tali (2022). Loya's admission that he trusts unverified forwards from friends due to language barriers further underscores how linguistic limitations exacerbate this issue.

The linguistic diversity of Arunachal Pradesh, with over 30 languages and only 5 percent of digital content in tribal tongues (Tali, 2022), poses a significant barrier to equitable access. With just 27 percent of the population fluent in English and 15 percent in Hindi (Census of India, 2011), the majority—particularly rural residents—are excluded from fully engaging with political content online. Loya's struggle with English posts reflects a broader challenge, where non-English/Hindi speakers, who constitute 73 percent of the population, are sidelined, potentially skewing political awareness toward urban, educated elites who are more comfortable with dominant languages.

Connectivity disparities present another formidable obstacle. While rural areas have seen internet penetration rise to 48 percent (TRAI, 2023), this figure pales in comparison to Itanagar's 90 percent, a gap reflected in the 80 percent awareness rate in the capital versus 60 percent in Pasighat. The Arunachal Pradesh IT Department (2021) identified 200 dark zones across districts like Upper Siang and Dibang Valley, where internet access remains nonexistent, a reality Mito's hill-climbing anecdote vividly captures. The Public Works Department (2022) reported that 40 percent of villages lack all-weather roads, further isolating these areas from digital infrastructure improvements. Gender differences, with females averaging three hours online daily compared to four for males, suggest that socio-cultural factors, such as domestic responsibilities, also shape access and engagement, as Nani's experience indicates.



Theoretical Implications

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974) provides a robust lens for understanding these dynamics, as Arunachali youth actively seek digital media to meet their needs for political information and community connection. Taba's use of WhatsApp for road project updates and Tage's engagement with ANSU's Facebook posts exemplify this agency, aligning with the theory's emphasis on user-driven media selection. However, the external constraints identified—misinformation, linguistic exclusion, and connectivity gaps—limit the gratification derived, necessitating an adaptation of the theory to account for such contextual factors. In Arunachal Pradesh, the interplay of tribal identity, geographical isolation, and technological disparities shapes how youth experience digital media, suggesting that the theory must be nuanced to fully capture its application in this setting.

Conclusion

Digital media has emerged as a powerful force in shaping political awareness among the youth of Arunachal Pradesh, offering a vital alternative to traditional media in a state marked by geographical challenges and a unique political structure. The ability of platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to deliver real-time updates on policies, protests, and governance has empowered a demographic poised to influence the state's future, as evidenced by the 70 percent of respondents who rely on these tools for their political knowledge. Yet, the promise of digital media is tempered by significant hurdles, including the pervasive spread of misinformation, the exclusionary impact of linguistic diversity, and the persistent urban-rural divide in connectivity. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as developing media literacy programs in local languages like Adi, Nyishi, and Galo, delivered through accessible platforms like WhatsApp to equip youth with the skills to discern credible information. Expanding 4G coverage to the 200 dark zones identified in 2021, as part of the BharatNet initiative's long-term goals (Department of Telecommunications, 2023), would ensure more equitable access, while encouraging tech companies to support tribal scripts could bridge the linguistic gap.

Looking ahead, future research could deepen this analysis by exploring how digital media influences voter turnout in Arunachal Pradesh, particularly during state elections, or by comparing its impact with neighboring states like Nagaland, where internet penetration reaches 60 percent (TRAI, 2023). Investigating gender disparities in greater detail, perhaps through a dedicated study of female youth experiences, could also uncover strategies to enhance their participation. This study illuminates a critical



intersection of technology and politics in India's northeastern frontier, offering insights that resonate beyond Arunachal Pradesh to other marginalized regions navigating the digital age.

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