



Exploring Public Opinions on the Causes of Mainstream Newspaper Closures in Sri Lanka over the Last Five Years

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ABSTRACT

The fact that several long-established mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka closed down within the last five years namely, *Rasa, Ravaya, Ada, Deshaya, Mihira, and Sarasaviya* indicates a structural crisis within the print media sector of the country. In this respect, this research investigates public perceptions about the economic, technological, and socio-cultural factors that have driven the closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka, based on media substitution theory. From this theoretical perspective, the research hypothesizes that (H1) an increase in the production and operational costs, (H2) rapid digitalization and the migration of audiences to digital platforms, and (H3) the loss of readers' trust, credibility, and advertisement revenue are crucial factors for the decline and closure of newspapers. A deductive approach with a descriptive survey design was used. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from 550 newspaper readers of Sri Lanka with diversified demographic, educational, occupational, and residential backgrounds through online and offline modes. For the analysis, SPSS software, version 22, was



utilized with descriptive statistics, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and multiple regression analysis to test the hypothesized propositions. The results show that the overall regression model is statistically significant: $F(8, 529) = 7.002$, $p < 0.001$, and hence, the chosen set of economic, technological, and behavioral predictors jointly explain significant variance in perceptions of newspaper decline. Greater printing and operational costs, with a β of 0.163 and p-value of 0.001, and the perceived potential of digital formats to re-attract readers, with a β of 0.164 and p-value of less than 0.001, emerged as significant predictors. On the other hand, television-based newspaper reading programs were strongly associated with negative newspaper sales, having a β of -0.242 and a p-value of less than 0.001. Descriptive findings further reveal a significant decline in print newspaper readership across all age groups, particularly among digitally active cohorts aged 21-40, along with an increase in reliance upon social media and online news platforms. This leads the study to conclude that the decline of printed newspapers in Sri Lanka does not mean the disappearance of journalism but reflects a structural transformation driven by media substitution toward hybrid and digitally integrated news models. The results underline that newspaper institutions have to pursue technological adaptation while underpinning editorial independence, credibility, and democratic values if they are to survive in the long term.

Introduction

In the modern information age, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing social discourse. In mass communication, media can be mainly divided into 02 parts. That is, electronic media and Print media. Electronic media can be classified as television, radio and cinema. Electronic media can be described as media based solely on electronic technology. Similarly, print media can be identified as media based mainly on printing methods such as newspapers, magazines, books. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a print media is printed forms of communication that provide information or entertainment, for example, newspapers, magazines, and books' Among these media, print



media in particular serves as a major source of news and information for people around the world. Since ancient times, print media has been used to achieve various communication goals, and newspapers, magazines, and periodicals have a special place in it. The fact that print media has capabilities that other media in the world do not have is a strong reason for its continuous flow. A newspaper, which comes under the print media, is called a set of large printed sheets of paper, or a website, containing news, articles, advertisements, etc. and published every day or every week; the organization responsible for producing this" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.).

A newspaper has a great influence on the reader in making critical decisions on a daily basis. The newspaper is also the oldest medium in use today. A newspaper can be defined as any publication published daily, weekly or monthly containing advertisements and opinions on everyday events. Gamage (2024) critically analyses the representation and framing of news coverage in Sri Lankan print media. "The Sri Lankan media landscape is characterized by a diverse array of print publications, including newspapers in English, Sinhala, and Tamil languages. This diversity reflects the country's multi-ethnic and multilingual population, with each linguistic community having its own media outlets catering to its specific needs and interests" (Gamage, 2024, p1942).

Journalism in Sri Lanka has undergone a major transformation in recent times, and the rise of digital media can be cited as a major factor in this. Scherer and Cho (2022) analyse the transformation of the newspaper industry in the digital era. "Business decisions by news aggregators such as Apple News and Google News and by social media platforms such as Facebook also affect the viability of newspapers" (Scherer & Cho, 2022). For this very reason, many newspaper institutions around the world have been closed down in recent times. Press Gazette (2024) reported that 22 UK local newspapers closed in the past two years (Press Gazette, 2024)

In the United States, daily newspaper circulation has declined significantly over the past two decades. From 2020 to 2021 alone, circulation fell by 6%, continuing a downward trend that began long before the digital age. (Franken, 2024, p912). Readers are migrating toward digital platforms, leaving traditional print newspapers with an aging demographic. Advertising revenues, once a cornerstone of the newspaper business, have also been in decline. Digital platforms like Google and Facebook have become dominant players in the advertising space, offering more targeted and cost-effective solutions for businesses. Consequently, print advertising has lost much of its appeal, and newspapers are struggling to attract advertisers willing to pay premium rates for space in physical publications (Newman et al., 2022).



Also, over 50 newspapers that started in Sri Lanka in the last 3 decades have either ceased printing and switched to digital media or closed down completely. The majority of newspapers closed down their printing operations in the last decade or in the last 5 years. Among those newspapers are *Janatha*, *Lakjanatha*, *Turanaya*, *Rividina*, *Riviresa*, *Davaza*, *Iruresa*, *Kinihira*, *Divisara*, *Aththa*, *Mulpituwa*, *Rajina*, *Diyaniya*, *Morning Leader*, *Kekulu*, *Bindu*, *Yahalu*, *Sitthara*, *Hiru*, *Sathsiri*, *Surathala*, *Ranketi*, *Nawayugaya*, *Sathuta*, *Lakdiva*, *Trishulaya*, *Madura*, *Hithawatha*, *Colomba*, *Tiratharu*, *Aradhana*, *Geetha*, *Malsara*, *Dasauna*, *Chitramithra*, *Sadavasana*, *Sarasi*, *The sun*, *Hela Diva*, *Janarala*, *Dinakara*, *Siyarata*, *Irudina*, *Sunday Leader* (1994-2018), *Sathhada* (2015-2018), *Randiva* (2010-2015), *Janayugaya* (2017-2018), *Samudura* (1992-2019), *Handamama*, *Irida Apple* (2016-2018), *Rivira* (2006-2018), *The Nation*, *Ravaya* (1990-2019), *Rivira Irida Sangrahaya*, *Dinapatha (Daily)* *Lakbima* (1999-2018), *Irida (Sunday)* *Lakbima* (1994-2019), *Rasa* (2018-2020), *Dinapatha (Daily)* *Monera* (2024-2025), *Ada* (2012-2025), *Deshaya* (2014-2025), *Vidusara* (1987-2025), *Mihira* (1964-2023) & *Sarasaviya* (1963-2024).

Aneez (2019) reported that newspaper circulation in Sri Lanka fell for the second consecutive year. Although the country's newspaper circulation reached a high of 411.8 million in 2016, the annual circulation of daily national newspapers has since declined to 368 million in 2018, down from 398.7 million in 2017. Similarly, while weekly newspaper circulation increased to 136.3 million in 2017, it fell to 113.3 million in 2018. (Aneez, 2019)' This situation intensified with the post-COVID-19 era and economic bankruptcy. This led to the loss of jobs for many journalists and the collapse of newspaper institutions. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore readers' perceptions of the reasons for the closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka over the past five years.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive survey method. This was most appropriate as the descriptive survey design allows for a structured approach to collecting data from a population to describe existing conditions, trends, and perceptions. Here, an inferential research approach was applied, identifying hypotheses and research variables from the general literature and theories of media economics, technological change, and audience behaviour, and then empirically testing them using survey data. Therefore, this method was suitable for examining how previously identified factors such as the expansion of digital media, economic challenges, and changing information consumption habits predict newspaper closures. The descriptive design was specifically used to capture readers' views on what they believe are the reasons for the closure of mainstream newspapers over the past five years. The



research was conducted across Sri Lanka, covering respondents from different provinces and districts. To ensure geographical diversity, it focused on an island-wide area, which could capture differences in newspaper readership patterns across urban and rural contexts.

The sample included individuals from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational groups. A probability random sampling technique was used to select respondents. Random sampling is a technique used to minimize sampling bias and increase the representativeness of the sample. Accordingly, data were obtained from 550 respondents under the random sampling method. Accordingly, primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire. To ensure easy access and response, the questionnaire was distributed in both online and offline formats, including Google Forms and social media platforms. The mixed-method approach was helpful in reaching respondents with varying levels of digital access. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, including Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and demographic questions. Data collection was conducted over a 5-month period from May to October 2025. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study during the distribution of the questionnaire and participated voluntarily.

The data collected were analysed using SPSS, version 22. The research used both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies, percentages, and means were used to summarize the characteristics of the respondents and general trends, and inferential statistical tests were used to determine how the variables were related to each other and how they varied. These methods ensured greater accuracy and analytical weight to this research.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses media substitution theory as its conceptual framework to explain the decline of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka over the past five years. As new communication technologies emerge in the world, they replace or diminish older media forms that were performing similar functions through those communication technologies. Accordingly, this theory, developed in the context of media economics and audience behaviour research, explains how audiences switch from one medium to another when new alternatives offer greater convenience, accessibility, or efficiency. Accordingly, in the Sri Lankan context relevant to this research, the rise of digital news platforms, social media, and mobile-based reading applications has increasingly replaced the traditional role played by printed newspapers. Applying this media substitution theory to this research, readers' perceptions of newspaper decline are interpreted as part of a broader process of technological and behavioural substitution. The theory helps to



interpret the findings by linking technological, economic, and socio-cultural factors to the media substitution process.

Results

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data from 550 respondents obtained in the study titled “Exploring Readers’ Perceptions of the Reasons for the Closure of Mainstream Newspapers in Sri Lanka over the Last Five Years.” The objective of this chapter is to analyse the opinions of readers and identify the key economic, technological, and socio-cultural factors that have contributed to the decline of printed newspapers in the country. The findings are presented in tables, charts, and graphs to show patterns, relationships, and trends among the studied variables. This chapter begins with an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the analysis related to the reading habits of newspapers, perceptions about media substitution, and the overall factors associated with the closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	70.871	8	8.859	7.002	.000 ^b
	Residual	669.324	529	1.265		
	Total	740.195	537			

a. Dependent Variable: Living Area

b. Predictors: (Constant), Sri Lankan newspapers can re-attract readers if they come in digital formats (e-newspapers, apps), New media (Internet, Social Media, YouTube, Online News Sites) reduced reader demand for newspapers., Credibility issues (declining public trust in newspapers as a means of obtaining information) led to the decline of the newspaper, Declining newspaper sales led to newspaper closures, Newspaper sales fell due to morning newspaper reading programs, The increase in the costs of printing newspapers (paper, printing presses, vehicles, electricity) was a major reason for the closure of newspapers, The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent economic crisis in the country have directly affected newspaper sales, The use of computers and mobile phones by the younger generation has reduced print reading

Table 01: Survey Data - 2025



The result of the ANOVA test on the multiple regression model is shown in Table 01, which has been done to analyse how good, as a whole, the model is in explaining the variations within the dependent variable, Living Area. The regression model is statistically significant- $F(8, 529) = 7.002$, $p < 0.001$ -indicating that the set of independent variables jointly explains a significant proportion of variance in the dependent variable. This verifies that the predictors included in the model-economic, technological, institutional, and behavioural factors related to newspaper decline-are jointly effective in distinguishing differences associated with respondents' living areas. While $SS = 70.871$, compared to the residual $SS = 669.324$, states that the model accounts for a meaningful portion of the total variance ($SS = 740.195$), the higher mean square value of the regression ($MS = 8.859$) versus $MS = 1.265$ for the residuals shows substantial explanatory power in the model.

The overall results of ANOVA, in this case, justify the adequacy of the regression model and affirm that, taken together, the predictors selected are significantly useful in explaining variations in living area based on perceptions of newspaper decline and closure in Sri Lanka.

Regression Analysis Results

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.800	.386		4.663	.000
Declining newspaper sales led to newspaper closures	-.039	.061	-.029	-.638	.524
The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent economic crisis in the country have directly affected newspaper sales	.006	.066	.004	.090	.929
The increase in the costs of printing newspapers (paper, printing presses, vehicles, electricity) was a major reason for the closure of newspapers	.223	.065	.163	3.415	.001
The use of computers and mobile phones by the younger generation has reduced print reading	-.136	.080	-.099	-1.708	.088



New media (Internet, social media, YouTube, Online News Sites) reduced reader demand for newspapers.	.085	.077	.064	1.094	.274
Newspaper sales fell due to morning newspaper reading programs	-.297	.054	-.242	-5.477	.000
Credibility issues (declining public trust in newspapers as a means of obtaining information) led to the decline of the newspaper	.005	.053	.004	.100	.921
Sri Lankan newspapers can re-attract readers if they come in digital formats (e-newspapers, apps)	.232	.059	.164	3.927	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Living Area

Table 02: Survey Data - 2025

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to examine the relationship between selected economic, technological, and institutional factors associated with newspaper decline and the dependent variable, Living Area. The analysis aimed to identify the extent to which these factors vary across respondents' residential contexts.

The regression constant is statistically significant ($B = 1.800$, $t = 4.663$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the baseline level of the dependent variable when all independent variables are held constant. Among the independent variables, the increase in the costs of printing newspapers, including expenses related to paper, printing machinery, transportation, and electricity, exhibits a statistically significant positive relationship with the dependent variable ($B = 0.223$, $\beta = 0.163$, $t = 3.415$, $p = 0.001$). This result suggests that rising production and operational costs constitute a significant factor associated with newspaper closures across different living areas.

In contrast, morning newspaper reading programmes demonstrate a statistically significant negative association with the dependent variable ($B = -0.297$, $\beta = -0.242$, $t = -5.477$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that the prevalence of such programmes is strongly linked to declining newspaper sales, thereby intensifying the structural challenges faced by print newspapers. Furthermore, respondents' perceptions that Sri Lankan newspapers can re-attract readers through digital formats, such as e-newspapers and



mobile applications, show a significant positive effect ($B = 0.232$, $\beta = 0.164$, $t = 3.927$, $p < 0.001$). This underscores the potential of digital transformation as a strategic mechanism to counter declining readership and enhance newspaper sustainability.

Demographic analysis

The initial stage of the data analysis process in this research was to analyse the demographic factors of the respondents in the sample. This allowed us to identify the nature of the sample.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Female	359	65.3	65.3	65.3
	Male	191	34.7	34.7	100.0
	Total	550	100.0	100.0	
Living Area	Village	205	37.3	37.3	37.3
	Urban	193	35.1	35.1	72.4
	Estate	13	2.4	2.4	74.7
	semi urban	139	25.3	25.3	100.0
	Total	550	100.0	100.0	
Age	20>	53	9.6	9.6	9.6
	21–30	169	30.7	30.7	40.4
	31–40	202	36.7	36.7	77.1
	41–50	52	9.5	9.5	86.5
	51–60	52	9.5	9.5	96.0
	60<	22	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	550	100.0	100.0	
Highest Education Qualification	Still in school	37	6.7	6.7	6.7
	G.C.E Ordinary Level	10	1.8	1.8	8.5
	G.C.E. Advanced Level	86	15.6	15.6	24.2
	Diploma	95	17.3	17.3	41.5
	Graduate	218	39.6	39.6	81.1

post graduate	90	16.4	16.4	97.5
Other	14	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	550	100.0	100.0	

Table 03: Survey Data - 2025

The analysis of the demographic factors of the respondents for this research showed that the majority of the participants in this research were females at 65.3%, while the remaining 34.7% were males. This constitutes a good gender balance within the sample. Also, a greater proportion of the respondents fell between the age brackets of 21-40 years, which is 67.4%, indicating that the present study reflects mainly the perception of a technologically active generation who are exposed to both print and digital media. In addition, most of the respondents lived in rural and urban areas, 37.3% and 35.1%, respectively, while those representing semi-urban and estates were only 25.3% and 2.4%, respectively, indicating a broad geographical representation. Also, the data analysis of educational qualification for the sample indicates that more than 70% have at least a diploma or above, showing a fair level of literacy and significant media awareness among the audience. Lastly, government employees and students are the dominant occupational groups within the overall sample, comprising 27.8% and 28.2% of the total, respectively, indicating that working professionals and youth contributed significantly to the research.

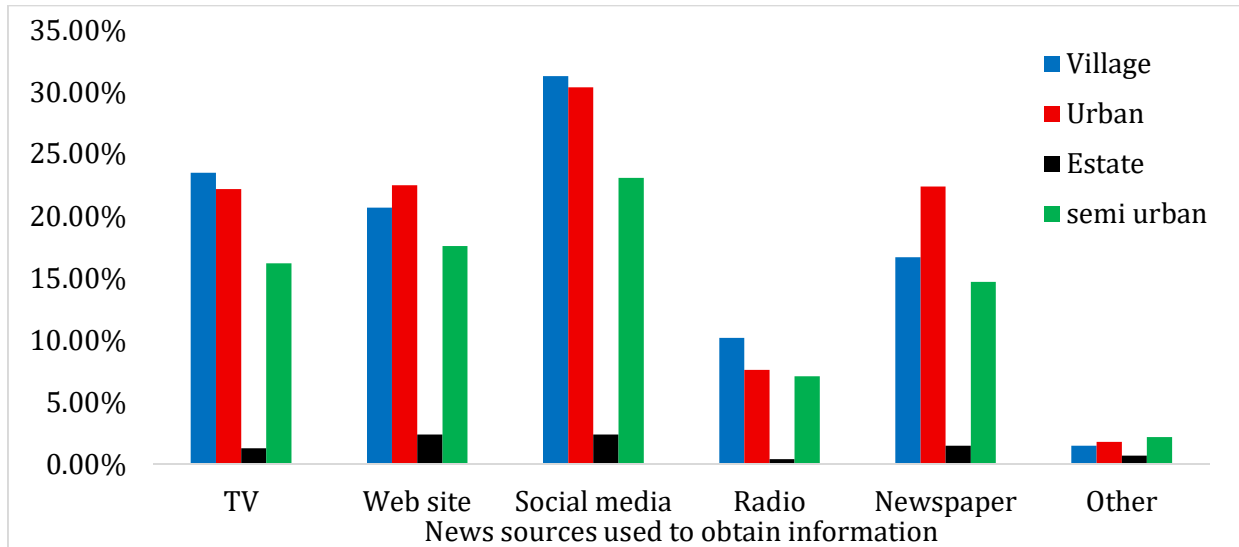
Data analysis regarding the news sources used by members of the sample to obtain information

News sources used to obtain information		Living Area				Total
		Village	Urban	Estate	semi urban	
TV	Count	129	122	7	89	347
	Percentage %	23.5%	22.2%	1.3%	16.2%	63.1%
Web site	Count	114	124	13	97	348
	Percentage %	20.7%	22.5%	2.4%	17.6%	63.3%
Social media	Count	172	167	13	127	479
	Percentage %	31.3%	30.4%	2.4%	23.1%	87.1%
Radio	Count	56	42	2	39	139
	Percentage %	10.2%	7.6%	0.4%	7.1%	25.3%
Newspaper	Count	92	123	8	81	304
	Percentage %	16.7%	22.4%	1.5%	14.7%	55.3%
Other	Count	8	10	4	12	34



	Percentage %	1.5%	1.8%	0.7%	2.2%	6.2%
Total	Count	205	193	13	139	550
	Percentage %	37.3%	35.1%	2.4%	25.3%	100.0%

Table 04 : Survey Data – 2025



In urban areas, social media (30.4%) and websites (22.5%) are the most popular sources, while semi-urban areas also have a higher proportion of readers who use social media (23.1%) and website (17.6%). This indicates that digital usage is spreading from urban areas to suburban areas. In contrast, rural respondents are also active on social media (31.3%), but they are more inclined towards television (23.5%) and radio (10.2%). The data shows that estate communities, which constitute only 2.4% of the total sample, are the least connected to news sources, but use websites (2.4%) and social media (2.4%), indicating that digital access is growing slowly in underserved areas.

Overall, newspaper readership also remains strong in urban areas (22.4%) compared to rural areas (16.7%). The continued popularity of television across all regions (from 16.2% to 23.5%) indicates that audiovisual media continues to be a reliable and easily accessible platform for mass communication. The analysis of the data regarding the most frequently used news sources by the respondents in the sample shows a clear shift in the patterns of information consumption among the Sri Lankan population. The findings of the research indicate that social media (29.0%) is the most frequently used news source. This is followed by websites (21.1%) and television (21.0%), while traditional media such as newspapers (18.4%) and radio (8.4%) are the least used by readers as news sources. Overall, these findings indicate a paradigm shift in news consumption.



Data Analysis of Readers’ Trust in News Media Platforms

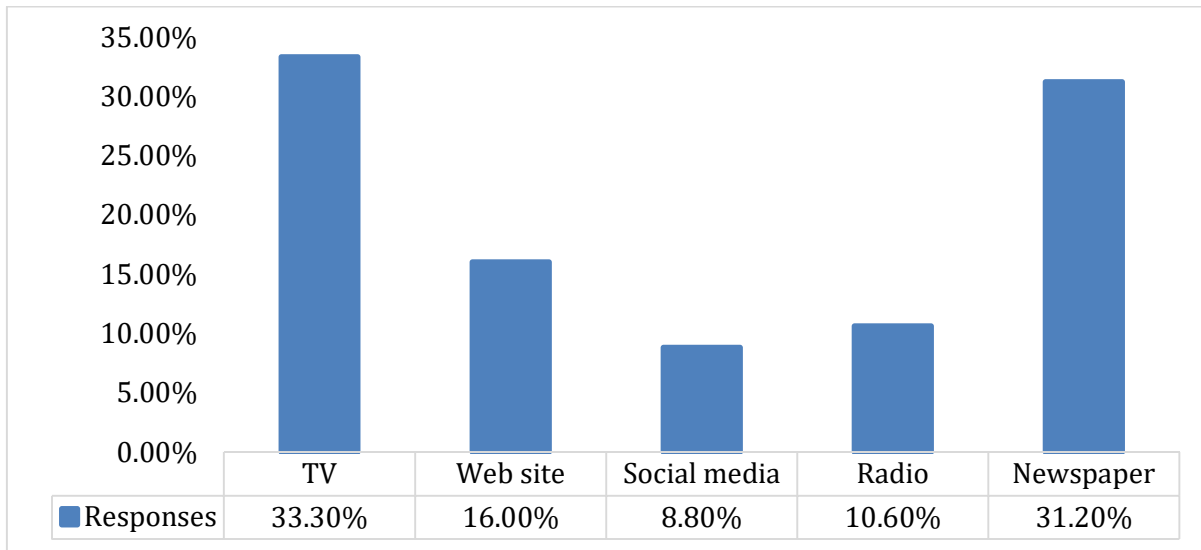


Table 05 : Survey Data – 2025

The analysis of the data regarding the news source that the sample’s readers trust the most revealed that 33.3% of the total sample considered television and 31.2% newspapers as the most trusted news sources. Despite access to information through digital technology, it appears that audiences still associate established institutions with credibility, editorial accountability, and professional reporting standards. Similarly, the responses of 16.0% for websites and 8.8% for social media show significantly lower trust. Radio maintains a moderate level of trust of 10.6% of the total sample, reflecting its continued presence among the rural and older population as an accessible and familiar source of news.

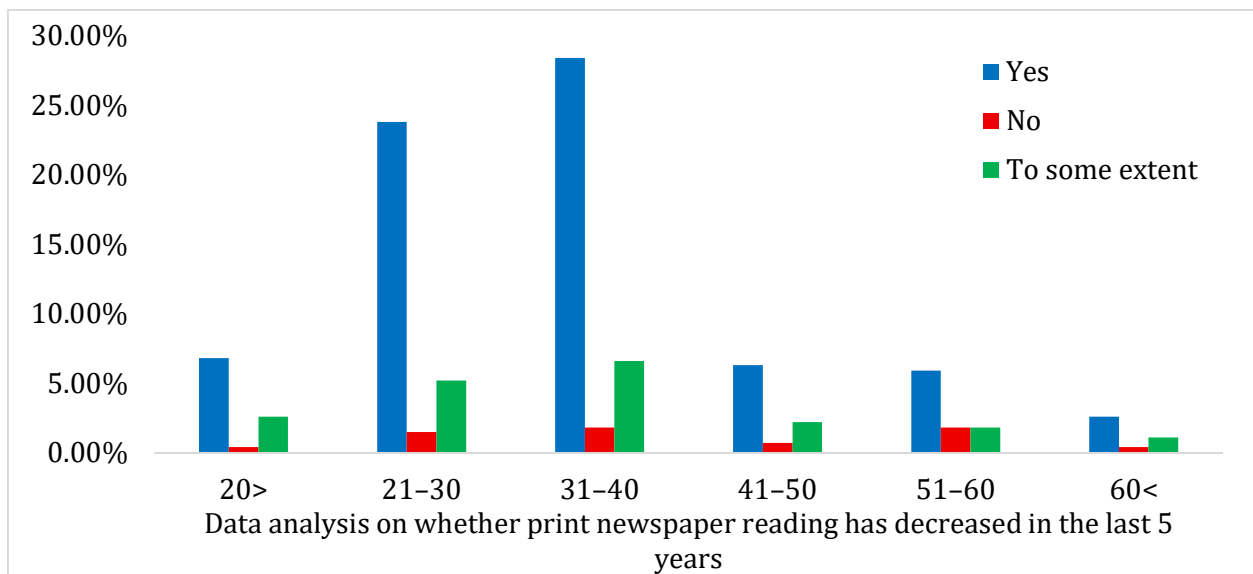
Data analysis on whether print newspaper reading has decreased in the last 5 years

Generation	Age	Data analysis on whether print newspaper reading has decreased in the last 5 years			Total	
		Yes	No	To some extent		
Z	20>	Count	37	2	14	53
		Percentage %	6.8%	0.4%	2.6%	9.8%
Y	21–30	Count	129	8	28	165
		Percentage %	23.8%	1.5%	5.2%	30.4%
Generation	31–40	Count	154	10	36	200
		Percentage %	28.4%	1.8%	6.6%	36.9%



X Generation	41–50	Count	34	4	12	50
		Percentage %	6.3%	0.7%	2.2%	9.2%
Baby boomers Generation	51–60	Count	32	10	10	52
		Percentage %	5.9%	1.8%	1.8%	9.6%
60<		Count	14	2	6	22
		Percentage %	2.6%	0.4%	1.1%	4.1%
Total		Count	400	36	106	542
		Percentage %	73.8%	6.6%	19.6%	100.0%

Table 06 : Survey Data – 2025



A key strength of this research is its careful look at age-based reading trends related to the decline and closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka over the past five years. The study shows that print newspaper readership has dropped significantly across all age groups. 73.8% of respondents said their newspaper reading habits have decreased during this time. The decline is most noticeable among those aged 31 to 40 (28.4%) and 21 to 30 (23.8%), who make up a large part of Sri Lanka’s working and digitally engaged population. This trend shows a change in how different generations consume news. Only 6.6% of respondents reported no decline, suggesting that traditional newspapers have mostly lost their central role in daily information habits, even among older people. In addition, 19.6% of the total sample said that their newspaper reading has decreased to some degree. Overall, 93.4% of respondents said that newspaper reading has dropped over the past five years. Accordingly, there is a clear and steady decline in newspaper reading among readers of all age groups, with significant differences between generations. In contrast, Generation X (ages 41–50) and Baby Boomers (ages 51–60) show a relatively

lower decline of 6.3% and 5.9%, respectively. This shows that although digitalization has reached the older generation, their attachment to traditional print formats remains to some extent. Generation Z (ages under 20), at 6.8%, reflects a reduced engagement with print media. This may be due to their early adoption of mobile phones and social media as primary communication tools.

Data analysis on the reader's preferred format for obtaining information from newspapers

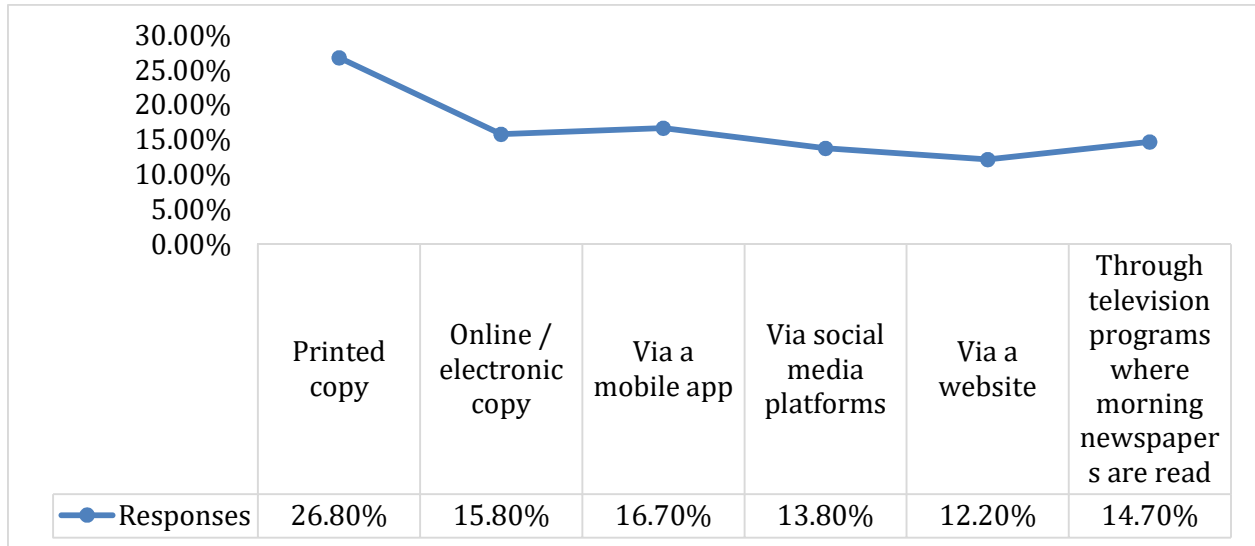


Table 07 : Survey Data – 2025

According to the data analysis on the preferred format for obtaining information from newspapers, printed copies remain the most preferred format, with 26.8% of the total sample responding. Similarly, online and mobile-based electronic formats, including e-copies (15.8%), mobile applications (16.7%), social media platforms (13.8%) and websites (12.2%), accounted for nearly 58.5% of the total sample. This shows the digitalization of news. In addition, 14.7% of the respondents preferred to read newspaper content or receive news through television programs that summarize it.

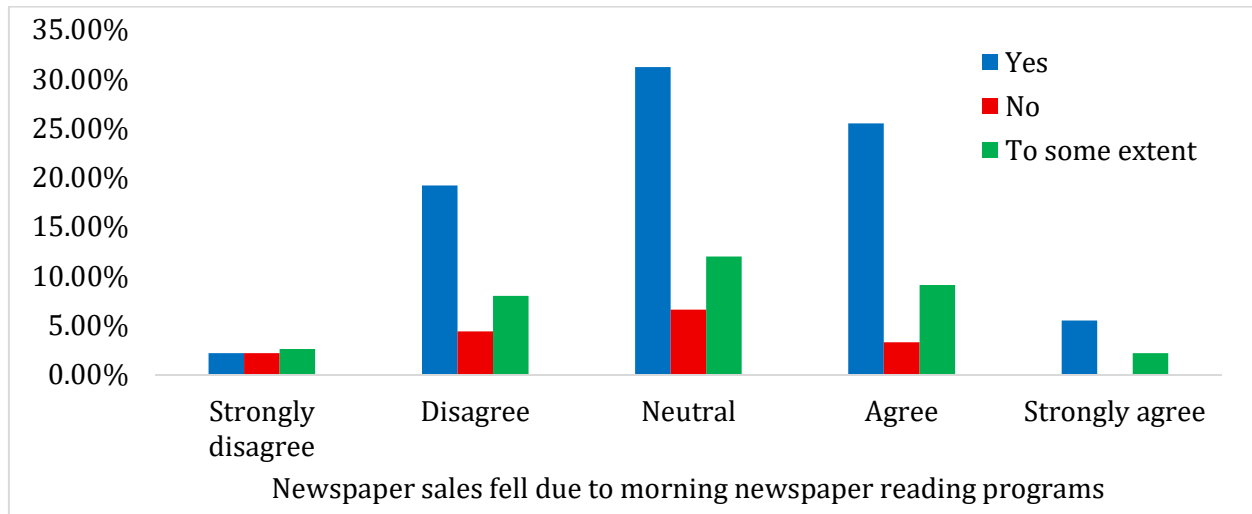
Data analysis on whether newspaper sales declined due to morning newspaper reading TV programs

	Newspaper sales fell due to morning newspaper reading TV programs	The language of reading newspapers			Total
		Sinhala	Tamil	English	
Strongly disagree	Count	12	12	14	26
	Percentage %	2.2%	2.2%	2.6%	4.7%
Disagree	Count	105	24	44	127



	Percentage %	19.2%	4.4%	8.0%	23.2%
Neutral	Count	171	36	66	209
	Percentage %	31.2%	6.6%	12.0%	38.1%
Agree	Count	140	18	50	156
	Percentage %	25.5%	3.3%	9.1%	28.5%
Strongly agree	Count	30	0	12	30
	Percentage %	5.5%	0.0%	2.2%	5.5%
Total	Count	458	90	186	548
	Percentage %	83.6%	16.4%	33.9%	100.0%

Table 08 : Survey Data – 2025



According to the analysis of data on the impact of morning newspaper reading programs on newspaper sales by language of the newspaper read by the reader, 38.1% of the respondents maintained a neutral position, while 34% (28.5% 'agree' and 5.5% 'strongly agree') expressed the opinion that these television programs have contributed to the decline in newspaper sales. This shows that a significant percentage of readers have used programs that summarize or discuss newspaper content in audio-visual formats as a direct substitute for printed newspapers.

Accordingly, among the majority (83.6%) of the total sample of Sinhala-language newspaper readers, 31% (25.5% and 5.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that morning programs have reduced newspaper purchases, 19.2% disagreed and 31.2% had a neutral response. Tamil language readers (16.4%) also showed weak agreement, with only 3.3% agreeing and 2.2% strongly disagreeing, indicating a relatively limited impact of television news content on print readership in Tamil media markets. However, among



English language readers (33.9% of respondents), a relatively high 11.3% (9.1% of respondents agreeing and 2.2% strongly agreeing) acknowledged the impact of morning programs. This has led to a decline in newspaper purchases by the audience.

Data analysis on whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent economic crisis that hit Sri Lanka directly affected newspaper sales

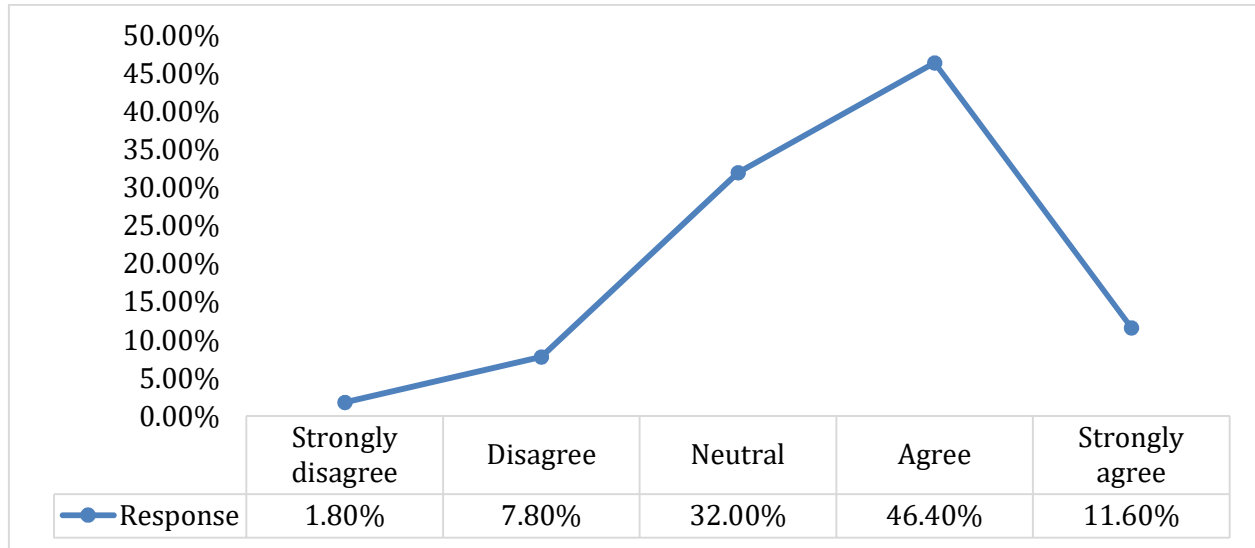


Table 09 : Survey Data – 2025

An analysis of public perceptions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis on newspaper sales reveals that these external shocks have significantly impacted the sustainability of the print media sector in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, 58% of respondents (a combination of agree (46.4%) and strongly agree (11.6%)) agreed that the pandemic and the economic downturn directly contributed to the decline in newspaper sales, while only 7.8% of the total sample disagreed with this statement. Similarly, a small percentage of 1.8% responded that they strongly disagreed, while 32% of the total sample held a neutral position.

Data analysis of reader suggestions for revitalizing newspaper publishing

If newspapers can be restarted, what changes should be made	Living Area				Total	
	Village	Urban	Estate	Semi urban		
Publish as a digital copy	Count	56	68	6	63	193
	Percentage %	10.2%	12.4%	1.1%	11.5%	35.2%
Publish through a	Count	70	70	7	57	204



mobile app	Percentage %	12.8%	12.8%	1.3%	10.4%	37.2%
Creating quality content	Count	111	96	11	85	303
	Percentage %	20.3%	17.5%	2.0%	15.5%	55.3%
Lowering the selling price	Count	57	53	6	53	169
	Percentage %	10.4%	9.7%	1.1%	9.7%	30.8%
Provide more opportunities for advertising	Count	6	8	0	8	22
	Percentage %	1.1%	1.5%	0.0%	1.5%	4.0%
Free of charge	Count	12	12	4	10	38
	Percentage %	2.2%	2.2%	0.7%	1.8%	6.9%
Introducing new formats that can attract the reader	Count	136	96	9	79	320
	Percentage %	24.8%	17.5%	1.6%	14.4%	58.4%
Freedom from political influence	Count	89	54	6	63	212
	Percentage %	16.2%	9.9%	1.1%	11.5%	38.7%
Other	Count	13	13	0	4	30
	Percentage %	2.4%	2.4%	0.0%	0.7%	5.5%
Total	Count	203	193	13	139	548
	Percentage %	37.0%	35.2%	2.4%	25.4%	100.0%

Table 10 : Survey Data – 2025

The following is an analysis of the data provided by the sampled readers on how newspapers can successfully relaunch in the contemporary media environment. According to this data analysis, 58.4% of respondents expressed their willingness to introduce new formats that can attract readers, such as visually engaging layouts, interactive features or thematic supplements. 55.3% of respondents also emphasized the creation of quality content, and they emphasized that media credibility, relevance and originality are central to reader trust and engagement. 37.2% of participants also suggested publishing newspapers through mobile applications, while 35.2% said that digital copies are necessary. Furthermore, 38.7% of respondents called for newspapers to be free from political influence, and another 30.8% recommended reducing sales prices. Meanwhile, reflecting financial pressures among rural and estate communities, 6.9% proposed free newspaper distribution.



Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore readers' perceptions of the reasons for the closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka over the past five years. Accordingly, a questionnaire was administered to 550 newspaper readers in Sri Lanka and the responses were analysed. The results of the data analysis show that economic instability, digital transformation and socio-cultural shifts (generational change) have been prominent among the factors that have contributed to the decline of the print newspaper industry. Using media substitution theory as a framework, this discussion interprets the quantitative findings as a technological and behavioural transition process in which audiences are migrating from print media to digital platforms.

Digital Technological Transformation and Media Substitution

The study reveals that there is currently a profound generational transition in the information consumption patterns of society. 73.8% of respondents to the survey said their newspaper reading had decreased in the past five years. However, only 6.6% said their newspaper reading had not decreased. The decline was most pronounced among the digitally active Generation Y and the early Generation X, aged 21-40. This showed that readers in these generations have become accustomed to mobile-based news apps and social media platforms that provide faster, more interactive content. These results align with the media substitution theory used in the study. It found that readers replace older media as new media formats offer greater convenience and accessibility.

According to the research data, 87.1% of the sample used social media as a primary news source, followed by 63.3% using websites and 63.1% relying on television. In contrast, only 55.3% still used newspapers. This shows that digital media is not only replacing traditional newspapers, but is also redefining the rhythm of daily information consumption. Respondents in urban and semi-urban areas showed the highest level of use of online platforms, illustrating how infrastructure and internet penetration are driving the substitution process. Meanwhile, while still connected to television and radio, rural respondents are increasingly engaging with social media, suggesting that even remote audiences are not isolated from digital diffusion.

These findings support the observation of Scherer and Cho (2022) that digital platforms such as Google News and Facebook have significantly undermined the viability of newspapers' business decisions. Sri Lanka's digital transition reflects global trends where audiences prefer personalized, mobile-friendly, and cost-free content over printed copies.



Economic constraints and institutional decline

Economic factors stand out as one of the decisive forces behind the closure of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka. The results confirm that 58% of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis/bankruptcy directly impacted newspaper sales. The increase in printing costs, including paper and ink, led to a decrease in newspaper printing or a reduction in the number of pages in newspapers, and the resulting collapse in advertising revenue created an unsustainable environment for newspaper publishers. During and after the 2022–2023 crisis, many newspapers temporarily or completely suspended print editions due to paper shortages and cost inflation. This has been discussed in the introduction. These problems were exacerbated by the 2022 economic collapse and import restrictions imposed as a state policy to preserve reserves. The loss of advertising revenue, especially from small and medium-sized enterprises, was prominent here. As Franken (2024) noted in the global context, advertisers have shifted to digital spaces that offer more precise audience targeting, which further reduces the income of print publishers. The closure of the 'Ada' newspaper on August 29, 2025, and the 'Deshya' newspaper on August 30, 2025, was also due to the increase in production costs (Printing cost).

The quantitative evidence of declining readership also reflects not only consumer behaviour but also the breakdown of the traditional business model. Newspapers were no longer able to maintain wide circulations due to rising printing costs and declining consumer purchasing power. Here, more advertising could be attracted by reducing the selling price, as suggested by 30% of respondents, or by increasing the circulation of printed newspapers through free access, as suggested by 6.9%.

Sociocultural Shifts and Audience Preferences

The study also identified strong sociocultural factors driving print media churn. Data analysis revealed that 58.5% of readers prefer to read newspapers in digital formats, online copies, mobile apps, social media and websites. Only 26.8% of the total sample prefers print editions. Today's readers value immediacy and interactivity that traditional newspapers cannot offer, and the younger generation (aged 21-40) in particular represents a mobile-centric demographic that consumes news while multitasking, traveling or engaging in social media.

It also revealed that television continues to play a complementary role. About 34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that television's morning news programs have contributed to the decline in print newspaper sales. Many programs like *Mul Pituwa*, *Pathtare Wistare* etc. are used to read newspapers in



the morning on several TV channels like *Swarnavahini*, *Hiru TV*, *Siyatha TV*, *Derana TV*, *Shakthi TV* etc. This was started by *Mr. Bandula Padmakumara* with the 'Mul Pahada' program on *Swarnavahini* a decade and a half ago and was later replicated by other channels. This shows how the audiovisual media of the newspaper serves as intermediaries in the substitution process. The printed content is provided through a different technological medium. Among Sinhala language readers, 31% have accepted this impact, indicating that language communities are differently affected by media convergence. Despite the shift to digital platforms, trust remains a key factor in maintaining partial loyalty to print media. The study revealed that 33.3% of respondents still trust television the most, while 31.2% trust newspapers. Although audiences rely on digital media for convenience, they continue to associate credibility with traditional media outlets. Therefore, the challenge for print media is not just technological but also reputational.

Political and Institutional Factors

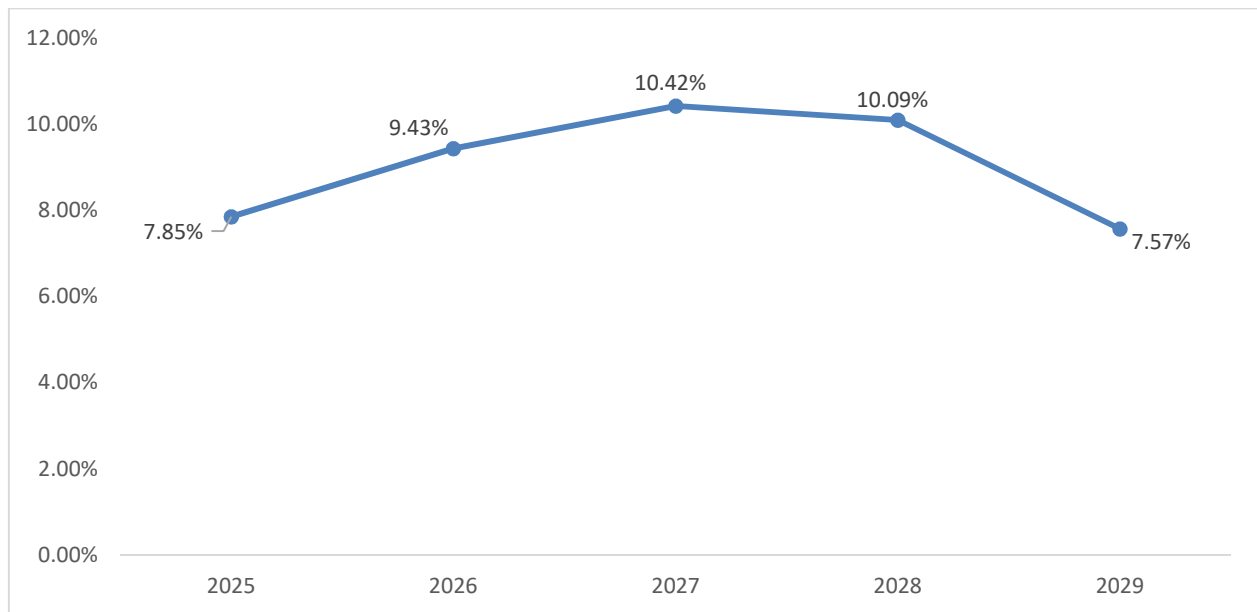
Another prominent theme emerging from the reader suggestions is the demand for editorial independence. A significant 38.7% of respondents emphasized the need for newspapers to be free from political influence. This indicates that reader perceptions of bias have eroded trust in print journalism. For decades, newspapers in Sri Lanka have been closely aligned with political parties or business interests, which has limited their appeal among critical readers. While the Lakehouse newspapers carry the ideology of the ruling government, other newspaper institutions are also associated with various political families. Even their ownership is linked to political families. For example, the newspapers '*Lankadeepa*' and '*Ada*' are owned by the Wijaya Newspaper Company, which is owned by the Wijewardene family. In addition, several studies have revealed that each newspaper has political influence. As readers gain access to different online perspectives due to these ideologies, they increasingly reject newspapers that are openly politicized. Thus, political neutrality and investigative rigor are considered essential for the revival of the industry. Respondents' emphasis on "creating quality content" (55.3%) and "introducing new formats that can attract readers" (58.4%), highlighting a growing expectation that newspapers must modernize both content and format while preserving editorial integrity.

Rebuilding Strategies and Future Prospects

These findings suggest multiple avenues for revitalizing the Sri Lankan newspaper sector. First, digital adaptation is not a threat but an opportunity, as 37.2% of respondents recommend publishing newspapers via mobile apps. This suggests that readers are open to hybrid formats that combine print credibility with digital accessibility. The use of responsive digital platforms, multimedia storytelling, and subscription-



based e-newspapers can help newspapers maintain engagement and revenue. Second, the industry needs to focus on audience-centric innovation. This demonstrates a willingness to embrace “new formats” and a desire for creative presentation through visual design, data journalism, and multimedia integration. Such innovations resonate with *6Wresearch’s* (2025) forecast that, although print media may decline further, the overall newspaper market will experience moderate growth between 2025 and 2029, driven by digital expansion and diversified content strategies.



6Wresearch

Third, sustainability requires addressing structural weaknesses. Publishers must reduce production costs through shared printing facilities, local paper sourcing, and efficient logistics. Partnerships with telecommunications providers and educational institutions can expand readership through discounted digital access. Finally, the cultural value of print media should not be dismissed. While technological substitution dominates, print newspapers retain their symbolic importance as tangible records of public discourse and democratic accountability. Therefore, the future of the industry lies in coexistence. Where digital media enhances rather than erases print culture.

Synthesis with Media Substitution Theory

The findings of this study strongly support the assumptions of media substitution theory. Digital media in Sri Lanka have not merely complemented newspapers but have actively replaced them as primary information channels. This substitution is occurring at three interrelated levels:



1. Technological - the spread of smartphones and affordable internet is encouraging audiences to switch to online platforms.
2. Economic - rising printing costs and falling advertising revenues are making print unsustainable.
3. Cultural - the desire for instant, shareable content is changing the very habit of reading newspapers.

However, substitution is not absolute. The continued trust in print media and the positive suggestions of respondents for digital transformation reveal that traditional newspapers still hold a residual cultural authority. Therefore, the Sri Lankan newspaper industry is undergoing a transformation rather than an extinction a shift from printed artifacts to integrated news ecosystems.

Conclusions

The research, titled “Exploring Readers’ Perceptions of the Reasons for the Closure of Mainstream Newspapers in Sri Lanka in the Last Five Years,” revealed a number of factors that contributed to the recent decline of the Sri Lankan print newspaper industry. Using Media Substitution Theory as a basic theoretical framework, the primary objective of this research was to explore the factors that contributed to the decline of newspapers in the country.

The research revealed that print newspaper readership has declined significantly, posing a serious challenge to the newspaper industry. The younger and more digitally literate generation in particular is turning to online digital newspapers, news apps, news websites and social media, which confirms the basic logic of media substitution theory. As new technological platforms provide greater convenience and instant access, it is a natural process for users to move away from print formats.

Economic factors also play a major role. Several years of adverse economic conditions, shortages of printing materials and rising costs have had a severe impact on newspaper sales and publishing. As various newspaper companies found it difficult to maintain print editions due to high costs and declining advertising revenue, the shift to digital publications became an inevitable option. This shows that the newspaper industry is facing not only a technological transformation, but also a major change in economic organization.

Readers also expect a number of significant changes in the newspaper in the social and cultural environment. Readers are increasingly prioritizing digital formats, rapid access to information and interactivity are prominent among them. However, research shows that despite this cultural shift, trust in



traditional media still exists. Media institutions such as newspapers and television are considered reliable sources of information. This is due to the low reliability of digital sources.

In addition, it was revealed that the reader is more concerned about editorial independence and content quality. It was revealed that newspapers should be free from political influence and that reliable, high-quality content creation can lead to a renaissance in the newspaper industry. This reflects that scientific and legal accountability and fair reporting are still the core values that inspire reader confidence.

Therefore, the reduction of newspapers, especially the English language newspapers, in Sri Lanka cannot be attributed to one reason alone. It cannot be attributed to the death of journalism, but to the process that adjusts to the new environment and transformed into the new structure itself. Thus, to ensure the sustainability of the newspaper press, one needs to adjust to the innovation and demands that are taking place, along with the maintenance of its integrity and public accountability.

It has been ascertained that though the shape of the print media in journalism has altered, its significance in society has remained important. As such, it has become imperative that the future of the newspaper industry in Sri Lanka will be dependent on its adaptability to the technological realities of the digital era.

Recommendations

In view of this evidence, several recommendations could be made for surviving in an ever-changing technological and economic environment by the Sri Lankan newspaper publishing industry. First, publishing organizations in Sri Lanka need to formulate hybrid approaches to publishing, ensuring that print media and digital media outlets could be synergistically synchronized. In fact, statistical evidence shows that e-newspapers, mobile apps, and other digital publishing media appear to be seen as alternatives to conventional media by readers, and thus, this technological innovation will no longer pose threats to newspapers but has also become an inevitable technology-driven transformation. Second, the ever-skyrocketing cost factor with respect to printing media, especially printing costs, distribution costs, and raw material costs, has got to be dealt with as it has already led to the winding down of quite a number of publishing units in Sri Lanka. The publishing units need to identify cost-saving options such as jointly printing, printing in smaller lots, and distributing them locally. There has to be an emphasis on digital media in product design, meaning greater reliance on digital-oriented production.

Furthermore, the report underlines the importance of, apart from print advertising, the improvement of sustainable business models also being urgent. The media needs to investigate further diversified business opportunities, such as digital subscriptions, freemium business, online targeted advertising, as



well as collaborations with telecommunication companies and education organizations. Similarly, the restoration of trust in the newspaper industry needs to be ensured. Concerns about independence in content, credibility, and political neutrality were found to influence reader interaction, which means survival for the industry depends upon commitment to journalism values and transparency in content production and investigation in journalism. Secondly, there is also the challenge of newspapers embracing an audience-centered innovation of content improvement for satisfying digital-minded readers, especially younger generations. Lastly, policy actions also have an important role in these adaptations. It is important for national and governmental authorities to acknowledge the significance of newspapers as democratic institutions and provide them with support in digital innovation, training for media professionals, and sustainability at the same time as media freedom and independence.

Future Research

Although this research sheds light on public perceptions with regard to the shutdown of mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka, it opens several research avenues in the future. Future research could make effective use of longitudinal approaches to identify shifts in media usage and socio-cultural attitudes toward print and digital format newspapers, particularly inter-generational. Comparative research carried out in South Asian countries or in Developing Nations in general could prove to be very informative in an attempt to identify whether this Sri Lankan phenomenon identifies with particular global and regional patterns in the shutdown of mainstream newspapers. In conclusion, while future research, as mentioned, can take into account audience positions, it could, and should, go further to identify institutional, economic, and professional aspects by involving journalists, editors, publishers, and advertisers, alongside policy makers, as supply-side actors. More complex statistical methodologies, such as Structural Equation Models or Path Analysis, could potentially shed even more light into complex causal relations between certain economic, technological, and socio-cultural determinants and issues affecting mainstream newspaper sustainability. There remains further research to be done in relation to trust and credibility in digital journalism, and in particular with regard to issues of Misinformation, Algorithmic News Dispersion, and Credibility Attitudes among particular socio-cultural audiences. In conclusion, lastly, Language-specific and community-focused studies with regard to Sinhalese, Tamil, and English-speaking mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka can prove to be highly informative and could shed insightful light into individual linguistic and cultural media substitution processes in place.



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