
Fact-Checking India:

Identifying the Spread of Fake News and Policy
Recommendations for Combatting Misinformation

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Executive Summary



This study explores the prevalence and nature of fake news on social media in India, examining how it manifests across different themes and understanding user behaviour and perceptions towards misinformation. The empirical research identifies six major themes: politics, health, crime, entertainment, general topics, and religion. Political fake news is the most frequent accounting for 46% of cases. This theme, along with general issues (33.6%) and religion (16.8%), represents 94% of the fake news stories analysed, underscoring the significant impact of misinformation, particularly in political contexts.

The study further delves into types of content associated with political fake news, revealing that text and video formats dominate. Social media emerges as the primary source of misinformation (77.4%) compared to mainstream media (23%). Among social media platforms, Twitter is the leading platform for spreading fake news (61%), followed closely by Facebook (34%).

Besides content analysis, the perception and experience survey reveals that 74.89% of Indian consumers rely primarily on social media for news, with a strong preference for video content (68.21%). Facebook stands out as the preferred platform for news, with varying levels of usage observed across different age groups.

The study shows that individuals who are young (especially those aged 18-24), belong to low-income groups (earning less than Rs. 2,000), and have lower education levels are more susceptible to fake news. They are also more likely to share misinformation without verifying the facts

and authenticity, contributing to its spread. Therefore, age, income, and education are crucial factors in combatting fake news. The findings underscore the importance of understanding demographic differences in news consumption behaviour, with younger users often less aware of the potential risks of sharing fake news, while older individuals exhibit greater awareness of misinformation risks. The study also emphasises the need for comprehensive media literacy programs, improved reporting mechanisms, and collaborative efforts among stakeholders to tackle the challenges posed by fake news and deepfakes.

This research establishes a foundation for developing targeted strategies to mitigate the spread of fake news, enhance media literacy, and foster responsible sharing practices among users. The insights gained from this study can serve as a critical resource for policymakers, educators, and organisations aiming to navigate the challenges of misinformation in the Indian digital landscape.

Introduction

Overview of the Prevalence of Fake News in the Digital Age

In an age where the internet is the primary source of news and information for most consumers worldwide, social media has become an integral part of our society and daily lives. Every day, people read, watch, or listen to the news online on topics ranging from conversations around their favorite celebrities to information concerning their preferred political candidates, and they often take the information found online for granted. However, social media is susceptible to misinformation and frequently features inaccurate data and news. This false information or misinformation is often called fake news, i.e., fabricated stories lacking verifiable facts, sources, or quotes. Fake news is forged to influence the reader's opinions on various topics.

The spread of fake news has surged in recent years, particularly across platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, which facilitate rapid and wide-reaching information sharing. Fake news has become a buzzword after the 2016 US election (Quandt et al., 2019). It is referred to as a rumour, misinformation, and disinformation (Duffy et al., 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018,

2020; Meel & Vishwakarma, 2019; Muigai, 2019). Rumour is unverified information that emerges in ambiguous and threatening situations and when information is scarce and people feel a psychological need for understanding or security (Difonzo & Bordia, 2006; Watson & Hill, 2006). Disinformation is false or misleading information constructed deliberately to mislead people (Derczynski et al., 2015).

In recent years, Indian consumers have become increasingly susceptible to fake news and deepfakes. As of March 2024, India has over 820 million active internet users, with 442 million from rural parts of the country. Internet penetration continues to grow, increasing 8% year-on-year, with 33.4% of the Indian population engaged on social media. With 398 million users aged 18 and above—representing 40.2% of the population—the digital ecosystem exerts a significant influence on various aspects of Indian society, including connectivity, access to information, social interaction, and entertainment. Given the massive user base, it's crucial for stakeholders, including government bodies, tech companies, media organisations, and civil society,



to address key issues such as digital literacy, online safety, data privacy, and the spread of misinformation. Educating users, promoting responsible online behaviour, and implementing effective regulatory frameworks are essential steps to harness the potential benefits of the digital ecosystem while mitigating the risks associated with misinformation and improper internet use. As India continues to embrace digital technologies and social media platforms, fostering a culture of digital citizenship, critical thinking, and ethical online practices will be crucial in leveraging the power of the internet for positive social, economic, and cultural development. Therefore, understanding the trends and patterns in the spread of fake news and consumer perceptions of it is vital.

Definition of Fake News and its Implication on Society

Fake news encompasses various types of false stories or news primarily published and distributed on the internet to purposely mislead, deceive, or lure readers for financial, political, brand-damaging, or other gains. It can manifest in diverse forms, such as news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising. Fake news can be categorised into different forms, such as (i) text data (i.e. articles, written posts, blogs); (ii) multimedia content like images, video, audio, and graphics found in fake texts, photos, video, and audio files; (iii) hyperlinks connecting different sources, such as websites, snapshots, sound clips; (iv) audio as a standalone category, such as podcasts. Fake news can manifest in different forms, each with its unique characteristics and implications:

Misinformation: Inaccurate or misleading information presented as true, which may include misinterpreted facts, out-of-context content, or genuine mistakes in reporting.

Disinformation: Intentionally false information spread intending to deceive or manipulate, often created and disseminated to serve a particular agenda or influence public opinion.

Satire or Parody: Fake news presented in a satirical or humorous manner, often mimicking the style of legitimate news sources. While intended for entertainment, satire can sometimes be misconstrued as actual news.

Clickbait: Sensationalised or misleading headlines designed to attract clicks and web traffic. Clickbait often exaggerates or distorts information to generate curiosity or provoke an emotional response.

Fabricated News: Completely false stories created from scratch to deceive readers. Fabricated news is entirely fictional and has no basis in reality.

Manipulated Content: Visual or audio content that has been digitally altered or edited to misrepresent reality. This can include photoshopped images, deepfake videos, or audio clips manipulated to convey false information.

Biased Reporting: News stories that present information in a one-sided or partial manner, omitting key facts or context to advance a particular viewpoint or agenda.

Propaganda: Information, often disseminated by governments or organisations, designed to promote a specific ideology, agenda, or narrative. Propaganda can be misleading or false, aiming to influence public opinion and shape perceptions.

Deepfakes

Deepfake technology is the innovative trend toward misinformation in digital media. It uses machine learning algorithms to embed faces and voices into images, video, and audio recordings of real individuals, enabling the creation of highly realistic impersonations generated entirely from digital sources. The outcome is an image, video, or audio that appears genuine, making it seem as though someone has said or done something they have not. While deepfakes can be produced with the consent of those involved, they are often created without it.

Implications of Fake News on Society

The spread of fake news can have far-reaching and often harmful implications for society. Here's a look at some of these effects:

1. Erosion of Trust

- **Media Institutions:** Fake news undermines trust in legitimate media outlets, leading to public skepticism about the news they consume.
- **Public Figures and Institutions:** Misinformation can damage the reputations of individuals, companies, and public institutions, eroding public trust in these entities.

2. Political Polarisation

- **Divisive Content:** Fake news often exploits emotional and ideological divides, intensifying political polarisation and stoking conflicts between different social groups.
- **Manipulation of Public Opinion:** False information can skew public opinion and affect electoral outcomes, potentially undermining democratic processes.
- **Political Manipulation:** Deepfake technology can amplify political manipulation by creating false narratives that can manipulate public perception and potentially influence the outcome of elections or geopolitical situations.

3. Undermining Democratic Processes

- **Election Integrity:** The spread of misinformation can interfere with free and fair elections by unfairly influencing voter perceptions and decisions.

- **Public Participation:** When people lose trust in the accuracy of information, they may disengage from the political process, leading to lower voter turnout and reduced civic participation.

4. Public Safety and Health Risks

- **Misinformation on Health:** False information on health topics, such as vaccines or pandemics, can lead to harmful health choices and public health crises.
- **Public Safety Threats:** Fake news can incite panic, violence, or lawlessness, posing serious threats to public safety.

5. Economic Impact

- **Financial Scams:** Misinformation can be used to perpetrate financial scams, resulting in economic losses for both individuals and businesses.
- **Market Manipulation:** False information can disrupt stock prices and financial markets, affecting economic instability.

6. Social Disruption

- **Community Conflicts:** By targeting specific communities with misinformation, fake news can incite communal conflicts and social unrest.
- **Erosion of Social Cohesion:** Persistent exposure to fake news may create a fragmented society with weakened social cohesion and trust.

7. Undermining Knowledge and Understanding

- **Spread of Ignorance:** Fake news spreads ignorance by presenting falsehoods as facts, challenging the dissemination of accurate and reliable information.
- **Critical Thinking Deterioration:** The prevalence of misinformation can undermine critical thinking skills, making it harder for people to distinguish between credible sources and false information.

8. Cultural and Societal Norms

- **Cultural Attitudes:** Fake news can shape cultural attitudes and societal norms by perpetuating stereotypical, biased, or prejudiced information.
- **Normalisation:** Persistent misinformation can normalise unethical or harmful behaviours, altering societal norms for acceptable discourse.

9. Impact on Mental Health

- **Anxiety and Stress:** Constant exposure to fake news, especially sensationalised or fear-mongering content, can lead to heightened anxiety, stress, and a sense of helplessness among people.
- **Distrust and Paranoia:** Conspiracy theories and misleading information can foster a culture of distrust and paranoia, straining social bonds.

10. Cybersecurity Threats

- **Cyber Meddling:** Fake news can be part of broader cyber threats, such as information warfare and cyber-attacks aimed at destabilising nations or influencing foreign policy.



- **Identity Theft:** Misleading online content can be used in phishing attacks and other cybercrimes, putting personal data and security at risk.

11. Cyber Bullying and Harassment

- Deepfakes can facilitate cyberbullying by creating humiliating or damaging images or videos of individuals, leading to psychological harm.

Recognising and addressing these implications is essential for fostering a healthy, informed, and resilient society.

Spread and Influence of Fake News and Deepfakes

Fake news often spreads faster than genuine news. The dissemination of fake news uses various channels and platforms to spread misleading or false information. The primary mechanisms for the dissemination of misinformation are:

1. Social Media

- **Social Networking Sites:** Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn allow users to share content rapidly. Users create and disseminate fake news through posts, which can go viral through likes, shares, retweets, and comments.
- **Algorithms and Echo Chambers:** Social media algorithms often promote sensational content that attracts high engagement. This can create echo chambers where users are only exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, making them more susceptible to fake news.
- **Groups and Communities:** Closed groups and communities on social media platforms also serve as breeding grounds for the proliferation of false information, as they can share and propagate fake news among like-minded members with limited scrutiny.

2. Websites

- **Fake News Sites:** These are purpose-built websites that publish fabricated stories masquerading as genuine news. They often use clickbait headlines to attract visitors and generate ad revenue.

- **Blogs and Forums:** Personal blogs and online forums are also sources of fake news, whether shared intentionally or unintentionally. Users may publish and discuss unverified information, which can then spread further.
- **Content Farms:** These are sites that generate large volumes of content designed to attract clicks and ad revenue. They often prioritise sensationalism over accuracy.

3. Messaging Apps

- **Private Messaging:** Apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, and Facebook Messenger enable the sharing of messages, images, and videos directly between users or within groups, often with end-to-end encryption. This makes it difficult to monitor and control the spread of fake news.
- **Group Chats:** Mass messaging to large groups facilitates the rapid spread of misinformation, as users share content with multiple contacts simultaneously.
- **Forwarding Features:** The ease of forwarding messages to other users or groups amplifies the reach of fake news, allowing it to spread quickly across vast networks.

4. Other Digital Platforms

- **Video Sharing Sites:** Platforms like YouTube and TikTok host video content that can spread misinformation. Videos often have a powerful impact because of their visual and auditory elements, making the fake news more convincing.
- **Podcasts and Streaming Services:** Audio content on platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and various streaming services can disseminate misinformation through discussions and interviews.
- **Memes and Visual Content:** Infographics, memes, and other visual content shared across various platforms can convey false information effectively, especially when they are easily shareable and relatable.

5. Email

- **Chain Emails:** Emails containing fake news can be sent to large lists of recipients, who may forward the content to their contacts.
- **Spam Emails:** These emails use sensational headlines and false information to attract attention and engage recipients, often incorporating fake news into broader fraudulent schemes.

6. Search Engines and SEO

- **Search Engine Optimisation (SEO):** Fake news sites employ SEO techniques to boost the ranking of their fabricated stories in search engine results, increasing the likelihood that users searching for information will see and believe them.
- **Content Aggregators:** Platforms that aggregate news and information from multiple sources inadvertently disseminate fake news if they do not effectively filter and verify the content.

7. Traditional Media Channels

- **Television and Radio:** In some cases, mainstream media outlets can inadvertently spread fake news by reporting unverified information, especially during breaking news situations.
- **Print Media:** Although less common, newspapers and magazines sometimes publish fake news, particularly in the form of sensationalist or biased reporting.

Understanding the mechanisms through which fake news is disseminated is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its impact and foster a more informed society.



Case Studies Highlighting the Spread and Influence of Fake News

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, facilitate the rapid sharing and amplification of information, reaching millions of users. The effect of fake news on public opinion and behaviour has been profound in various contexts. This section highlights the impact of fake news through specific incidents of its spread in India and abroad. Below are several notable case studies that illustrate these effects:

False Information during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a surge of misinformation regarding the virus, treatments, and vaccines, primarily disseminated through social media and messaging apps.

Key Fake News Stories

- **Miracle Cures:** Messages promoting unproven and sometimes dangerous treatments for COVID-19 circulated widely, including claims that drinking hot water or consuming herbal remedies could cure the virus.
- **Vaccine Misinformation:** False information regarding vaccine safety, efficacy, and potential side effects led to widespread vaccine hesitancy.

Impact

- **Public Health Risks:** Belief in fake cures and the rejection of scientifically backed health advice led to preventable illness and deaths.
- **Vaccine Hesitancy:** Misinformation significantly contributed to vaccine hesitancy in various parts of India, complicating efforts to achieve widespread immunisation and control the pandemic.
- **Government and Media Response:** Efforts to combat misinformation included public awareness campaigns, myth-busting articles from reputable news organisations, and initiatives by social media companies to flag and remove false information.

Indian General Elections (2019)

The 2019 Indian general elections were characterised by widespread misinformation, as political parties and partisan entities leveraged social media to influence voter opinions.

Key Fake News Stories

- **Misleading Polls and Statistics:** Fake surveys and doctored statistics were circulated to falsely show that certain political parties or candidates were in the lead.
- **Character Assassination:** Numerous fake news stories targeted political figures, spreading false allegations of corruption, criminal activities, or immoral behaviour.

Impact

- **Voter Perception:** The fake news campaigns were designed to shape voter perceptions and decisions, potentially skewing the democratic process.
- **Polarisation:** The flood of misinformation exacerbated societal divisions and intensified political polarisation.
- **Legal and Regulatory Actions:** The Election Commission of India worked with social media platforms and fact-checking organisations to identify and mitigate the spread of fake news during the election period.

Mob Lynchings Triggered by WhatsApp Rumours (2018)

Many incidents of mob lynchings were reported across India, triggered by false rumours spread via WhatsApp regarding child kidnappers on the prowl.

Key Fake News Story

- **Kidnapping Gangs:** Messages claiming that gangs of child kidnappers were active in various regions spread rapidly, often accompanied by doctored videos and images.

Impact

- **Violence:** These rumours led to several tragic incidents, where mobs acting on false information attacked and killed innocent people. Notable cases included lynchings in states like Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Assam.
- **Public Outcry:** The widespread violence and deaths sparked public outcry and highlighted the dangers of misinformation on messaging platforms.
- **Government Response:** The incidents prompted the Indian government to urge WhatsApp and other social media platforms to implement measures to curb the spread of fake news. WhatsApp subsequently limited the number of times a message could be forwarded and labeled forwarded messages to address this problem.

Rumours and Panic during Demonetisation (2016)

The Indian government's decision to demonetise high-denomination currency notes in 2016 led to a surge of rumours and fake news about the policy and its implications.

Key Fake News Stories

- **False Claims about Policy Changes:** Reports claiming the government intended to demonetise other denominations and impose additional banking restrictions caused widespread panic.
- **Gold Confiscation Rumours:** Fake news falsely suggesting that the government would seize individuals' gold holdings, resulted in panic selling and hoarding behaviour.

Impact

- **Public Panic:** The spread of false information created confusion and fear among the populace, exacerbating the disruptions caused by demonetisation.
- **Economic Disruption:** In response to general panic, people engaged in unplanned financial actions, further straining an already stressed economy.
- **Government Response:** Authorities had to issue multiple clarifications and initiate awareness campaigns to combat the spread of misinformation.

Communal Tensions in Muzaffarnagar (2013)

Communal violence in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, was partly fuelled by fake news and inflammatory rumours, which spread through social media.

Key Fake News Story

- **Doctored Videos:** A video falsely claiming to show a Muslim mob attacking Hindu youths went viral, stoking communal tensions. The video was later found to be from a different incident in another country.

Impact

- **Deaths and Displacement:** The resulting riots led to the deaths of dozens of people and the displacement of thousands.
- **Long-Term Tensions:** The violence had long-term repercussions, deepening communal rifts in the region.
- **Government and Media Action:** The incident underscored the need for stringent laws to check the dissemination of fake news and proactive measures by authorities to address communal tensions.

Myanmar Rohingya Crisis

In Myanmar, the spread of fake news and hate speech on social media, particularly Facebook, played a significant role in escalating violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Key Fake News Story

- **Incitement of Violence:** Fabricated stories and doctored images falsely portraying the Rohingya as violent aggressors intensified the anti-Rohingya sentiment among the broader population and contributed to inciting violence against the Rohingya community.

Impact

- **Human Rights Violations:** The pervasive misinformation fueled ethnic violence, contributing to severe human rights abuses, including mass displacement, killings, and sexual violence against the Rohingya community.
- **International Condemnation:** The role of social media in spreading fake news attracted greater scrutiny and international condemnation, both toward the Myanmar government and social media platforms, for their inadequate response to the crisis.

Brexit Referendum (2016)

The Brexit referendum in the UK was marked by numerous fake news stories and misinformation campaigns that influenced public opinion regarding the decision to leave the European Union.

Key Fake News Stories

- **Funding Misinformation:** A widely circulated claim stated that the UK was sending £350 million a week to the EU, suggesting that this money could instead fund the National Health Service (NHS). This figure was misleading and oversimplified the financial contributions of the UK to the EU.
- **Immigration Scares:** Fake news stories exaggerated the impact of immigration on British society and the economy, stoking fears and xenophobia.

Impact

- **Voter Confusion:** The misinformation contributed to a divided electorate, with many voters basing their decisions on inaccurate information.
- **Polarisation:** The spread of fake news heightened political and social tensions within the UK.

2016 US Presidential Election

During the 2016 US Presidential Election, many fake news stories were widely circulated on social media, targeting both candidates but particularly focusing on Hillary Clinton.

Key Fake News Stories

- **Pizzagate:** One of the most infamous fake news stories alleged that a child trafficking ring involving prominent Democratic Party members was operating out of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. This baseless conspiracy theory led to a real-life incident where an armed man entered the pizzeria to “self-investigate.”
- **Pope Endorsement Hoax:** False reports claimed that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump, which, while untrue, added to voter confusion and misinformation.

Impact

- **Voter Influence:** Research suggests that fake news stories were shared more widely than some mainstream news stories, potentially influencing voter perceptions and decisions.
- **Sowing Division:** The fake news amplified existing political divisions, fostering an environment of suspicion and distrust.

Deepfakes in Political Discourse

In May 2024, during the Lok Sabha elections, a deepfake video surfaced on social media featuring Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Key Fake News Story

- **Viral Spread:** In the doctored video, she appeared to be dancing to the musical beats of a song (<https://www.newsx.com/national/mamata-banerjee-deepfake-video-goes-viral-freedom-of-speech-creativity-in-danger/>). The video quickly went viral across various social media platforms, leading to widespread pandemonium and heated debates among political supporters.

Impact

- The video aimed to manipulate public perception ahead of a contentious electoral period.

The spread of fake news has led to serious and often tragic consequences, including loss of life, social unrest, public health risks, and economic disruption. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from the government, private sector and civil society to enhance media literacy, develop robust fact-checking mechanisms, regulate misinformation, and promote responsible use of social media. In the current study, the researchers have:

- Analysed online fake news trends and content types.
- Developed a survey to understand consumers’ perceptions of fake news.
- Assessed the impact of fake news on society through survey analysis.
- Proposed recommendations to promote responsible online behaviour to curtail the spread of fake news.



Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to analyse how the Indian population perceives fake news and deepfakes, as well as the effect and broader impact of misinformation, fake news, and deepfakes on society.

Methodology

Analysis of Fake News Sites

Higdon (2020) examined four key themes of fake news: nationalism, hate, celebrity gossip, and fear. While the study aimed to provide deeper insights into these themes, it did not adequately address the complexity of fake news by failing to include other important themes, such as politics, crime, and miscellaneous issues. Wu and Liu (2018) identified four themes within social media fake news: business, science and technology, entertainment, and medicine. However, this study's scope was limited to a more technical genre, specifically computer science, with restricted categories that lacked detailed explanations and did not consider the Indian context. Banaji et al. (2019) proposed five themes related to WhatsApp fake news: overwhelming content, nationalism, religion, gender, and miscellaneous. Nonetheless, this study overlooked significant public interest issues and included several overlapping sub-themes. Limitations of these previous studies include the absence of a focus on the Indian context, inadequate consideration of social media, and lack of inclusivity in addressing diverse fake news themes.

Fake news content can be of different types, such as texts, photos, video, and audio files (Sukhodolov & Bychkova, 2017). Although Guacho et al. (2018) discussed three types of fake news content: text, image, and video,

their study focused only on the textual analysis of fake news articles. Similarly, Wheaton (2018) addressed text, image, and video as the primary fake news content, but focused only on textual analysis. Fake news on social media can appear in eight different forms: text, photo, audio, video, text & photo, text & video, photo & video, and text & video. The first four are primary content types, while the other four are combinations of one or more primary content. The combinations are necessary, as a single piece of fake news can be found in multiple forms at a specific time. Social media platforms are the primary sources of fake news. Online media includes digital media sources, such as social media platforms, blogs, websites, mobile apps of new channels, and newspaper websites. Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Twitter are the primary sources of fake news.

The fake news data was collected from Alt News (<http://altnews.in>), an Indian Fact-checking website. This platform was selected because of its wide recognition and credibility, and its rigorous fact-checking procedures. Alt News is certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and is also listed in The Reporter's Lab database at Duke University. The data collection period covered the year 2022-2024, with a sample of 500 items gathered over three months



Fake news was categorised into six themes:

(i) Health (ii) Religion (iii) Politics (iv) Crime (v) Entertainment and (vi) Miscellaneous. Codes used to classify the fake news content types were text, photo, audio, video, text & photo, text & video, photo & video, and text & photo & video (Sayeed Md. 2021).

Themes, Content Types and Sources of Fake News

Results and Findings

The findings show that fake news on social media primarily encompasses six themes: health, religion, politics, crime, and entertainment (Table 1). Of these, political fake news ranks highest in frequency, with n=218 (43.6%), followed by general topics at n=168 (33.6%) and religion at n=84 (16.8%) (Table 2). Together, these three themes constitute 94% of the fake news stories examined in this study. In contrast, sports-related fake news is the least frequent, with n=7 (1%).

Political fake news poses a particular threat to public trust, eroding confidence

not only in the media but also in political institutions. When misleading information about government actions or policies is widely disseminated, it can prompt citizens to question the integrity and effectiveness of governmental bodies, potentially resulting in a disengaged and disillusioned electorate.

In the category of political fake news, text & video content makes up the largest share, with n=178 (35.78%), followed by text & photos with n=114 (27.98%). The content code of photos & videos accounts for the smallest portion, at n=3 (0.92%) (Appendix B, Table 5).



Table 1. Description of the Themes of Fake News

Themes	Definition	Example
Health	Health-related topics, such as diseases, treatments, medical practices, vaccines, and public health policies.	Hydroxychloroquine is an effective cure for COVID-19.
Religion	Unverified information concerning religious beliefs, practices, events, or figures.	A doctored video showing the lynching of two Hindu youths by Muslims went viral, stoking communal tensions
Politics	Information about political events, figures, policies, or processes with the intent to influence public opinion, manipulate political outcomes, confuse the electorate, or create social and political discord.	During the Delhi legislative elections, fake news played a significant role. False claims about various candidates and political parties were shared via social media and messaging apps.
Crime	Incidents pertaining to violence, stealing, harassment, and other forms of criminal activities.	During India's demonetisation drive in 2016, fake news about ATM and bank fraud led to public panic.
Entertainment	Information related to celebrities, the entertainment industry, and events.	In 2020, false news of actor Sylvester Stallone's death because of COVID-19 was circulated widely on social media.

Table 2. Themes of Fake News

Themes	Frequency
Politics	218
General	168
Religion	84
Crime	23
Sports	7

Fake news on social media can appear in eight different formats: text, photo, audio, video, text & photo, text & video, photo & video, and text, photo & video (see Table 3). The first four represent primary content types, while the latter four are combinations of one or more primary content types. In this

study, text & video appear more frequently than the other formats, followed by text & photo. Together, these two categories account for 58% of the total sample. Conversely, text, text & video, audio, and text & photo & audio rank at the bottom of the list.

Table 3. Fake News Content Types

Variable	Frequency
Text	9
Text & Photos	114
Text & Video	178
Text & Audio	1
Photos & Video	3
Text & Photos & Video	94
Text & Photos & Audio	23
Text & Video & Audio	9
Text & Photos & Video & Audio	69

The two primary sources of fake news on social media are online media and mainstream media. Mainstream media primarily comprises national outlets such as television channels, newspapers, and radio stations. In contrast, online media includes digital versions of mainstream television channels and newspapers, online news portals, blogs, various websites, and social media platforms. In this study, online social

media has a larger share of fake news (n=802; 77.4%) compared to mainstream media (n=233; 23%). Among online media sources, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are the most common platforms for disseminating fake news. Twitter stands out as the leading platform for spreading fake news, with (n=489; 61%), followed by Facebook (n=271; 34%). YouTube has the lowest contribution, accounting for (n=16; 2%).

Table 4. Sources of Fake News

Social Media Platforms	Frequency	Percentage
Twitter	489	61%
Facebook	271	34%
WhatsApp	26	3%
YouTube	16	2%
Mainstream Media	233	23%



Methods and Data-Perception and Experience Study

The Perceptions and Experience study measured the average Indian consumers' understanding of fake news, their beliefs concerning the mode of fake news and its impact on society. The Catalytic Corp data collection agency was commissioned to gather responses (in both English and Hindi) through an online survey from a representative sample of the Indian population (N=5555) to evaluate their comprehension of fake news, usage of social media platforms, and other relevant behavioural and demographic attributes. The survey was conducted from February 2024 to June 2024.

The knowledge dimensions making up the survey questionnaire are summarised below:

1. **Media Usage Patterns**
2. **Sharing information**
3. **Impact**
4. **Deepfakes**

Along with these questions, demographic data was also collected to gather deeper insights, including factors relating to age, sex, education, and location. The sample had 45.5% female and 54.5% male representation (Appendix A, Fig 30).

Findings

The survey revealed that the primary source of news consumption is social media (74.89%), followed by television (69.43%) and newspapers (63.10%). Radio is the least preferred (17.34%) source of news in the digital age (Appendix A, Fig. 1). Video is the most preferred content type (68.21%) compared to text (41.13%) (Appendix A, Fig. 2).

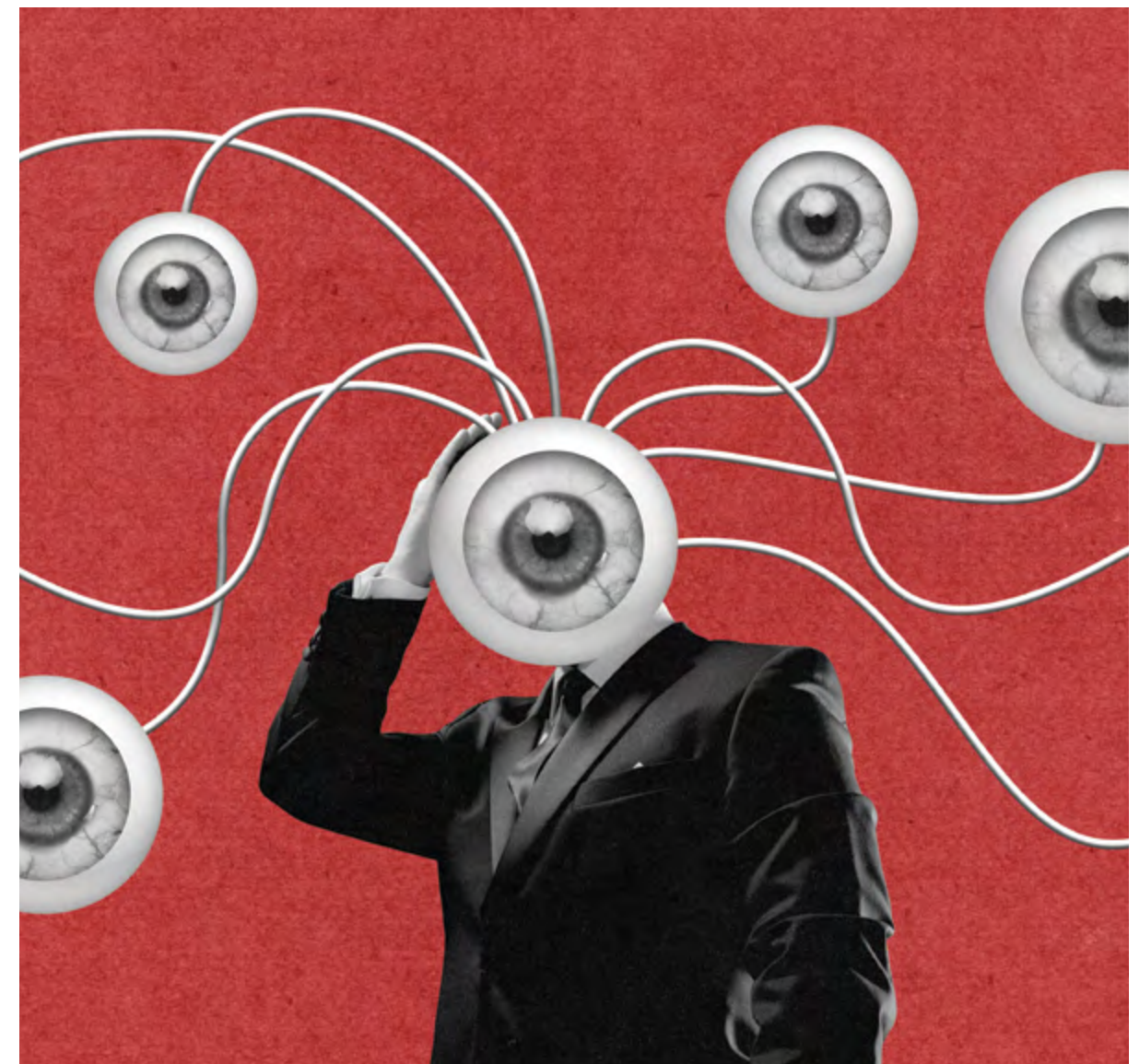
In recent years, social media has become the dominant platform for news consumption, both globally and in India. Several factors have contributed to this trend, including ease of access, speed of information dissemination, real-time updates, the interactive nature of social media platforms, personalisation and customisation, and the sheer diversity of sources. The study also compares and examines trends in social media platform usage for news consumption across two distinct regions: the United States and India. Below is the detailed analysis:

United States: Preferred Platforms (Appendix A. Fig. 3)

1. Facebook: 89.62% of the population prefers Facebook for news consumption.
2. YouTube: 89.55% of the population prefers YouTube for news consumption.
3. Instagram: 49.32% of the population prefers Instagram for news consumption.

India: Preferred Platforms (Appendix A. Fig. 4)

1. Facebook: 70% of the population prefers Facebook for news consumption.
2. WhatsApp: 64.50% of the population prefers WhatsApp for news consumption.
3. Instagram: 48.53% of the population prefers Instagram for news consumption.



Observations from United States Data

Facebook (89.62%) and YouTube (89.55%)

- **Popularity and Reach:** Both platforms have extensive reach and are highly popular among US consumers across different age groups. Facebook is particularly popular among US consumers aged 55 and older, with 94.59% of this demographic preferring it (Appendix A. Fig. 5, Fig 6, and Fig 7). This is closely followed by 92.40% of users in the 35-44 age group and 89.87% of users in the 45-54 age group. Among younger US consumers aged 18-24, 72.32% favor Facebook. Meanwhile, 97.08% of US consumers aged 35-44 prefer YouTube. In contrast, younger consumers, especially those aged 18-24, prefer YouTube, with 95.54% using it as their primary news source, followed by 83.93% favoring Instagram. Interestingly, the 55+ age group in the US demonstrates a clear preference for Facebook over YouTube.

- **Diverse Content Formats:** Facebook supports a variety of content formats, including articles, videos, and live streams, which resonate with users. YouTube, as a video-centric platform, offers in-depth news coverage, documentaries, and live broadcasts. Notably, many YouTube videos are frequently shared on Facebook by consumers.

Instagram (49.32%)

- **Visual Storytelling:** Instagram is primarily a visual platform, featuring images and short videos, which appeal particularly to younger demographics. Specifically, 61.17% of US consumers aged 18-24 prefer Instagram. However, there is a linear decline in the use of Instagram with increasing age, with only 24.04% of US consumers aged 55 and older favoring the platform (Appendix A. Fig. 8).
- **Influencer News:** Instagram influencers and micro-journalists often share news updates and personal takes on current events.

Observations from India Data

Facebook (70%) (Appendix A. Fig. 9)

- **Widespread Usage:** : Facebook's dominant presence in India and its community-oriented features that facilitate wide dissemination and discussion of information position it as a primary source of news. Overall, 72.13% of Indian consumers in the age group 35-44 prefer Facebook as their news source. This preference is slightly lower in the 25-34 age group, at 70.39%, and among younger consumers aged 18-24, where only 67.78% favor Facebook.
- **Language and Regional Content:** Facebook offers content in multiple languages, catering to India's diverse population.

WhatsApp (64.50%) (Appendix A. Fig. 10)

- **Private Sharing:** WhatsApp's private and group messaging features facilitate the sharing of news among family and friends, creating trusted channels for information dissemination. The study reveals a linear increase in WhatsApp usage with age. Specifically, 79.81% of consumers in the age group 55+ prefer WhatsApp, followed by 72.80% in the age group 45-54, and 68.66% in the age group 35-44. In contrast, only 57.53% of Indian consumers in the 18-24 age group favor WhatsApp.
- **Instant Sharing:** The platform's ease of use and ubiquity enable quick sharing of news, which at the same time presents challenges related to the rapid spread of misinformation.

YouTube (49.73%)

Data reveals that YouTube, a video-centric platform, is a popular news source, especially among older adults in India. Approximately 54.8% of individuals aged 55 and older prefer YouTube for news, signaling a strong inclination towards visual content in this age group. Additionally, the findings show a consistent increase in YouTube usage as age increases, suggesting that older age groups are more comfortable with and dependent on this platform for news compared to younger users. Specifically, only 47.62% of users in the 18-24 age group prefer YouTube for news, with the figure gradually increasing to 48.45% for those aged 25-34, to 52.17% for the 35-44 age group, and to 52.80% for individuals aged 45-54 (Appendix A. Fig. 5 and Fig. 11).

This trend shows that as individuals age, their preference for using YouTube for news grows, highlighting the platform's appeal to older audiences for in-depth coverage, documentaries, and live broadcasts. This pattern underscores the significance of tailoring news content to the preferences of different age groups, particularly when engaging with older audiences.

Instagram (48.53%)

- **Youth Engagement:** Instagram is especially popular among younger users in India, offering news through visually engaging formats. The study reveals that news and information are shared

in various forms, such as text, videos, memes, and more. As per the study, 68.21% of consumers in India prefer news in video format, followed by 41.13% who prefer text-based content (Appendix A. Fig. 12). Specifically, 61.17% of the individuals aged 18-24 prefer Instagram. However, there is a linear decline in Instagram usage with age, with only 24.04% of consumers aged 55 and older favoring the platform.

- **Influencers:** Influencers and public figures on Instagram play a significant role in shaping public opinion through the updates and news stories that they share.

The analysis reveals significant differences in preferences when it comes to selecting a social media platform for news across age groups in the United States and India. Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are overwhelmingly preferred by the 55+ demographic, and Instagram dominates among users aged 18-24 in India and the United States. There is a linear decline in Instagram usage with age not only in India but in the United States as well. In India, Facebook is the primary news source for most age groups in India, with WhatsApp preferred by those aged 55 and older.

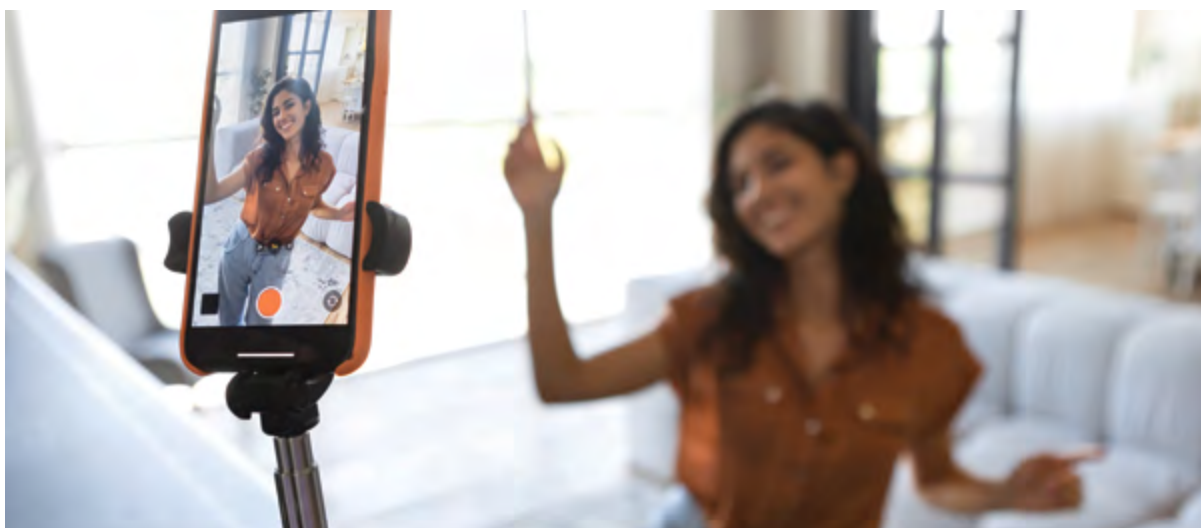
These insights are crucial for news organisations, social media platforms, and policymakers to tailor strategies that meet the needs and behaviours of each age group. By understanding these preferences, stakeholders can enhance user engagement, improve the quality of news delivery, and build a more informed and resilient public.

Cross-Language News Consumption: Understanding Audience Behaviour and Preferences

In a rapidly globalising world, multilingual news consumption has become increasingly important, especially in a linguistically diverse nation like India. Home to over 120 languages, India is a unique tapestry of cultural and regional identities, and this blend shapes how individuals access and engage with news. Cross-language news consumption reflects the dynamic interplay of audience behaviour and preferences, shaping the way information is perceived and disseminated across various demographics. This phenomenon is driven by factors such as technological advancements, the rise of digital media platforms, and the increasing relevance of regional perspectives in the national discourse. Understanding the patterns of news consumption in different languages is critical for media organisations, policymakers, and researchers alike, as it can provide valuable insights into the informational needs of an increasingly interconnected and multilingual audience.

Overall Sentiment

Across all age groups, there is a strong preference for consuming news in their native languages, with an impressive average score of 5.6 (Appendix A, Fig 14). The older age groups of 55+ and 45-54 showed a higher inclination towards consuming news in English compared to the other age groups. In line with their news consumption preferences, all age groups demonstrate a high level of trust in the news transmitted in their native languages, with an average trust score of 5.68. Conversely, only the 45-54 age group displays a degree of trust in English news, while all other age groups maintain a neutral stance regarding their trust in news presented in English (Appendix A. Fig. 20).



Motivations for Sharing News: Insights into Human Behaviour

In an era dominated by social media and instant communication, the motivation to share news has reached unprecedented heights. Humans are naturally inclined to inform others, express opinions, and engage in discussions, but this impulse can have unintended consequences. As individuals spread news, the lines between credible information and misinformation often blur. The eagerness to share sensational stories, intriguing headlines, or emotionally charged content frequently leads to the rapid dissemination of fake news. This dynamic is fuelled by a mix of psychological factors, such as the need for social validation, the desire to influence others, and the tendency to seek and share content that aligns with one's beliefs. Unfortunately, this motivation, while rooted in our social nature, can contribute to the spread of misinformation, creating confusion and eroding trust in reliable media sources. Understanding the motivations behind this behaviour is essential for addressing the challenges posed by fake news in today's information

landscape.

According to the study, 61.06% of respondents share news to raise awareness, followed by 59.82% who share out of safety concerns (Appendix A, Fig. 17A and Fig. 17B). About 44.57% of people share news to influence others, while 37.19% share news to make connections. Only 18.97% of the people validate the news before sharing. The findings further show that 66.95% of the people who share news to build awareness are only educated till high school, followed by 60.10% of people who are graduates and have professional qualifications. In terms of format, 84.68% of the consumers share news in the form of video, followed by 66.91% who use text while only 36.69% share news through word of mouth (Appendix A. Fig. 18).

Content Sharing Trends: Exploring What Users Share on Social Platforms

As social media platforms continue to shape the way people communicate and share information, understanding content-sharing trends becomes crucial, especially when it comes to the proliferation of fake news. Users frequently share diverse content, from news articles, memes, and videos, to personal opinions, often driven by emotional resonance rather than factual accuracy. This eagerness to share sensational stories or engaging visuals can cause a swift spread of misinformation, as users may not take the time to verify the authenticity of the content before posting. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter have become breeding grounds for fake news, with algorithms favoring sensationalised content that drives clicks and engagement, sometimes over verified information. As users aim to connect with their peers and express their thoughts on current events, the social dynamics of sharing play a pivotal role in amplifying misleading narratives, ultimately undermining trust in legitimate news sources and contributing to a more polarised society.

Recognising these trends is vital for developing effective strategies to counteract the spread of fake news and promote responsible sharing behaviour among users. Notably, consumers largely agree on sharing content related to health, well-being, and spirituality on social media platforms, with an average score of 5.3 (Appendix A. Fig. 15, Fig 16, Fig 17A, and Fig. 17B). This is followed by sharing religious, political, and social content, news about crime, natural disasters, and wars, as well as humorous and entertainment content, with an average score of 5.1. Interestingly, individuals aged 55 and older show a strong agreement for sharing health-related content, averaging 5.7, followed closely by those in the 45-54 age group, who average 5.5. Conversely, the 18-24 age group displays only moderate agreement with sharing health-related content on social media platforms.

Fake News on Social Media: A Growing Concern

The proliferation of fake news on social media has emerged as a significant concern in India, where the rapid adoption of digital communication platforms has created a fertile environment for misinformation to thrive. Trends indicate that individuals across diverse age groups and educational levels are increasingly sharing fake news, often without verifying its accuracy. Younger users, particularly those aged 18-24, are often unaware that the content they share may be fake news (Appendix A. Fig. 18).

As per the study, individuals aged 18-24, with an average score of 4.6, somewhat recognise having encountered fake news on social media. However, Section 3, Table 4 highlights a significant prevalence of fake news on these platforms. In comparison, the 35 and older age group shows a higher awareness of fake news on social media and concurs that they have encountered such content, reflected in an average score of 5.1. It is important to note that the younger population (often students) appear to be more oblivious to the fact of fake news on the internet compared to a higher age group and hence are more susceptible to fabricated content. Meanwhile, individuals aged 55 and above strongly believe that news on social media can be fake, with an average score of 5.6.

Interestingly, respondents with a monthly income below Rs. 2,000 disagree on encountering fake news on social media,

with a mean of 3.8 corresponding to the question measuring the frequency at which they have come across fake news on social media. Conversely, those in the income brackets of Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 50,000 have an average score of 5.3 for the same question (Appendix A. Fig. 19). The higher income groups also believe that social media content can be fake, manufactured, or made up, reflected in an average score of 5.7 compared to a reported mean of 4.8 by respondents with a monthly income of less than Rs. 2,000. This suggests that lower-income individuals may be more vulnerable to fake news and may share sensationalised content more frequently, driven by engagement and entertainment rather than factual reliability. Older age groups, like those aged 55 and above, are more likely to share health-related information, reflecting their concerns about well-being, yet they too are susceptible to being misled by fraudulent content.

Education level also plays a key role in this dynamic, as individuals with lower education display a higher propensity for sharing fake news, likely because of limited media literacy. As misinformation continues to spread across social media platforms, addressing the underlying factors motivating sharing behaviours—emotional resonance and the pursuit of social validation—becomes essential for developing effective strategies to combat fake news and promote a more informed digital citizenry in India.

Reporting of Fake News

Reporting fake news has become a critical issue, as misinformation threatens public awareness, trust in the media, and social cohesion. While platforms and organisations work to combat fake news through fact-checking and transparency, public perception of these efforts largely impacts their effectiveness. The study shows that only 45.24% of respondents actively report fake news, while 54.76% remain skeptical about doing so (Appendix A, Fig. 21).

Notably, 32.53% of consumers prefer to inform a friend, family member, or colleague about fake news, while only 21.24% report the misinformation on the respective social media platforms, and 21.75% notify law enforcement officials by using cyber-crime reporting portals (Appendix A. Fig. 22 and Fig 23). Interestingly, Instagram emerges as the most-reported platform, with 44.92% of users having reported fake news, followed closely by Twitter with 44.77%. In contrast, LinkedIn has the lowest fake news reporting rate, at 37.47%. This underscores the need for social media platforms to adopt a more proactive approach by launching campaigns that emphasise the importance of reporting fake news and implementing user-friendly reporting processes. The study reveals a consistent increase in fake news reporting with age. Specifically, 57.23% of consumers aged 55 and older have reported instances of fake news, compared to just 42.52% of consumers in the 18-24 age group (Appendix A. Fig. 24 and Fig 25).

Deepfake Content on Social Media Platforms

The proliferation of deepfake content on social media platforms has raised grave concerns regarding its implications for trust, information integrity, and societal cohesion. As deepfake technology becomes more accessible and sophisticated, social media users are increasingly exposed to manipulated videos and audio files that can convincingly impersonate public figures, celebrities, or ordinary individuals. This capacity for deception poses significant risks, from spreading misinformation during elections to enabling blackmail and reputational damage. The viral nature of social media can amplify the reach of deepfakes, facilitating rapid dissemination before fact-checking can occur. Social media platforms face the dual challenge of not only detecting and removing harmful deepfakes but also educating users about their existence and associated risks.

In the current study, only 48.22% of users reported having encountered fake news on social media platforms, while 51.78% stated they had not come across deepfake content on these platforms (Appendix A. Fig 26). This suggests that numerous users struggle to identify and detect deepfake material, often sharing it by mistakenly believing it to be authentic. The study also reveals that Facebook is particularly susceptible to the presence and spread of deepfake content, with 73.68% of users encountering it, followed by YouTube at 52% (Appendix A. Fig. 27 and Fig. 28). In contrast, Twitter users have lower exposure to deepfakes, with only 27.36% of users encountering such material.

Key Findings

The study provides comprehensive insights into the spread and dynamics of fake news in India, with several notable findings:

1. Young individuals in India, (particularly those aged 18-24), low-income individuals (earning less than Rs. 2000), and individuals with lower levels of education are more susceptible to fake news (Appendix A, Fig. 29A and Fig. 29B). They tend to share misinformation without verifying the facts and authenticity, contributing to its spread. Therefore, age, income, and education are crucial factors in combating fake news.
2. Six prominent themes dominate fake news on social media in India: politics, health, crime, entertainment, religion, and general topics.
3. When it comes to frequency, political fake news ranks highest at 46%, followed by general topics at 33.6% and religion at 16.8%. Together, these three themes comprise 94% of the fake news stories analysed in the study.
4. Within political fake news, text and video format accounts for the largest share at 36%, followed by the text and photos format at 23%.
5. Online social media platforms generate a larger proportion of fake news (77.4%) compared to mainstream media (23%).
6. Twitter emerges as the leading platform for disseminating fake news, at 61%, followed by Facebook at 34%.
7. The perception and experience study reveals that 74.89% of Indian consumers use social media as their primary news source, with 68.21% preferring video content over text (41.13%).
8. Facebook is the most preferred social media platform for news consumption among 70% of Indian consumers, followed by WhatsApp (64.50%), YouTube (49.73%), and Instagram (48.53%). In comparison, 89.62% of US consumers prefer Facebook for news, while 89.55% prefer YouTube.
9. In the US, consumers who are aged 55 and older prefer Facebook, with 94.59% usage, while YouTube is favored by 97.08% of consumers aged 35-44 and by 95.54% of those aged 18-24.
10. In India, Instagram is particularly attractive to younger users aged 18-24 (61.17%) for its visually engaging news content, although its popularity declines with increasing age.
11. Approximately 54.8% of individuals aged 55 and older prefer YouTube for news, indicating a strong inclination towards visual formats in this demographic. Older audiences increasingly rely on YouTube for in-depth coverage and documentaries.
12. Across all age groups, there is a strong preference for news in native languages, as it fosters a higher level of trust in such content.
13. A substantial swathe of consumers (61.06%), report sharing news to raise awareness, followed by a portion (59.82%) who do so out of safety concerns. Notably, 66.95% of those sharing news for awareness have a high school education, while 60.10% are graduates.
14. Despite the prevalence of misinformation, only 18.97% of respondents take the time to validate news before sharing it.
15. Younger users, particularly those aged 18-24, are often unaware that the content they share may be fake. They only partially acknowledge having encountered fake news on social media, which contrasts with empirical findings showing a strong prevalence of misinformation.
16. The 35-55+ age groups exhibit greater awareness of fake news on social media, with individuals aged 55 and above strongly believing that content can be fabricated.
17. The study reveals that 48.22% of users have encountered deepfake content on social media, while 51.78% report not having seen such content.
18. Lower education levels correlate with a higher tendency to share fake news, likely because of limited media literacy.
19. The study shows that only 45.24% of respondents report fake news, while 54.76% express skepticism towards reporting it.
20. Consumers primarily report fake news to friends and family; only 21.75% notify law enforcement through cybercrime reporting portals. Instagram shows notable reporting activity, with 44.92% of users having reported fake news, followed closely by Twitter at 44.77%.
21. Facebook shows the highest prevalence of deepfake content at 73.68%, followed by YouTube at 52%.



Key Observations

- Age and Education:** Individuals in the age group of 18-24, particularly those with lower levels of education, are key contributors to the spread of fake news. This demographic is often more active on social media platforms, where sensationalised content thrives, making them highly susceptible to misinformation. Their lack of experience and critical thinking skills may hinder their ability to discern credible sources from unreliable ones, resulting in a tendency to share unsubstantiated news. As a result, this age group can unwittingly contribute to the rapid dissemination of false information, amplifying its reach and impact. Empowering this group through education and media literacy programs is essential to help them navigate the digital landscape more responsibly and reduce the prevalence of fake news.
- Themes of Fake News:** The empirical study reveals that fake news on social media in India revolves around six major themes: politics, health, crime, entertainment, general issues, and religion. This suggests that the types of content shared while diverse are focused on areas that deeply resonate with the public.
- Prevalence of Political Fake News:** Politics is the most common theme for fake news, ranking first at 46%, followed closely by general topics at 33.6%, and religion at 16.8%. Together, these three themes account for 94% of all fake news stories identified in the study, highlighting the significant impact of misinformation in political contexts.
- Content Types:** Within political fake news, text and video content makes up the largest share at 36%, with text and photos following at 23%. This emphasises the multimedia approach to misinformation, where visual elements significantly enhance the appeal and shareability of false narratives.
- Source of Fake News:** Social media platforms are responsible for a substantial portion of fake news (77.4%) compared to mainstream media (23%). Their accessibility and viral nature play a significant role in their high dissemination rate.
- Leading Platforms:** Twitter has emerged as the primary platform for spreading fake news (61%), followed by Facebook at 34%. This shows that users share or encounter fake news more frequently on these platforms, which can have serious implications for public perception and discourse.
- News Consumption Trends:** The perception and experience study found that 74.89% of Indian consumers primarily use social media as their news source. Additionally, 68.21% prefer video content, with Facebook ranking as the most favored platform at 70%, followed by WhatsApp (64.50%) and YouTube (49.73%).
- Demographics of Media Preference:** Older users (55+) show a preference for YouTube at 54.8%, while younger users (18-24) favor Instagram for news-sharing, although Instagram's usage for the said purpose declines with age.
- Trust in Native Language News:** All age groups exhibit a strong preference for news in native languages, along with a high level of trust in such content, reflecting the importance of local language media in shaping perceptions.
- Motivations for Sharing News:** Numerous individuals share news to raise awareness (61.06%) or out of safety concerns (59.82%). However, only 18.97% validate news before sharing it, raising significant concerns about the spread of misinformation.
- Awareness of Fake News:** Younger users often don't realise the potential for sharing fake news, while those aged 35-55 exhibit greater awareness. Individuals aged 55 and older strongly believe that news can be fabricated, suggesting a need for targeted educational initiatives.
- Incidence of Deepfakes:** Approximately 48.22% of users reported encountering deepfake content on social media, showing a significant awareness of this issue. Facebook stands out as particularly susceptible to the presence and spread of deepfake content, with a rate of 73.68%, followed by YouTube at 52%.
- Reporting Behaviour:** The study highlights that only 45.24% of respondents report fake news and 54.76% display skepticism toward reporting it. Many consumers prefer to share news about fake content with friends and family rather than notify law enforcement, with only 21.75% using cybercrime reporting portals.

This interpretation illuminates the current landscape of fake news and deepfake content in India, illustrating the complexities and implications for society. The findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced media literacy, proactive reporting mechanisms, and stronger collaboration among stakeholders to combat the challenges posed by misinformation and deepfake content in the digital age. As users continue to navigate the evolving media landscape, building resilience against misinformation will be essential for promoting informed citizenry and maintaining the integrity of public discourse.

Recommendations

1. **Targeted Awareness Campaigns:** Given the significant prevalence and impact of political fake news, targeted awareness campaigns should prioritise educating the public about political misinformation while also addressing other critical themes such as health, crime, and religion. These campaigns can use relatable content to highlight the dangers and implications of sharing fake news.
2. **Multimedia Literacy Programs:** Since political fake news predominantly uses text and video content, implementing multimedia literacy programs will empower individuals to critically evaluate visual and audio content. Workshops and online webinars can be instrumental in teaching skills to evaluate the authenticity of different digital content types.
3. **Strengthen Social Media Literacy:** As 74.89% of consumers rely on social media for news, strengthening social media literacy among users is critical. Educational initiatives should encourage users to verify sources before sharing news, particularly on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where the misinformation incidence is higher.
4. **Enhanced Detection Technologies:** It is crucial to encourage social media platforms to invest in advanced algorithms capable of detecting and flagging fake news content. Collaborating with AI specialists could lead to the development of tools that help identify potentially misleading content before it goes viral.
5. **Encourage Reporting Mechanisms:** Given that only 45.24% of respondents report fake news, enhancing reporting mechanisms across social media platforms is essential. Simplifying the reporting process and providing users with clear guidelines on how to report fake news can increase participation in flagging misleading content.
6. **Engage Influencers and Local Media:** It is imperative to collaborate with social media influencers and local media organisations to share accurate information and promote responsible content sharing. Influencers can play a significant role in shaping public opinion and motivating followers to critically evaluate content before sharing.
7. **Promote Native Language News:** Acknowledging the strong preference and trust users place on news in native languages, news outlets and social media platforms should increase the availability of reliable content in local languages. This approach can improve accessibility and credibility, enhancing the overall media consumption experience.
8. **Focus on Younger Audiences:** Younger users (aged 18-24) are at a greater risk of sharing misinformation hence; it is important to develop specific strategies aimed at educating them. Since they may not always recognise the potential for misinformation, targeted communication strategies can build awareness about the credibility of sources and the consequences of sharing unverified information.

9. **Regular Monitoring and Research:** Conducting periodic studies and surveys to monitor trends in fake news, deepfakes, and public awareness can provide insight into shifts in user behaviour and perception, enabling stakeholders to adapt strategies and further target interventions.
10. **Collaborative Efforts with Policymakers:** It is important to advocate for collaboration between social media platforms, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations to establish comprehensive policies and guidelines addressing fake news and deepfakes. This multi-faceted approach can help create a unified front against misinformation.

Recommendations for Universities and Schools

1. **Media Literacy Education:** Schools and universities should incorporate media literacy programs into their curriculum, to guide students on how to critically evaluate news sources and fact-check information before sharing.
2. **Awareness Campaigns:** Educational institutions can lead awareness campaigns targeting young people on social media, dealing with topics like the frequency of fake news exposure, how it spreads, and its potential consequences on society and personal beliefs.
3. **Use Reliable News Sources:** Students need to be encouraged to follow credible news organisations. Universities and educational institutions should promote subscriptions or notifications from trustworthy sources that provide accurate reporting.

4. **Peer Influence:** Peer networks should be leveraged by encouraging young people to hold each other accountable, both for verifying details and seeking additional information before sharing potentially misleading content.

By implementing these recommendations, young individuals can become more discerning consumers of information, significantly reducing their likelihood of sharing fake news.

Recommendations for Government Agencies

1. **Develop Comprehensive Legislation:** Establish clear laws and regulations that specifically address the creation and dissemination of fake news and deepfake content. These laws should include penalties for those who produce or propagate false information intending to deceive.
2. **Encourage Collaboration with Tech Companies:** Foster partnerships between government agencies and social media platforms to enhance the detection and reporting of fake news. The government should work with tech companies to create standards for identifying and mitigating misinformation.
3. **Promote Media Literacy Education:** Implement national programs aimed at improving citizens' media literacy. These programs should include training on how to critically evaluate sources, recognise fake news, and validate information before sharing it with others.
4. **Strengthen Fact-Checking Initiatives:** Provide support and funding to independent fact-checking organisations that verify the accuracy of claims made

in news articles and social media posts. Establishing a reliable and accessible platform for fact-checking can help combat misinformation effectively.

5. **Launch Public Awareness Campaigns:** Initiate educational campaigns that inform the public about the dangers of fake news and the importance of responsible sharing. Collaborate with influencers, celebrities, and community leaders to expand the reach of these campaigns.
6. **Incentivise Responsible Journalism:** Create incentives for media organisations that adhere to ethical journalism standards and actively work to debunk fake news. These could include financial grants or recognition programs that promote credibility and transparency in reporting.
7. **Implement Reporting Mechanisms:** Develop user-friendly reporting mechanisms across social media platforms that allow citizens to report fake news easily. Platforms should also be liable to ensure timely and responsive actions to assess and address the reported content.
8. **Support Research and Development:** Invest in research and development focused on advanced AI tools for detecting and analysing fake news. Encourage collaborations between research institutions and tech companies to create innovative solutions for identifying misleading information.
9. **Engage Local Communities:** Encourage local governments and community organisations to participate in awareness and education efforts. Engaging communities will help tailor messaging to cultural contexts and enhance impact.

10. **Monitor and Evaluate Progress:** Establish frameworks for ongoing monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of implemented measures and campaigns. Regular evaluation can provide valuable insights for adapting strategies and enhancing responses to evolving misinformation trends.

Recommendations for Law Enforcement Officials

1. **Enhance Training on Cybercrime:** Conduct regular training programs for law enforcement officials focused on recognising and responding to cybercrimes, including fake news and deepfakes. Understanding the technologies and tactics employed by cybercriminals is essential for effective intervention.
2. **Establish Specialised Cyber Units:** Create dedicated cybercrime units within law enforcement agencies that specialise in the investigation of fake news and misinformation. These units can focus on gathering intelligence, tracking misinformation campaigns, and collaborating with relevant organisations.
3. **Foster Collaboration with Tech Companies:** Build partnerships with social media platforms and tech companies to receive timely information regarding the spread of fake news and deepfakes. Collaborative efforts can enhance detection capabilities, enabling authorities to track and identify perpetrators more effectively.
4. **Develop Reporting Protocols for Online Misinformation:** Implement clear reporting protocols for the public to flag fake news and deepfakes. Law enforcement should provide accessible

channels through the national cybercrime portal for reporting incidents and ensure that these reports are investigated promptly.

5. **Engage with Communities:** Conduct community outreach programs to educate the public on how to identify fake news and the potential legal consequences of sharing misinformation. Engaging communities can foster awareness and encourage responsible information-sharing practices.
6. **Promote Collaboration with Fact-Checkers:** Form partnerships with fact-checking organisations to enhance investigations into fake news. Sharing information on flagged content can help law enforcement agencies in identifying patterns and taking appropriate action.
7. **Improve Inter-Agency Cooperation:** Encourage cooperation between local, regional, and national law enforcement agencies to address the cross-jurisdictional nature of fake news and cybercrime. Effective communication and collaboration can improve case resolution rates.
8. **Implement Legal Frameworks for Fake News:** Work with policymakers to develop and enforce legal frameworks that address the creation and distribution of fake news. Clear laws can provide law enforcement officials with the necessary tools to take action against perpetrators.
9. **Monitor Trends in Misinformation:** Regularly analyse and report on the trends related to the spread of fake news and deepfakes. Close monitoring of the misinformation landscape will help law enforcement adapt their prevention and response strategies.

10. **Leverage Technology for Investigations:** Use advanced technologies such as AI and data analytics to support the detection and investigation of fake news and deepfake content. Employing cutting-edge technological tools can enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts.

By adopting these recommendations, governments and policymakers can play a vital role in combating the spread of fake news, protecting public trust in media, and promoting informed citizen engagement in the digital age. All the stakeholders must work collectively to mitigate the spread of fake news on social media in India, fostering a more informed public and strengthening the integrity of information in the digital landscape.

Recommendations for the Election Commission to Control the Propagation of Political Fake News During Elections

1. **Implement Clear Legislation:** Develop and enforce disinformation laws that specifically address the creation and dissemination of political fake news during elections. These laws should outline penalties for individuals or organisations that intentionally spread false information.
2. **Establish a Monitoring Task Force:** Create a dedicated task force within the election commission to monitor online platforms for fake news related to elections. This team should comprise experts who can promptly identify and respond to misinformation.
3. **Collaborate with Social Media Companies:** Partner with major social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to implement proactive measures that detect and limit the spread

of fake news. This collaboration could include automated tools for flagging false information and providing users with reliable sources.

4. **Launch Public Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct nationwide campaigns focussed on educating voters about how to identify fake news and understand its potential impact on the electoral process. These campaigns should leverage traditional media and digital platforms to reach different demographics effectively.
5. **Enhance Fact-Checking Resources:** Collaborate with independent fact-checking organisations to offer real-time fact-checking of political and party-related information. Make these resources easily accessible to the public, especially during the election period.
6. **Promote Transparency in Political Advertising:** Mandate that political parties and candidates disclose funding information and sponsors of their advertisements, including social media posts. Transparency can help voters assess the credibility of the information being presented.
7. **Encourage Responsible Reporting by Media Outlets:** Provide guidelines to media organisations on reporting practices during elections, emphasising the importance of accuracy and verification of information before publication.
8. **Implement Reporting Mechanisms for Citizens:** Create user-friendly channels through which citizens can report instances of suspected political

fake news. Ensure these mechanisms are well-publicised to encourage public participation in countering misinformation.

9. **Conduct Research and Stay Informed:** Continuously analyse the landscape of election-related fake news and misinformation. Keep abreast of emerging tactics used by those spreading fake news and adapt strategies accordingly.
10. **Foster Engagement and Dialogue:** Organise forums, town halls, and online discussions to engage with voters about the electoral process and address their concerns directly. Facilitating dialogue can help build trust and encourage a more informed electorate.
11. **Utilise Data Analytics:** Leverage data analytics to detect patterns in the spread of fake news, including targeted demographics and messaging strategies. An insight into these patterns will facilitate a more effective deployment of countermeasures.
12. **Crisis Communication Strategy:** Develop a robust crisis communication plan that can be activated in response to significant instances of fake news. This plan should outline clear steps for addressing misinformation and providing accurate information swiftly.

By implementing these recommendations, election commissions can play a vital role in controlling the spread of political fake news during elections. These measures can help ensure a fair and transparent electoral process, fostering public trust and encouraging informed voter participation.



Conclusion

This study highlights the pervasive issue of fake news on social media in India, underscoring the significant themes associated with misinformation, including politics, health, crime, and religion. Notably, political fake news is the most common, with crucial implications for public perception, trust in media, and overall democratic processes. Our findings show that, while social media platforms serve as primary sources of news for a majority of users, there is an alarming tendency for individuals to share content without adequate verification, contributing to the cycle of misinformation.

Our analysis also identifies demographic differences in how different age groups interact with, share, and perceive fake news, emphasising the need for targeted education and awareness initiatives. Younger users exhibit a concerning lack of awareness about the authenticity of the content they consume, while older generations demonstrate a stronger understanding of the risks associated with fake news.

This disparity calls for tailored strategies to enhance media literacy across all demographics.

In addition, the preference for news in native language underscores the importance of accessible, reliable information in diverse linguistic contexts, fostering greater trust and engagement among users. This study advocates for collaborative efforts among social media platforms, regulatory bodies, and educational institutions to tackle fake news through a multi-faceted strategy.

Ultimately, addressing the challenges posed by fake news requires a comprehensive understanding of user behaviour, effective communication strategies, and an ongoing commitment to promoting a more informed and discerning audience. With these collective efforts, stakeholders can work toward safeguarding the integrity of information in the digital age, ensuring that citizens are empowered to make informed decisions based on credible and verified news sources.

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Appendix A



Figure 1: Platform Usage for News Consumption

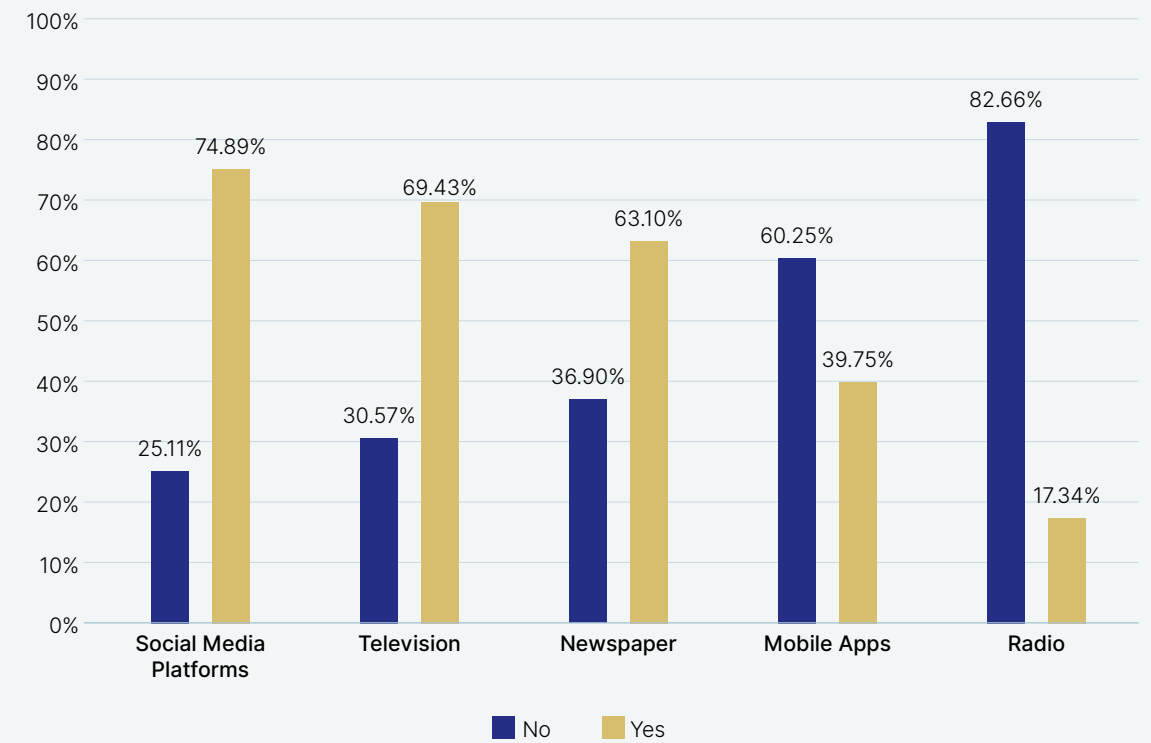


Figure 2: Content Type - News Consumption

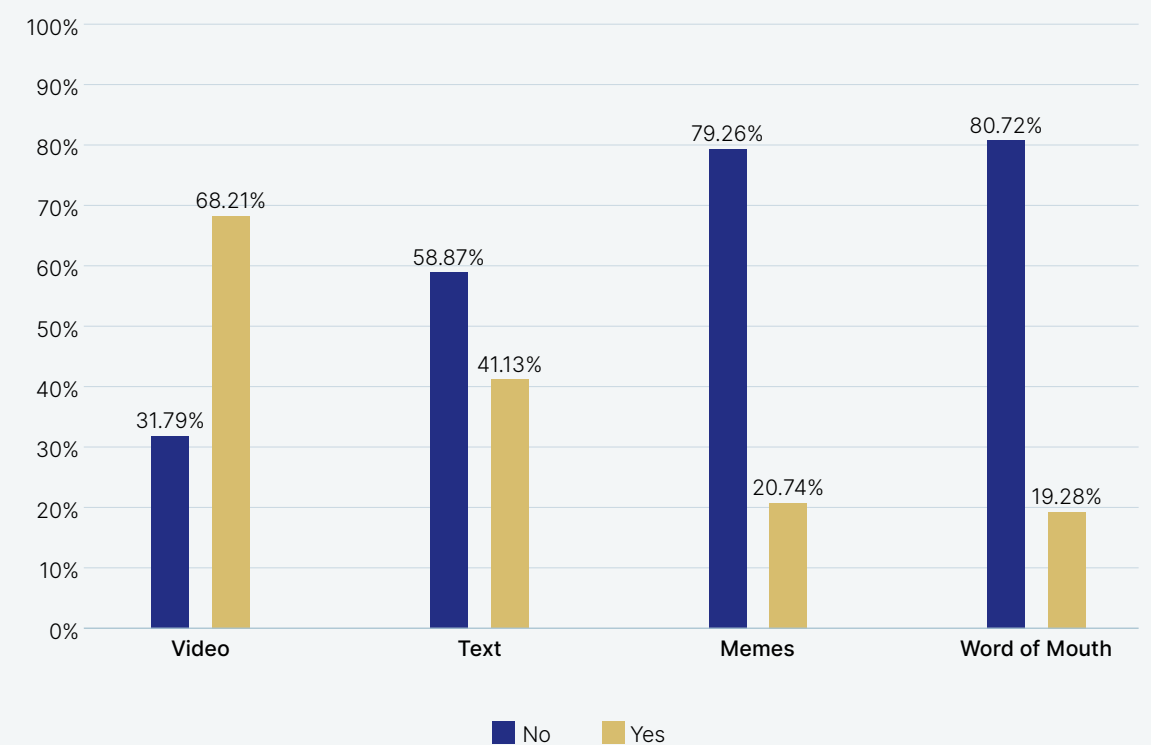


Figure 3: Social Media Platforms preferred by U.S. Consumers

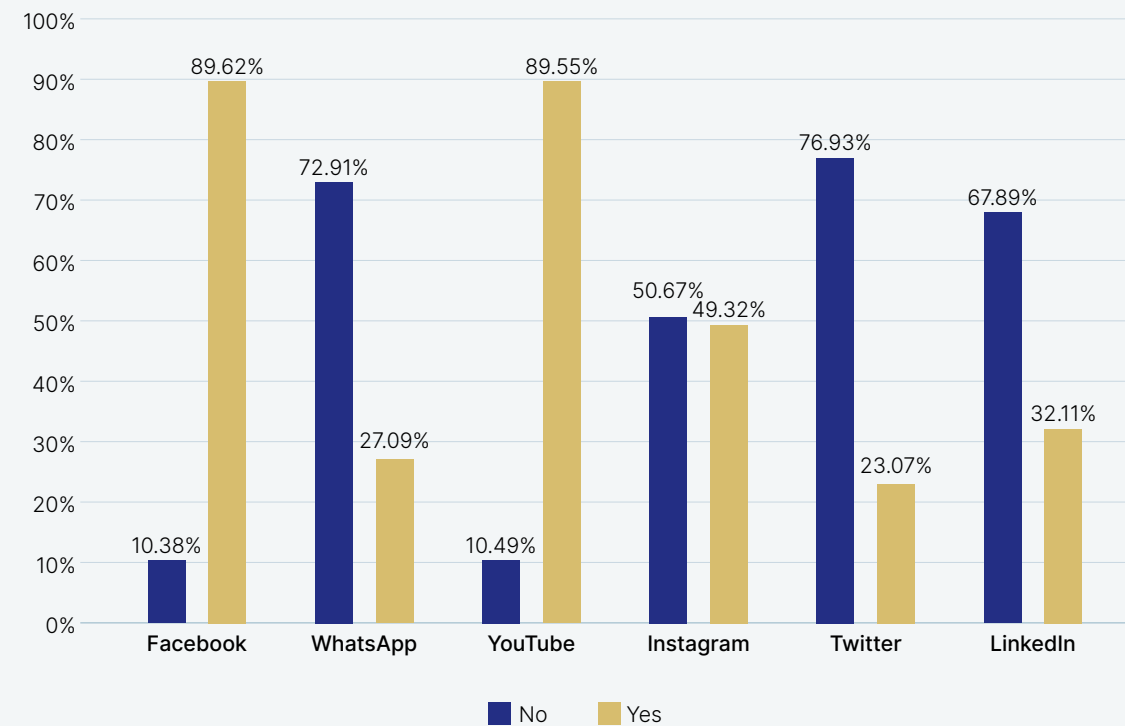


Figure 5: U.S. YouTube Users by Age Group

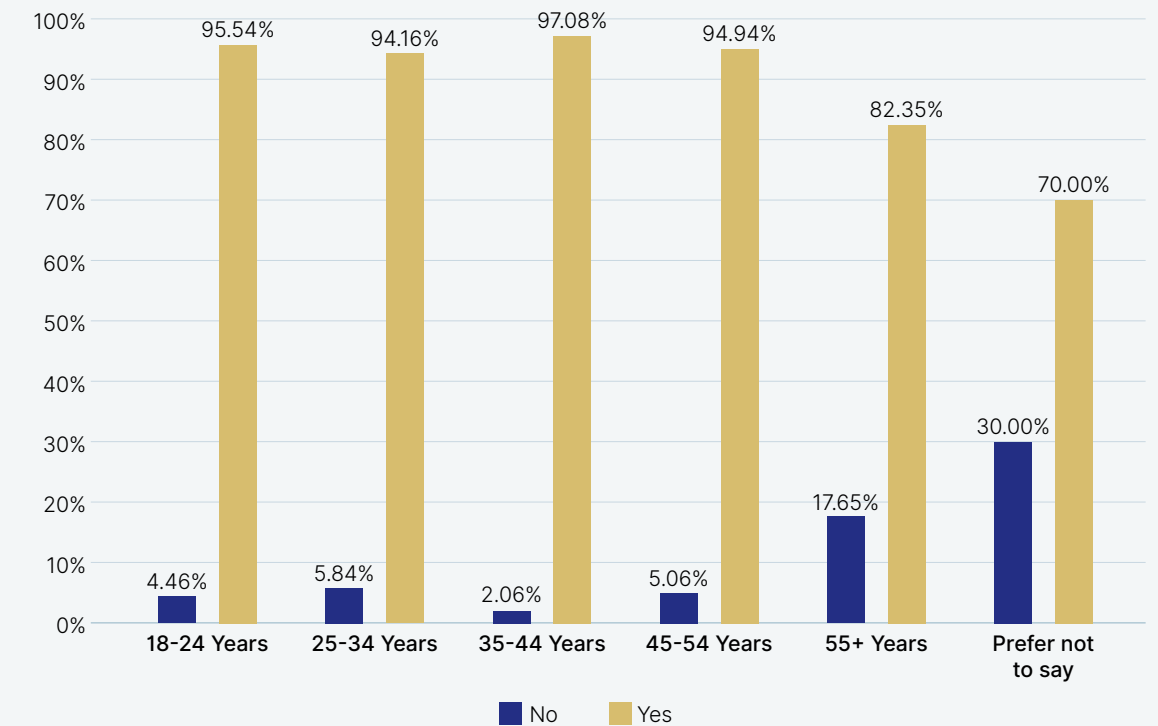


Figure 4: Social Media Platforms Preferred by Indian Consumers

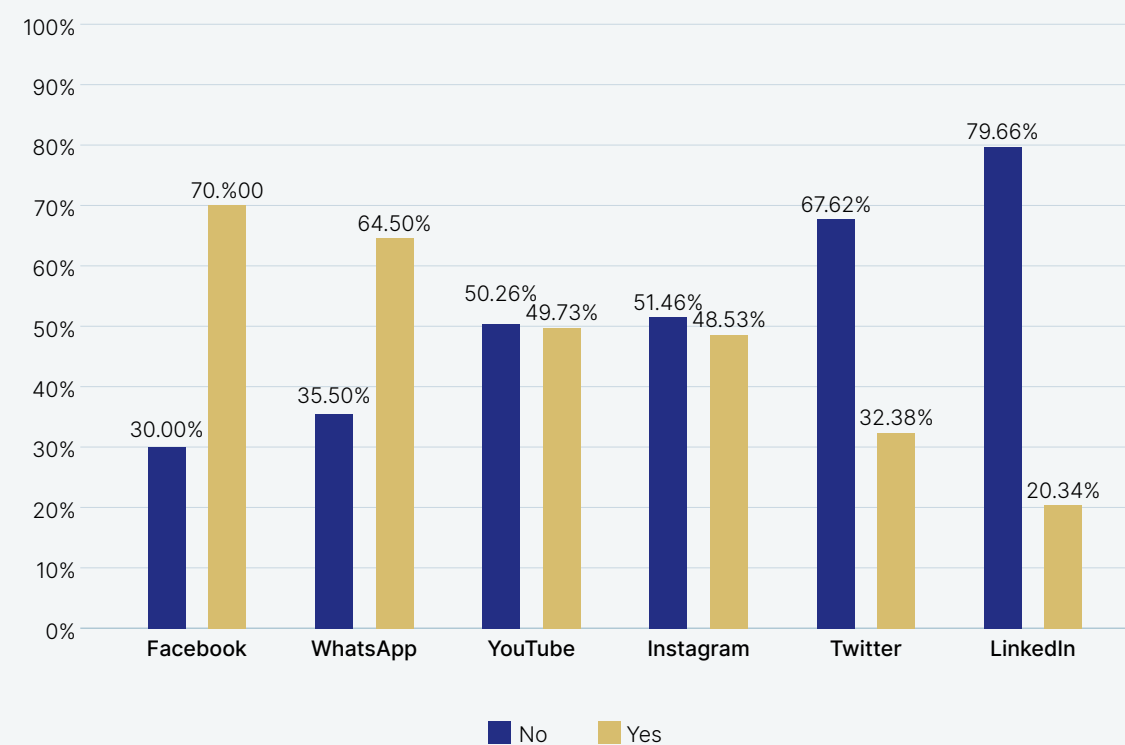


Figure 6: U.S. Facebook Users by Age Group

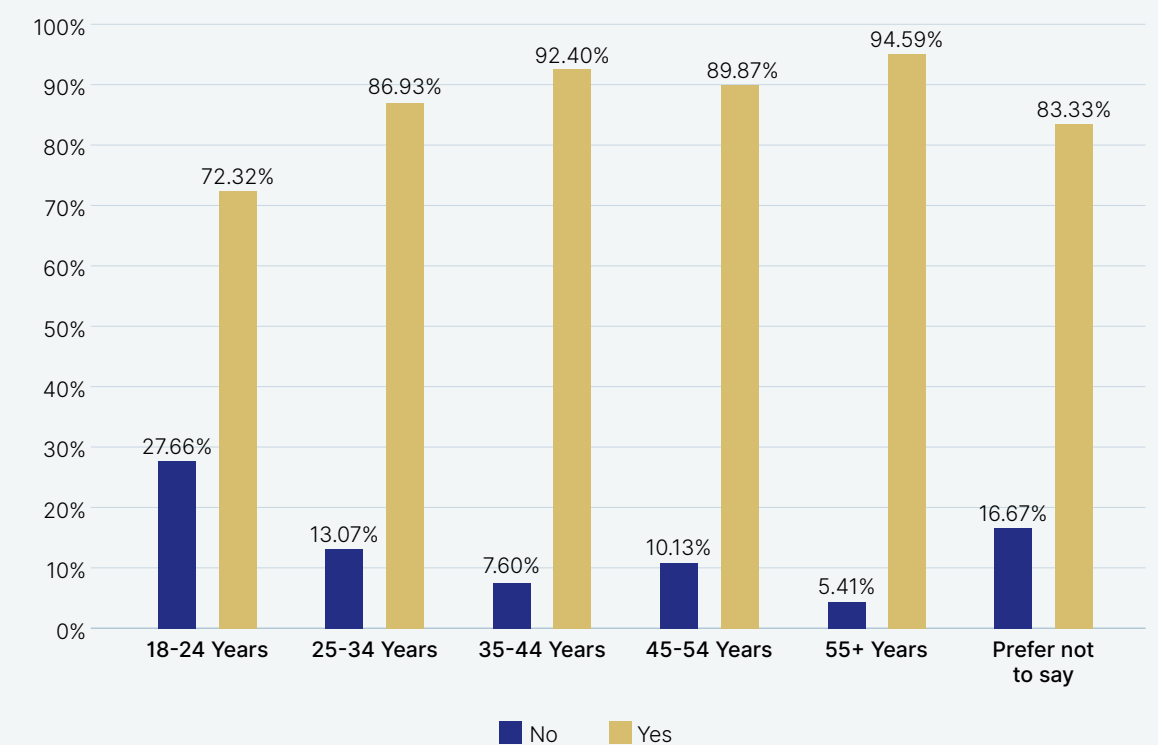


Figure 7: U.S. WhatsApp Users by Age Group

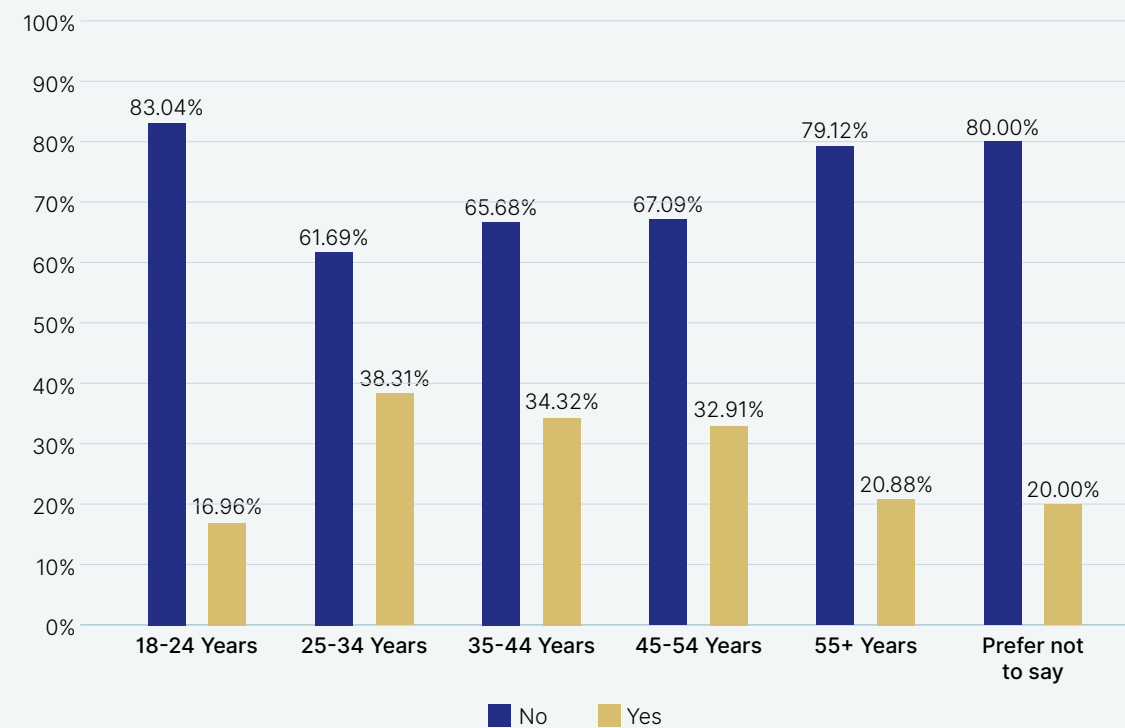


Figure 9: Indian WhatsApp Users by Age Group

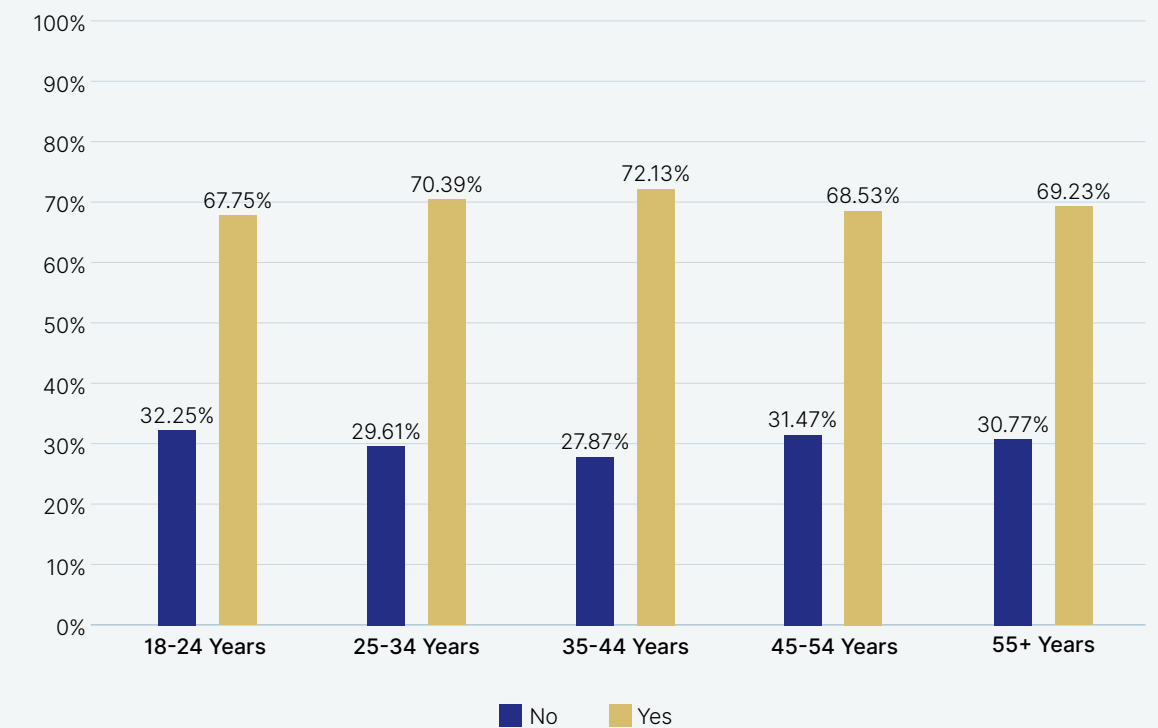


Figure 8: U.S. Instagram Users by Age Group

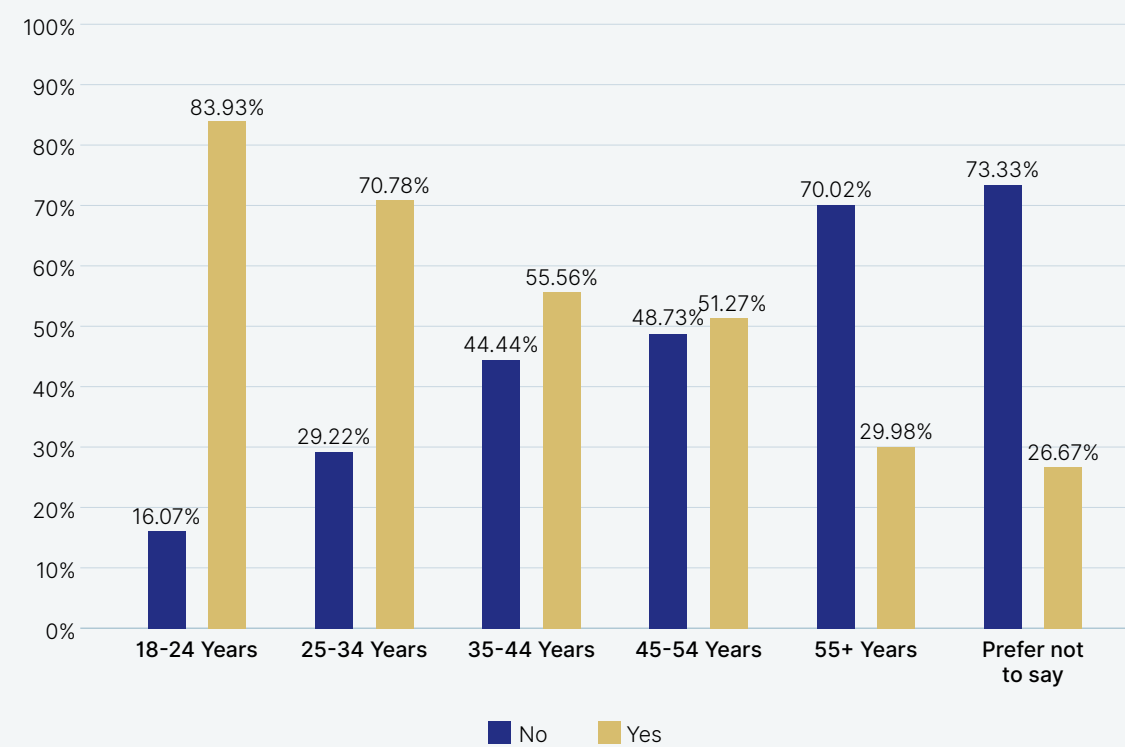


Figure 10: Usage of Whatsapp by Indian Consumers

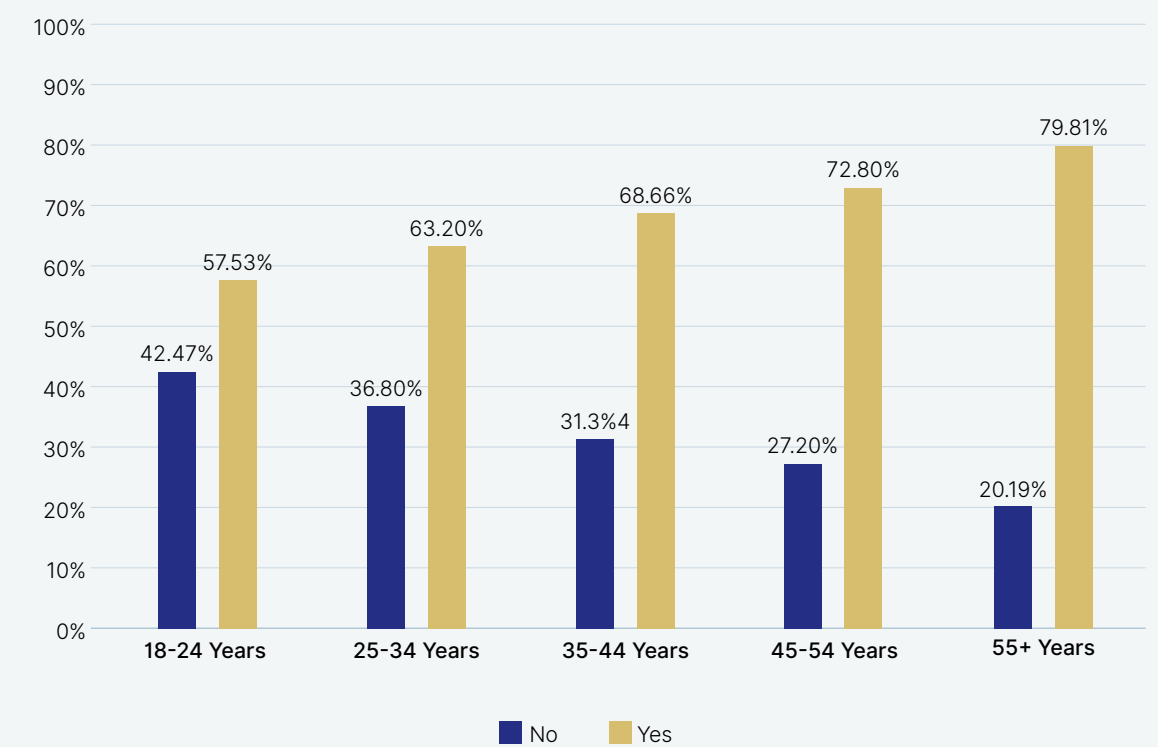


Figure 11: Indian WhatsApp Users by Age Group

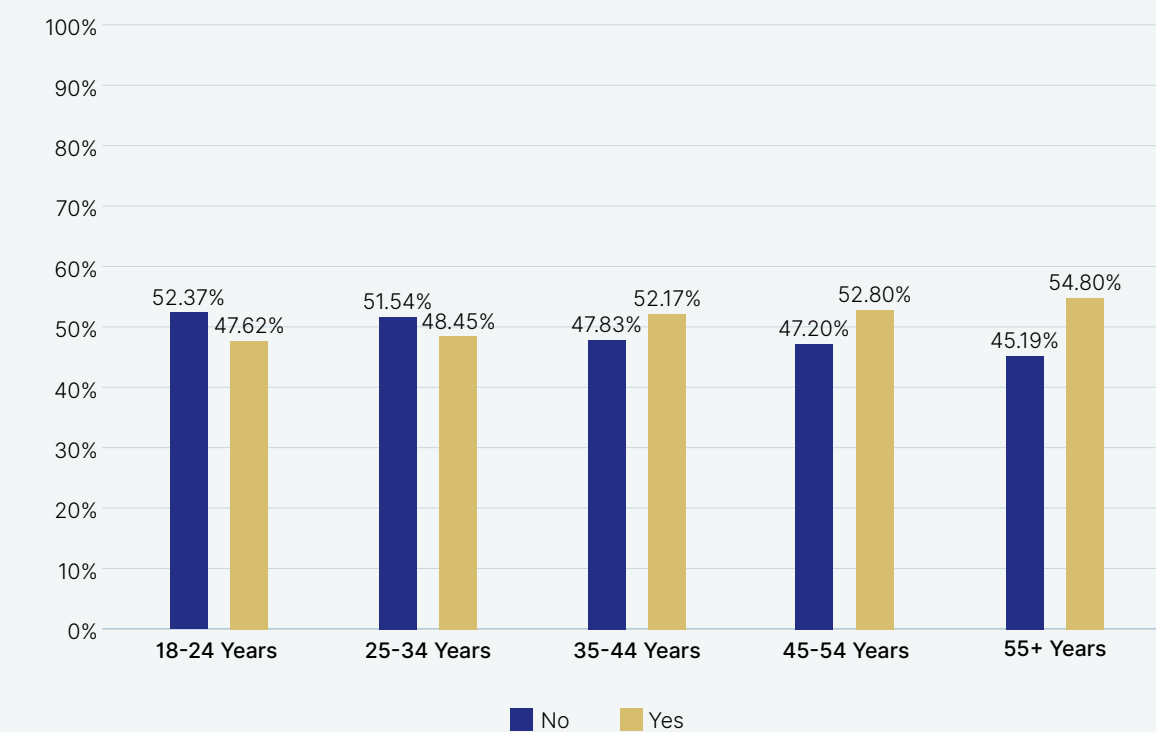


Figure 13: Consumption of News in English Vs. Native Language by Indian Consumers

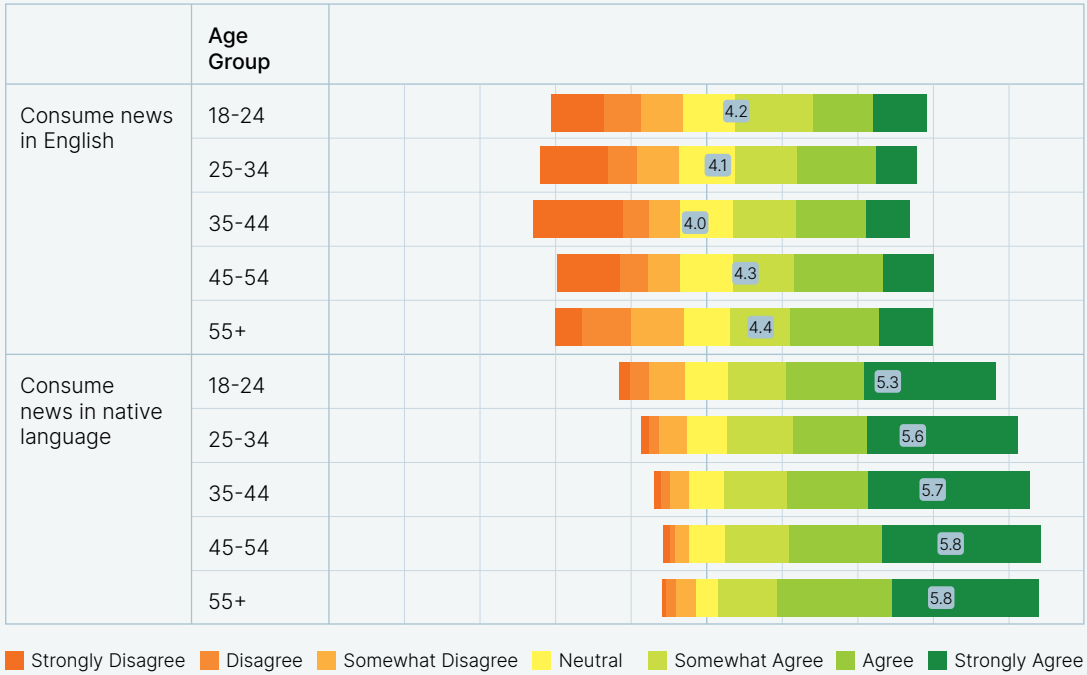


Figure 12: U.S. Instagram Users by Age Group

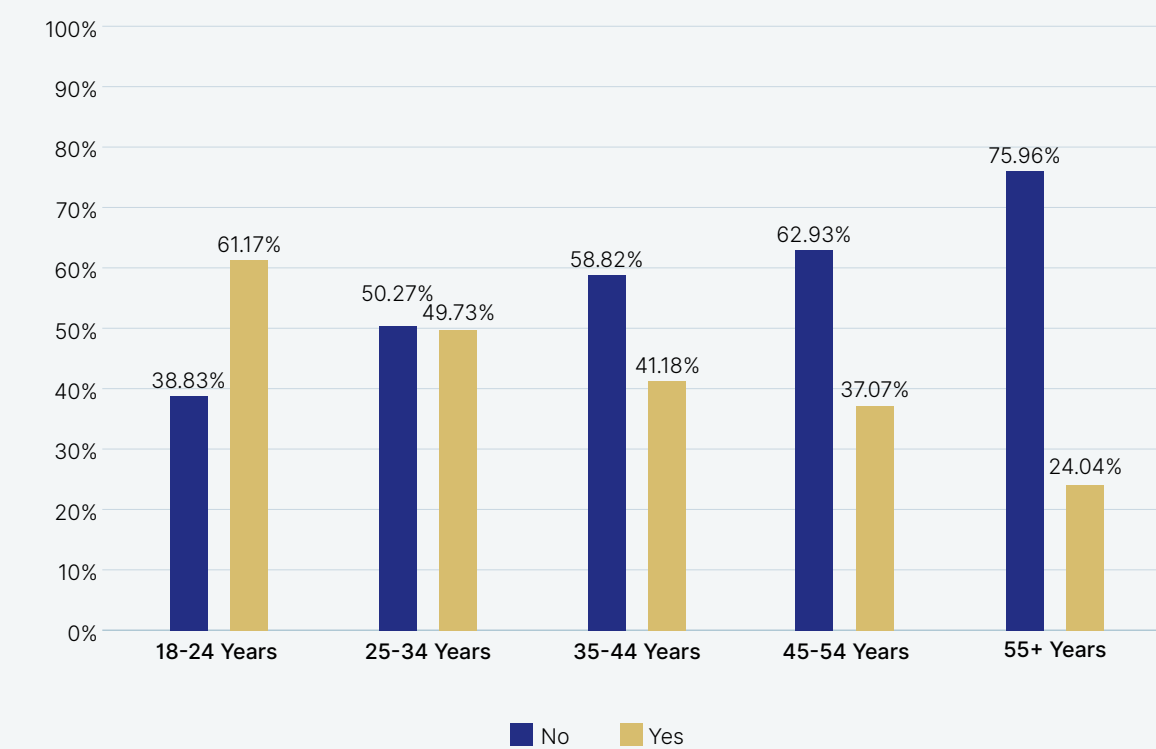


Figure 14: Trust on News in English Vs. Native Language by Indian Consumer

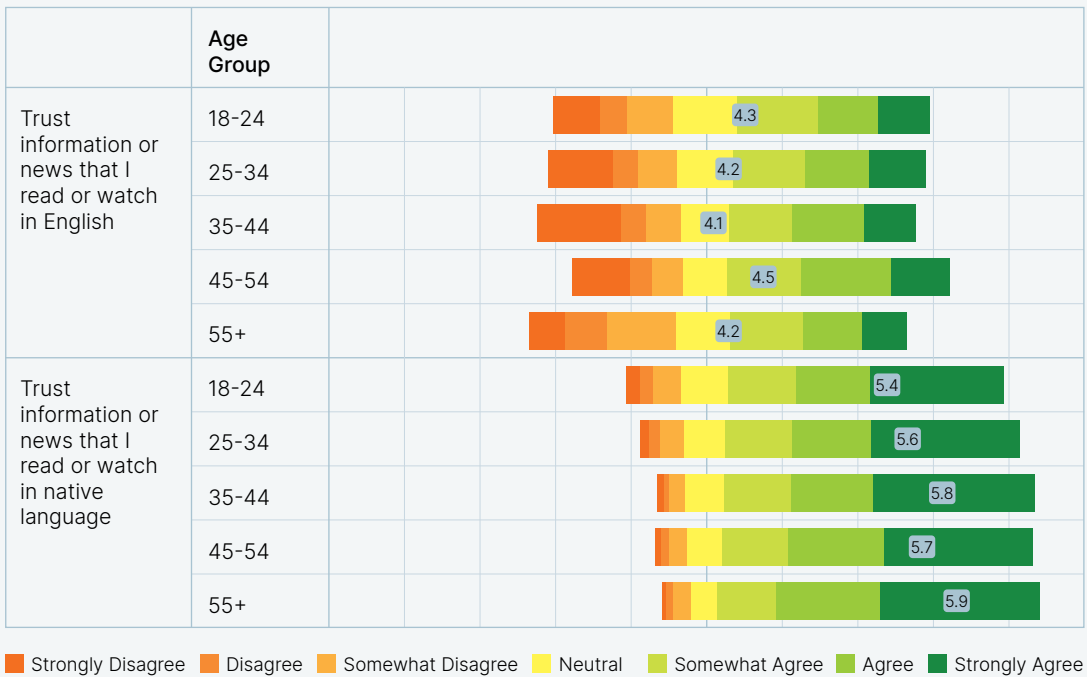


Figure 15: Motivation to Share News

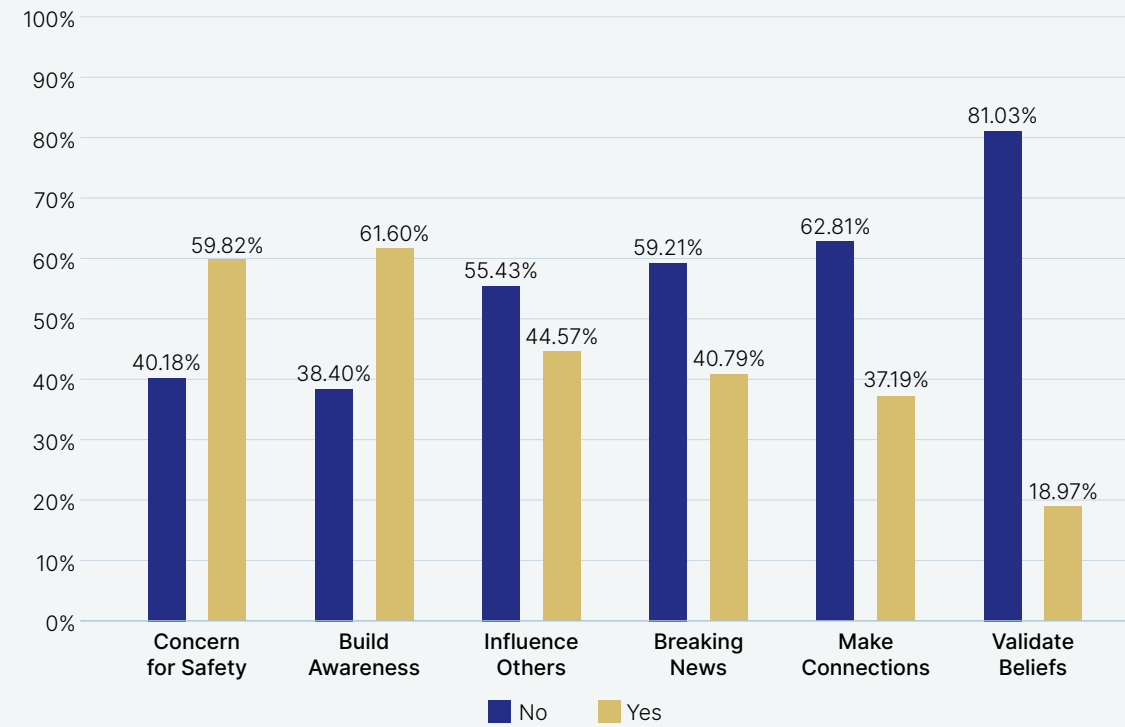


Figure 17A: Content Shared by Theme on Social Media

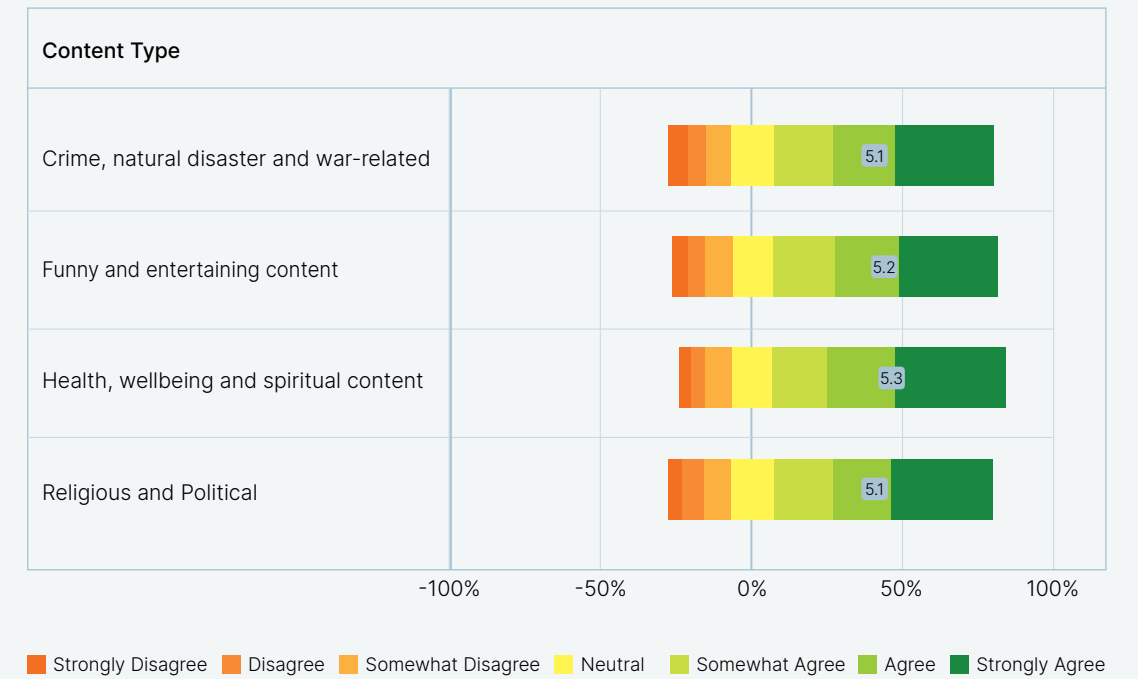


Figure 16: Content Type Used to Share the News

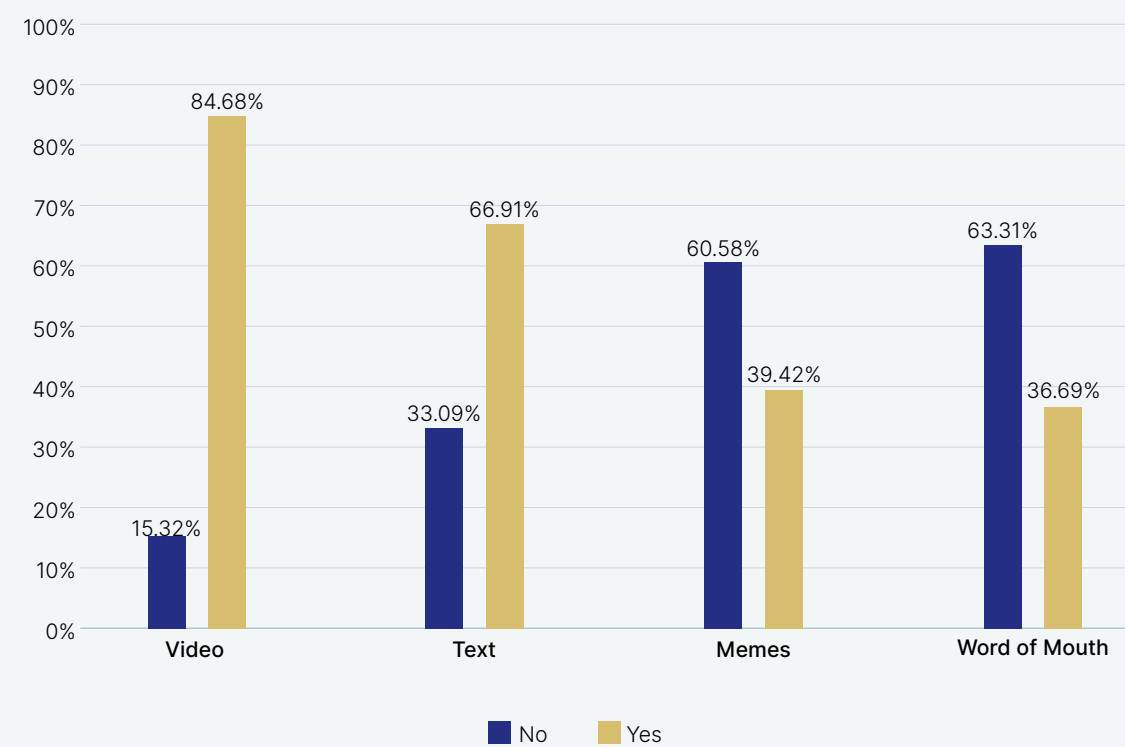


Figure 17B: Content Shared by Theme Types vs. Age

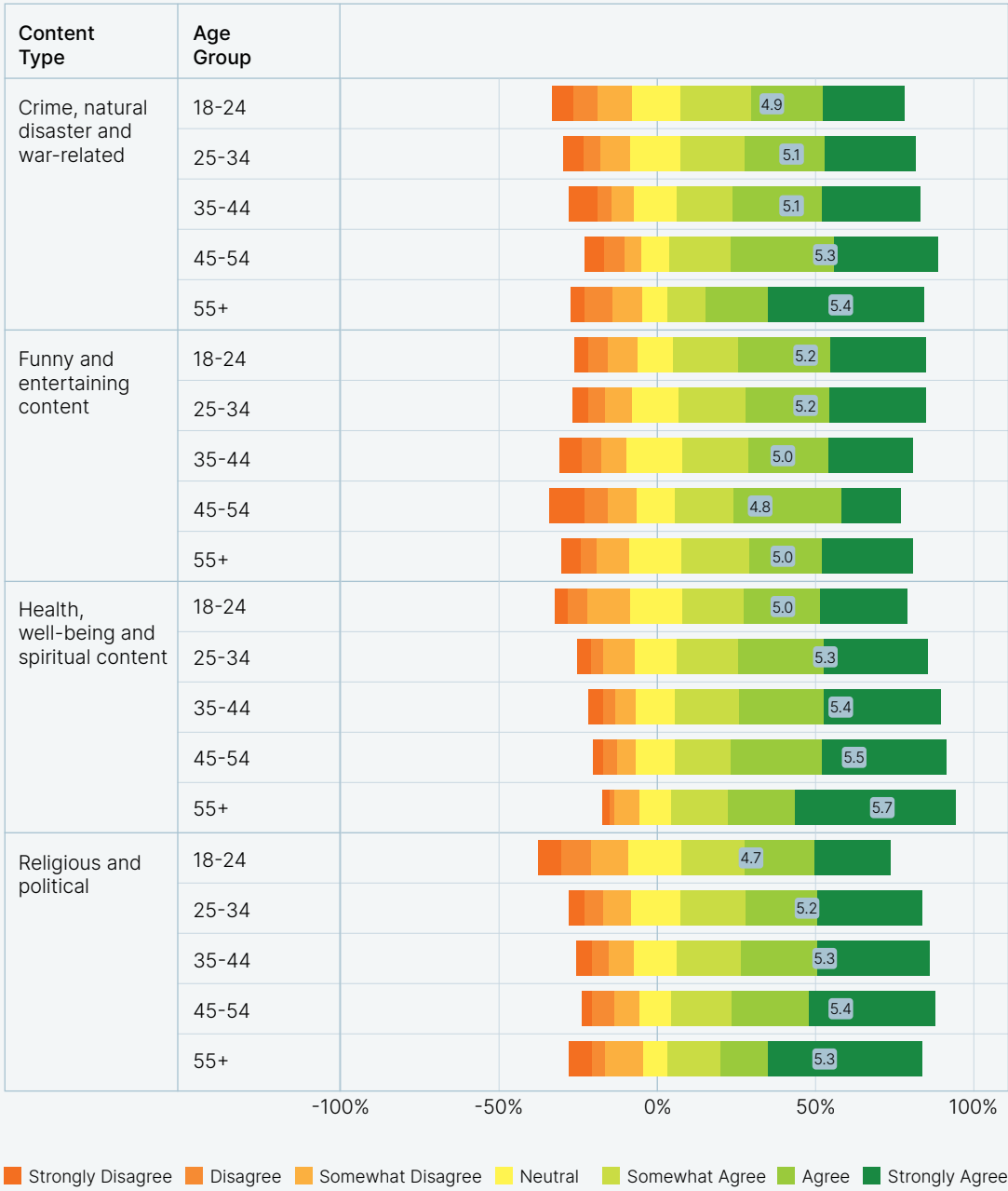


Figure 18: Identification of Fake News on Social Media vs. Age Group

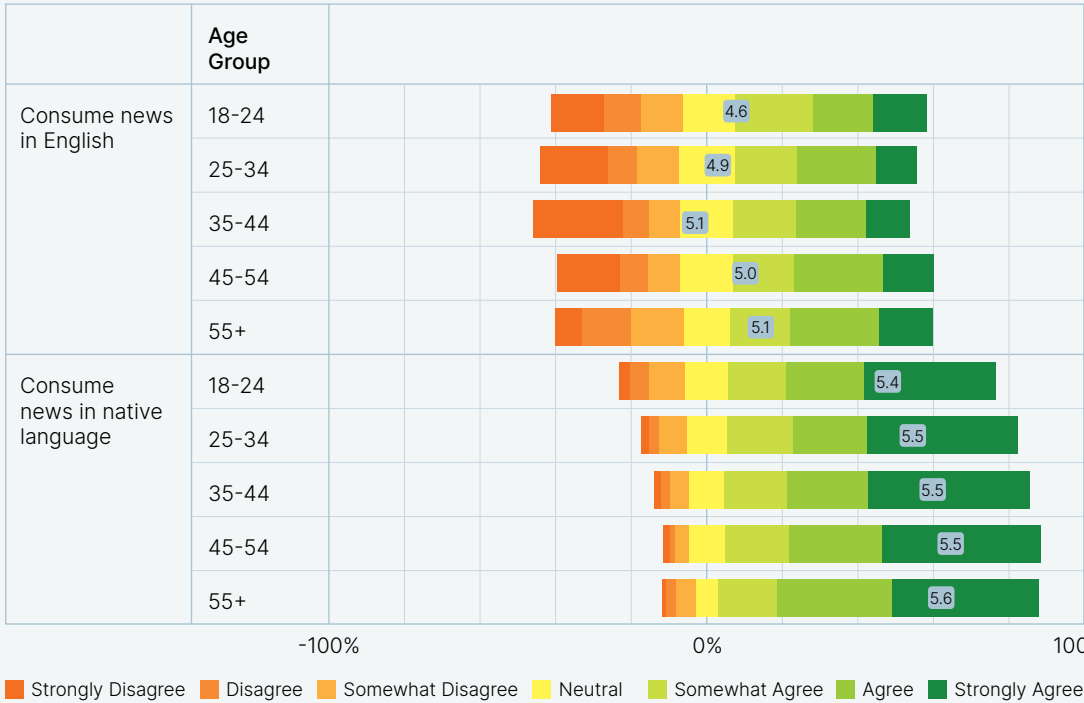


Figure 19: Identification of Fake News on Social Media vs. Income

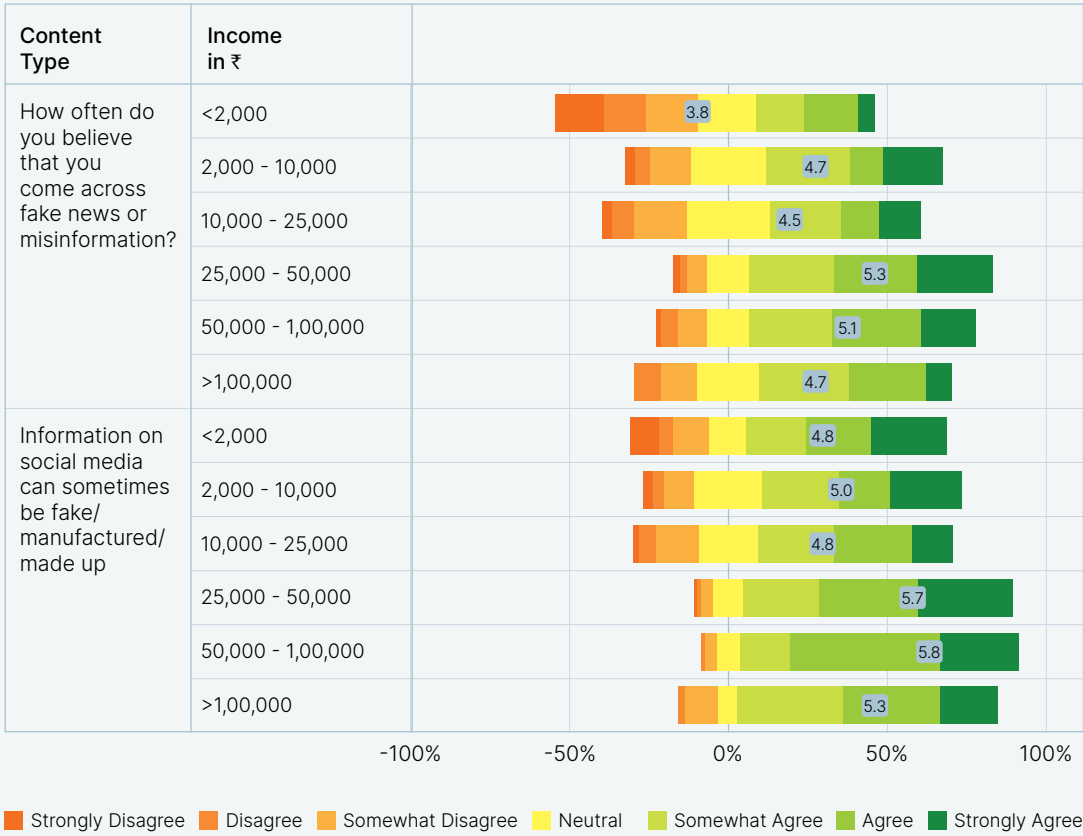


Figure 20: Verification of Fake News by Age Group

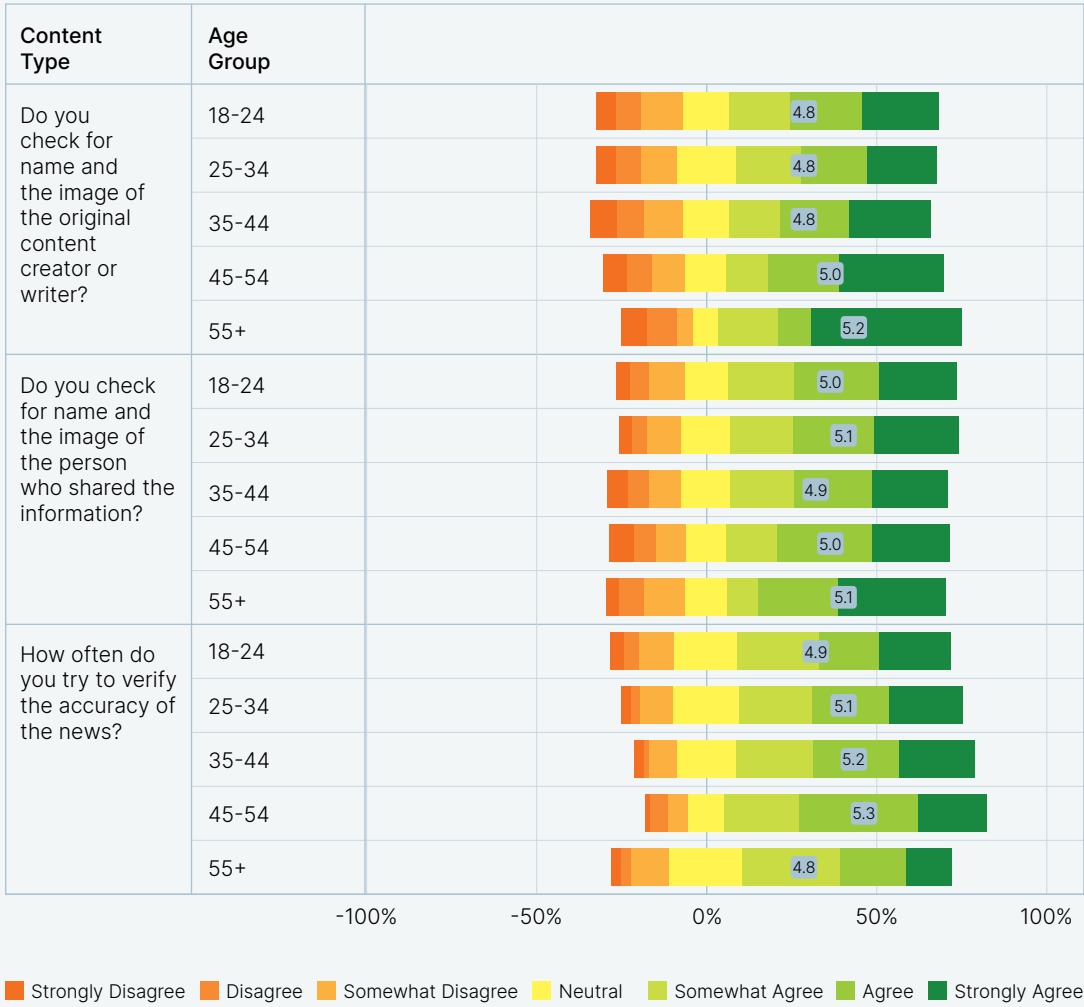


Figure 21: Percentage of People Ever Reported Fake News or Misinformation

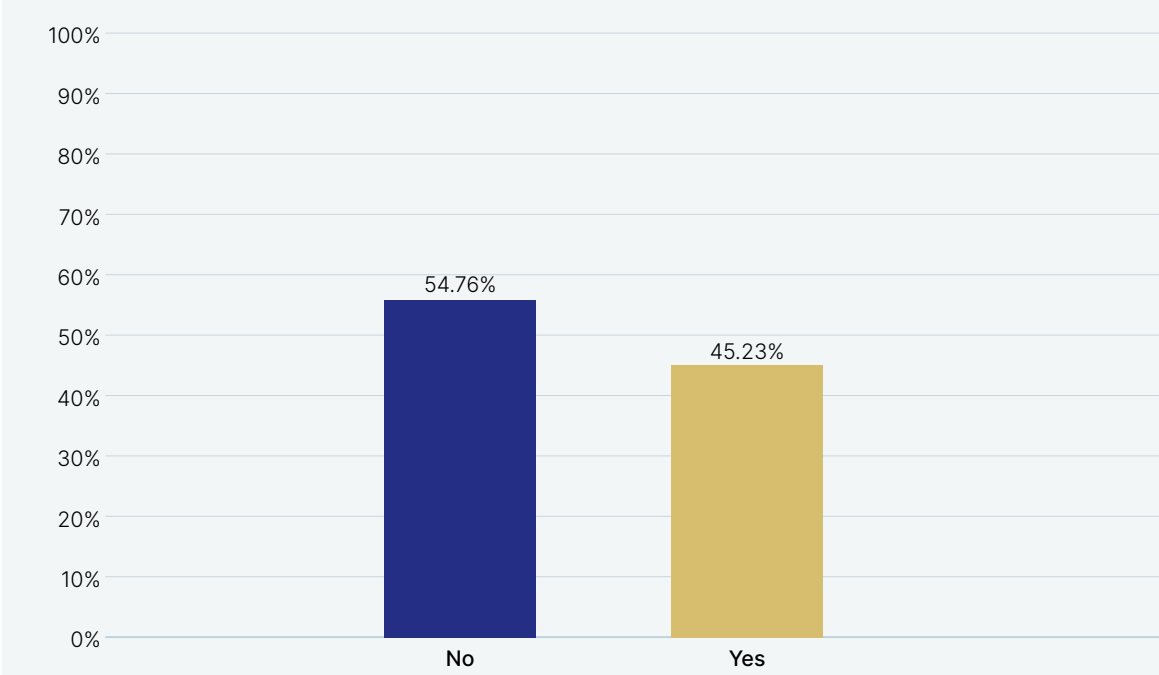


Figure 22: Medium Followed for Reporting of Fake News

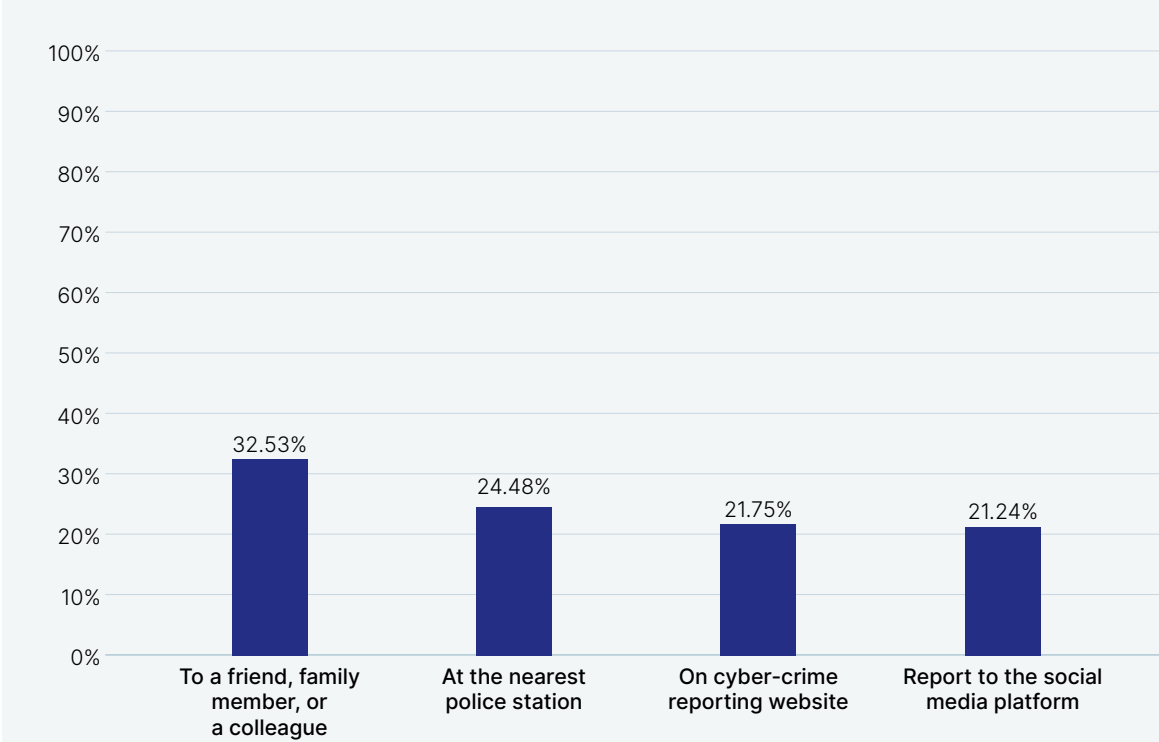


Figure 23: Identification of Fake News by Age Group

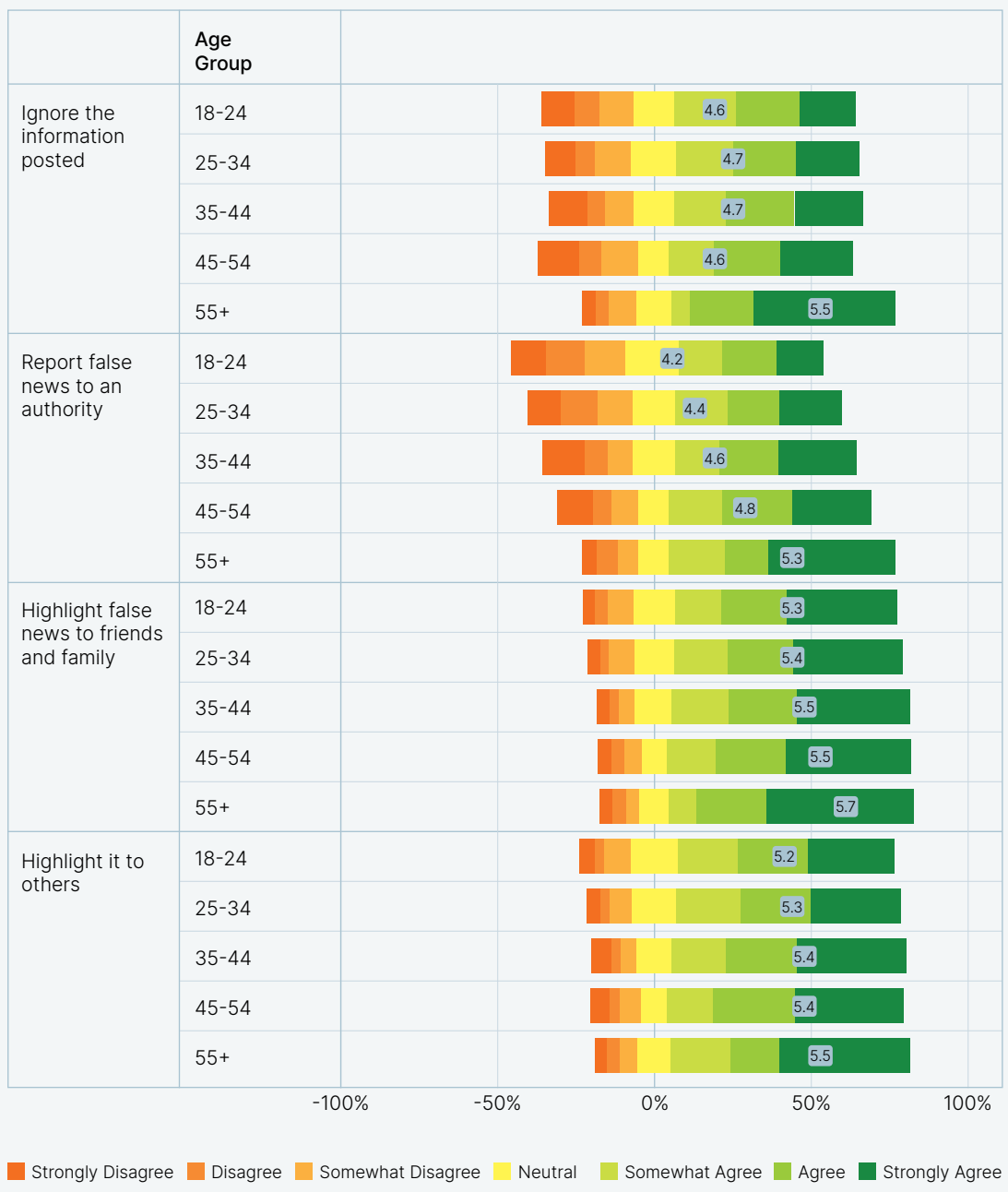


Figure 24A: Reporting of Fake News by Age Group

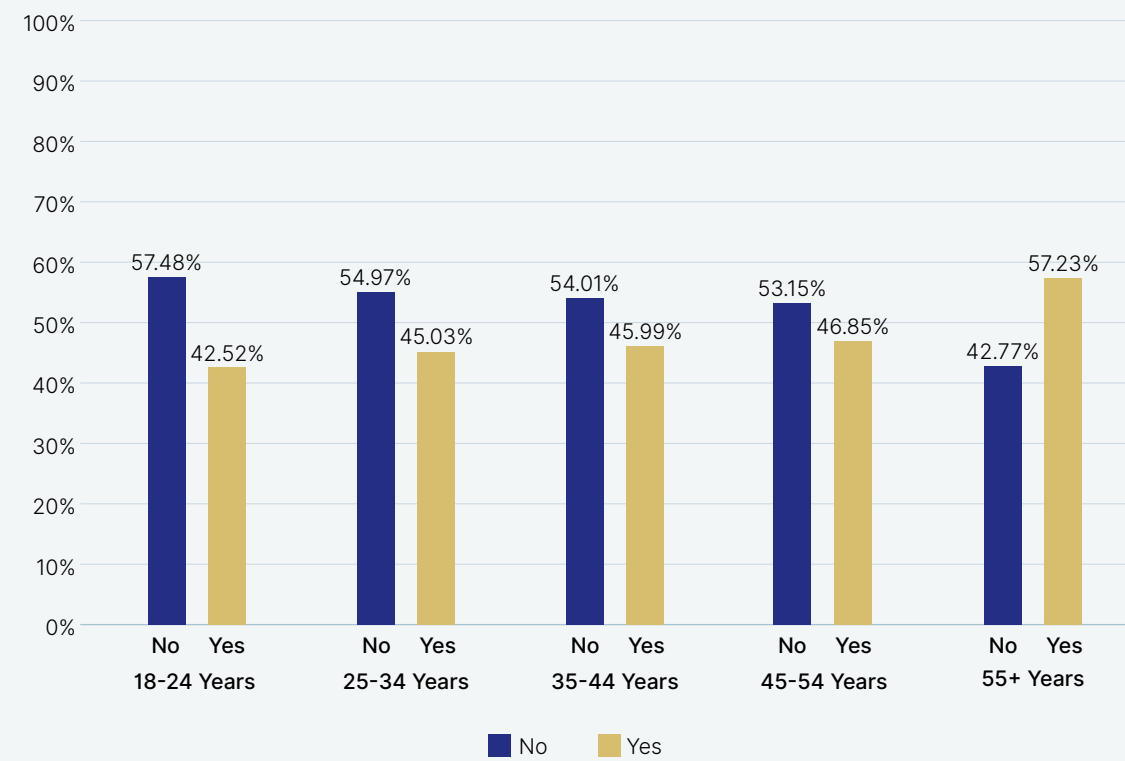


Figure 25: Percentage of Specific Social Media Platform Users Ever Reported Fake News or Misinformation

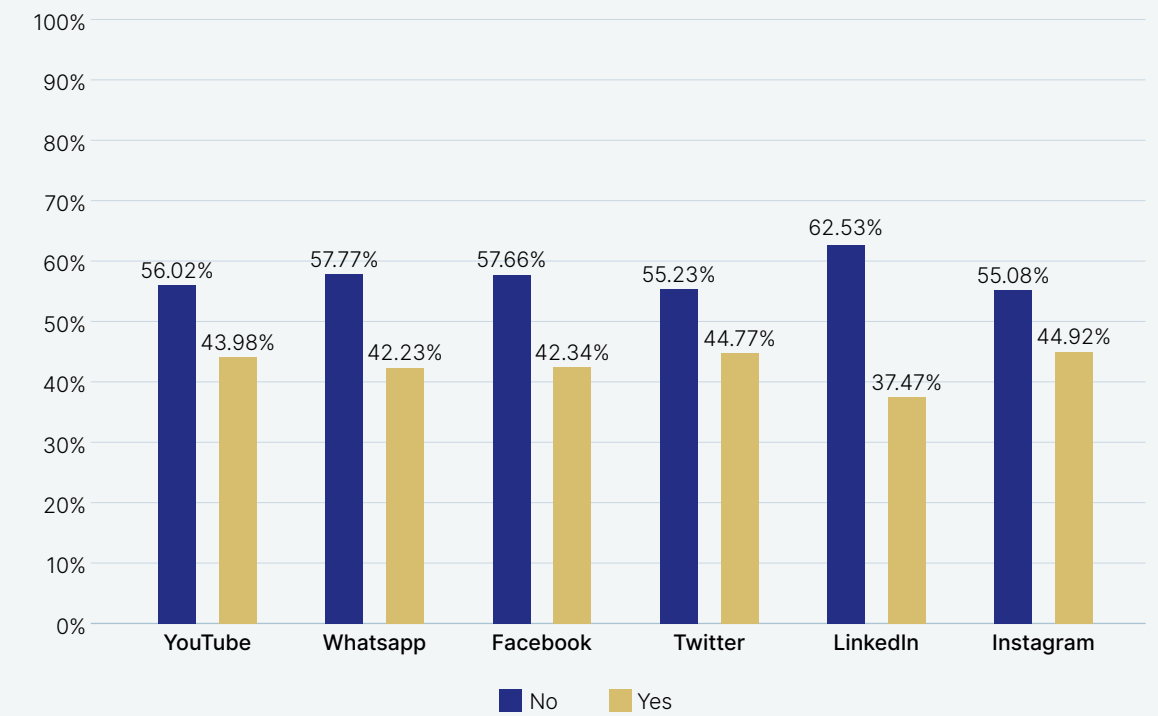


Figure 24B: Reporting of Fake News by Income Group

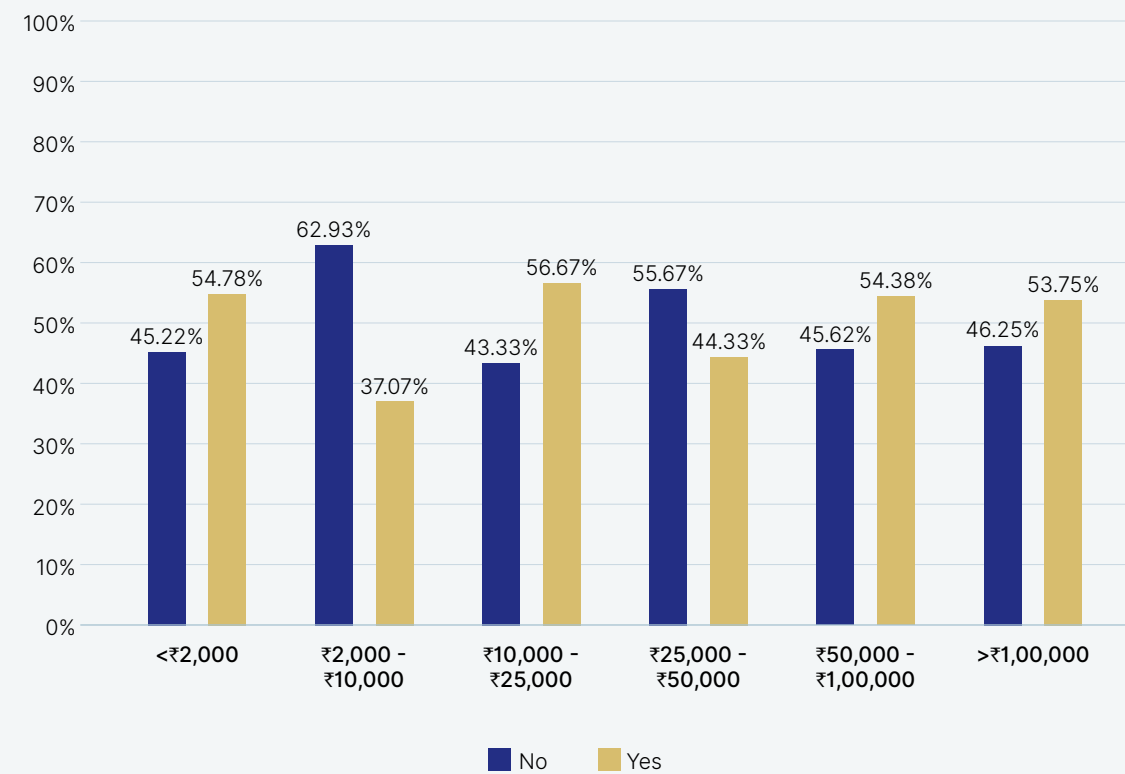


Figure 26: Percentage of People Aware of Deepfakes

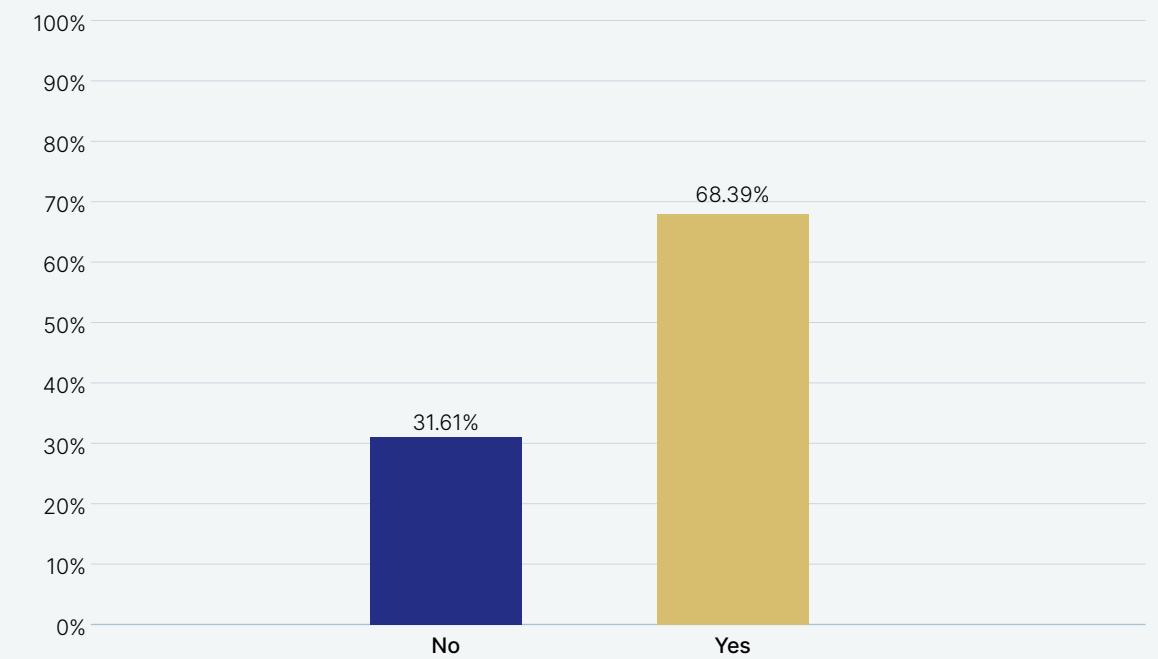


Figure 27: Percentage of People Using Social Media Who Came Across Deepfakes

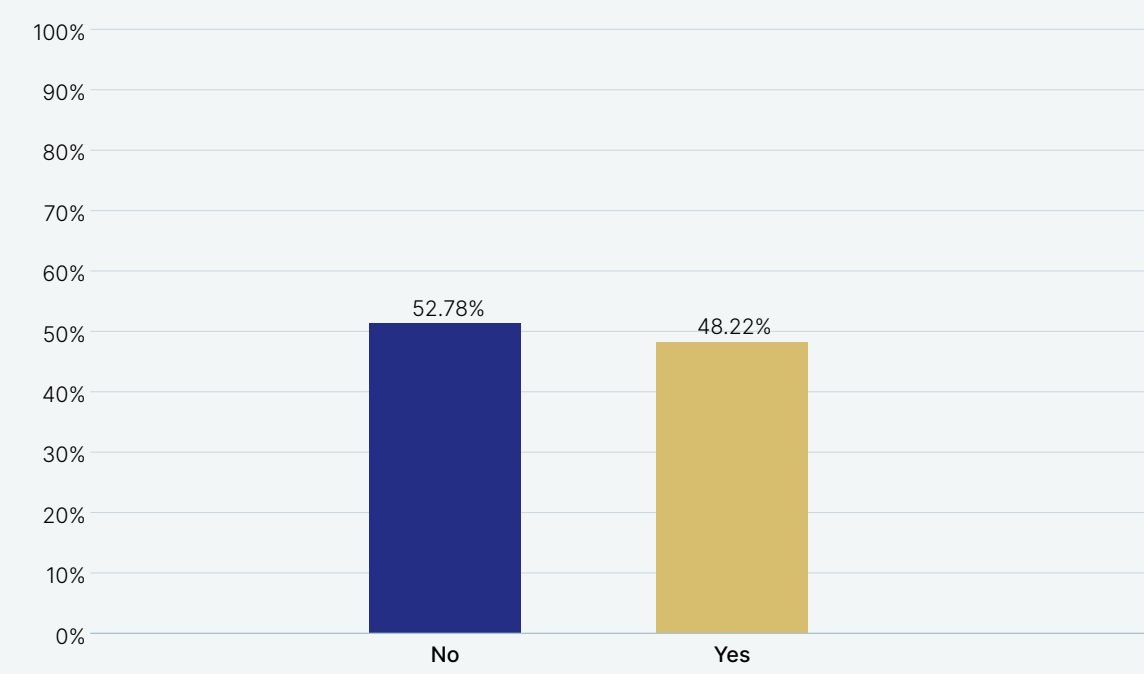


Figure 28: On Which Social Media Platforms Do People Think They Are Most Likely to Come Across Deepfakes

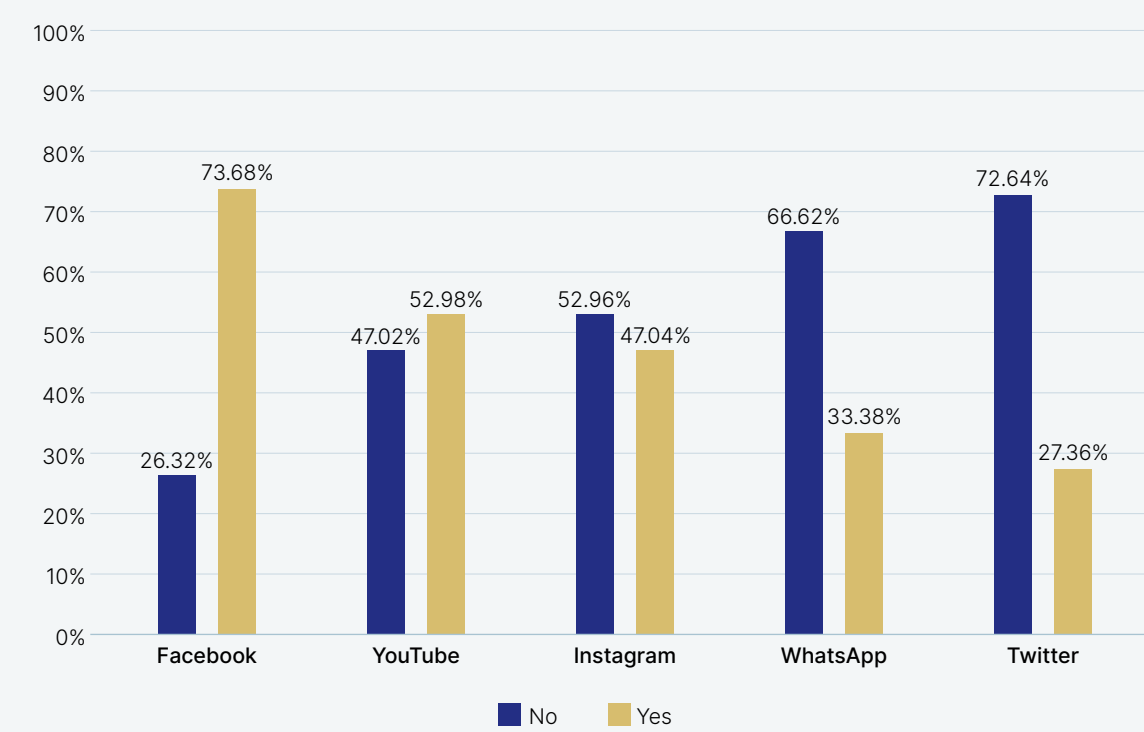
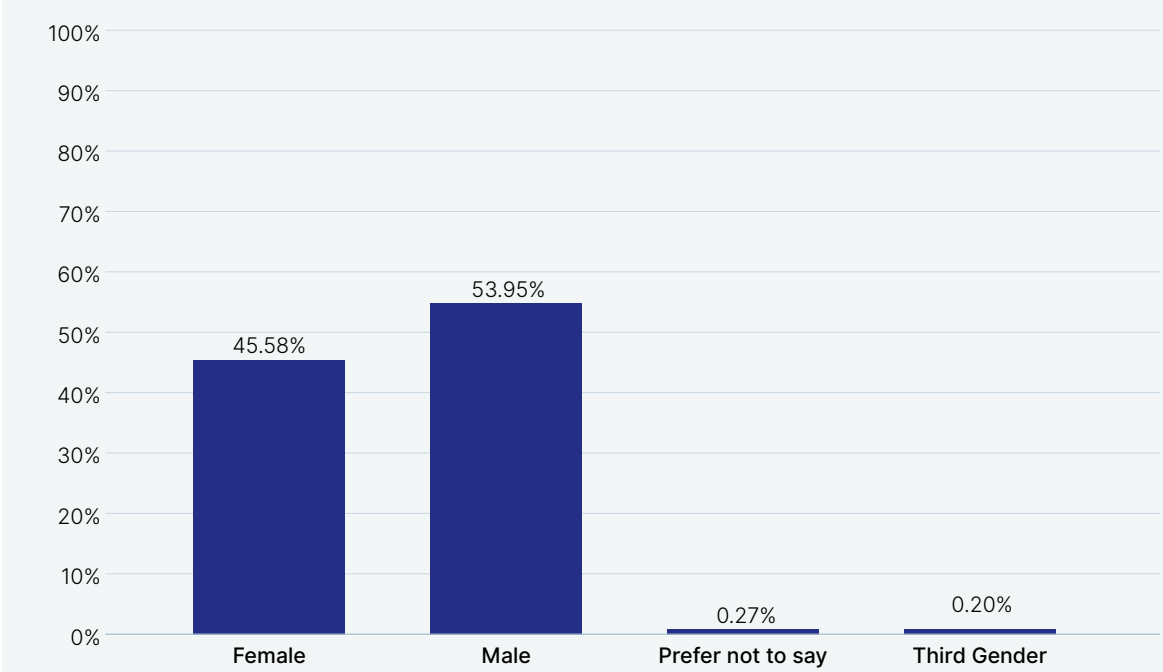


Figure 29: Experience of Fake News by Age, Education and Income



Figure 30: Gender Distribution in Sample Population



Appendix B

	Text	Text_Photos	Text_Video	Text_Audio	Photos_Video	Text_Photos_Video	Text_Photos_Audio	Text_Video_Audio	Text_Photos_Video_Audio
Politics	1.83%	27.98%	35.78%	0.46%	0.92%	17.43%	3.67%	1.83%	10.09%
General	1.79%	19.64%	33.93%	0.0%	0.6%	17.26%	5.95%	2.98%	17.86%
Religion	2.38%	19.05%	35.71%	0.0%	0.0%	22.62%	2.38%	0.0%	17.86%
Crime	0.0%	8.7%	52.17%	0.0%	0.0%	30.43%	4.35%	0.0%	4.35%
Sports	0.0%	28.57%	14.29%	0.0%	0.0%	14.29%	28.57%	0.0%	14.29%





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