

Indian Youth and Media: Access and Trends in Consumption

India has seen a steady growth in media consumption with the advent of digital and social media usage in recent years. The increasing affordability of technology and data has led to a spurt in internet penetration—there are over 600 million users across the country. The UDAYA survey explored the exposure of adolescents and young adults to mass media and social media in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

In terms of traditional media, adolescents in both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reported relatively high levels of television exposure—more than half of them said they watched television frequently or on a daily basis. However, married women in both states had relatively lower access to television. Boys and young men had a significantly higher access to films on a frequent basis than did girls. Radio programmes had poor penetration—only a fraction of young people listen to the radio, and its popularity is decreasing. Exposure to print media was highest among young men, while married women reported least access to newspapers, magazines, and books.



Older boys are more than twice as likely to own a mobile phone as compared with girls their age

The survey indicated that the nationwide upward trend in mobile phone usage was reflected in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar too. While both boys and girls had high levels of access to a mobile phone, ownership of a mobile phone was found much more among boys (almost 90% for older boys as compared with less than 40% for girls of the same age). Additionally, ownership of mobile phones was significantly higher among married girls (36–53%) as compared with unmarried girls (8–36%). As a corollary to this trend, daily time spent on the mobile phone was also higher for boys: 21–49 percent of the male cohort reported mobile usage in excess of an hour as compared with 6–19 percent for the female cohort. There were no differences in the duration of usage between married and unmarried girls of the same age, and both reported experiencing an increase in harassment through mobile phones, particularly in Bihar. Some of the boys also said that they have been harassed over the mobile.

All the respondents listed phone/video calls as the top activity when using mobile phones, followed by general entertainment such as listening to music, playing games, or watching movies and shows (especially in Bihar). Many of the boys in the older age group used their mobile phones for social media. A few of the older boys (27%) said that they used their mobile phones to look up health or fitness-related information—other cohorts did not report any significant use.



There has been a significant increase in internet penetration, and young people reported 2–3 times more access to the web, across cohorts, in 2018–19 compared with 2015–16

Given that most Indians (more than 665.31 million) access the internet through their mobile phones¹ and given the trend in ownership of mobile phones among boys, it is not surprising that boys report much higher access to the internet than girls—among those who completed at least five years of education, 63 percent of older boys said they used the internet almost every day, as opposed to 26 percent of older girls. More affordable data plans have also led to an increase in internet access throughout, but the trend is more pronounced in Bihar than Uttar Pradesh. The use of social media has also increased in both states. However, in keeping with the gender-based imbalance with regard to internet access, boys reported twice the amount of social media use as compared with girls. Among those who accessed the internet, both boys and girls primarily used WhatsApp to connect online (90%), followed by Facebook—video-sharing applications such as YouTube and TikTok were also accessed often. The time spent on social media every day seems to increase with age across all cohorts.

The increasing accessibility and affordability of technology provide unique opportunities to engage with young people through new media

The above trends provide an insight into how we can reach young people. By leveraging technology, programmes can engage with youth through social media and other digital platforms. More information is needed to understand their content-consumption patterns before disseminating information to them. There is also a need to address the gender disparity in terms of use of technology. Most of these imbalances seem to arise from the central issue of owning a mobile phone. It would be worthwhile to explore why ownership trends are so heavily skewed towards boys.

¹Telecom at a Glance. Department of Telecommunications, Government of India.