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Avinash
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Media & Mass
Communication, Pacific
Academy of Higher Education
& Research University,
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Digital innovation and readership trends in regional newspapers: An empirical audience-based study

Avinash

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Abstract

The digital transformation of the news industry has posed significant challenges for regional newspapers, particularly as audiences increasingly engage with news through digital and mobile platforms. This study empirically examines how recent digital innovations adopted by regional newspapers relate to contemporary readership trends, with a specific focus on younger demographics. Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Gatekeeping Theory, Second-Level Agenda-Setting, Diffusion of Innovations, and Uses and Gratifications, the research analyzes data from a quantitative survey of 415 respondents. Statistical techniques including paired samples tests, Bayesian estimation, and chi-square analyses were employed to assess relationships between digital availability, reader satisfaction, mobile app experience, content quality perceptions, loyalty beliefs, and generational adoption patterns. The findings reveal a weak positive association between digital availability and satisfaction, while no significant relationships are observed between app usability and reading experience, content quality and loyalty, or age and adoption likelihood. These results suggest that while digital innovations are acknowledged by audiences, their impact on satisfaction, loyalty, and generational renewal remains limited. The study concludes that digital transformation is a necessary but insufficient condition for sustaining readership engagement in regional newspapers, highlighting the importance of aligning technological strategies with audience expectations and perceived value.

Keywords: Regional newspapers, digital innovation, readership trends, audience perception, media transformation, local journalism

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the news industry represents one of the most profound structural shifts in the history of mass communication. Characterized by the fragmentation of audiences, the disruption of traditional revenue models, and the ascendance of platform intermediaries, this transition has challenged the operational and economic foundations of news organizations worldwide (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018; Pickard, 2020) ^[11, 12]. While much scholarly and industry attention has focused on national 'legacy' titles and digital-native start-ups, regional and local newspapers occupy a uniquely vulnerable, yet socially critical, position within this evolving ecosystem (Abernathy, 2018) ^[1]. This is particularly true in complex markets like India, where the newspaper industry defies global trends, showing resilience through a strong vernacular press and home-delivery models, though it still faces underlying economic pressures such as overdependence on advertising and rising costs (Kumar and Sarma, 2014) ^[19]. These organizations, traditionally embedded in the civic fabric of their communities, face the dual pressure of adapting to digital imperatives while sustaining the localized reporting that defines their public value.

The crisis facing regional newspapers is well-documented. Decades of consolidation, declining print circulation, and the catastrophic erosion of classified and local advertising revenue syphoned off by global digital platforms have created what scholars term "news deserts" and "ghost newspapers" in many communities (Abernathy, 2018) ^[1]. Stroud (2019) ^[15] discusses how digital news environments reshape audience engagement and challenge traditional journalistic roles, requiring news organizations to reconsider practice and value propositions in competitive online spaces. For regional outlets, this often means doing more with less, attempting to build digital capabilities while maintaining a diminished print operation, a tension that shapes the pace and nature of their innovation.

Corresponding Author:
Avinash
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Media & Mass
Communication, Pacific
Academy of Higher Education
& Research University,
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

Concurrently, profound changes in audience behavior, particularly among younger demographics, have reshaped the demand side of the news equation. Generational cohorts, especially Millennials and Generation Z, have largely matured in a media environment where digital and social platforms are the default channels for information discovery and consumption (Newman *et al.*, 2023) ^[10]. In hybrid media environments, audiences increasingly encounter news in varied contexts and formats, often through social platforms where the boundaries of *what counts as news* are blurred. Empirical evidence from India further demonstrates that digital news environments can intensify selective exposure, with frequent consumption of ideologically aligned content associated with higher rejection of contradictory viewpoints (Ahmed & Singh, 2025) ^[3]. This tendency for digital media to powerfully shape user perceptions and urgency extends beyond politics into other sensitive domains, such as healthcare, where exposure to related content has been shown to significantly influence parental decision-making (Ahmed *et al.*, 2025) ^[3]. While this research focuses on political information, it highlights a broader tendency for digital media consumption patterns to reinforce pre-existing preferences an insight relevant to understanding audience selectivity in regional news contexts as well. These patterns differ from traditional newspaper formats and reflect the changing nature of news engagement among users in digital media landscapes (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020) ^[4, 5]. This demographic shift presents an existential challenge for regional newspapers: their historical subscriber base is aging, and their future sustainability depends on attracting and retaining younger readers who lack the ingrained habit of print subscription. The central strategic question, therefore, revolves around whether the digital innovations adopted by these newspapers effectively resonate with and engage this crucial demographic.

Digital innovation in this context encompasses a suite of strategies and outputs. At its most basic level, it involves the creation and distribution of digital replicas or web-native versions of newspaper content. A further step involves the development of dedicated mobile applications, designed to offer a curated, brand-specific user experience on smartphones and tablets. Beyond distribution, innovation extends to the nature of content itself, including the integration of multimedia, interactive elements, and personalized news feeds, as well as efforts to build community through social media engagement and comment forums (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) ^[11]. This is particularly salient as reader revenues become increasingly important for news organisations, making audience engagement on proprietary platforms more crucial than reach on non-proprietary social media platforms (Westlund & Ekström, 2018) ^[16]. For regional newspapers, whose content is inherently geographically bounded, the digital challenge is to translate the value of local relevance into a compelling online experience that can compete with the convenience and breadth of global platforms. Despite extensive scholarship on digital disruption, significant gaps remain when focusing specifically on the regional newspaper sector's adaptation. Macro-analyses of the news industry often aggregate trends, potentially obscuring the distinct realities of local media markets, which operate with different resource constraints, competitive landscapes, and community relationships than national organizations (Hess & Waller, 2017) ^[6]. Furthermore, while numerous studies

survey the news consumption habits of young adults (e.g., Newman *et al.*, 2023) ^[10], fewer empirically examine the efficacy of *specific digital interventions* by *regional publishers* in influencing those habits. There is a need for granular research that connects the tactical choices made by regional newspapers their level of digital investment, the features of their apps and websites, their content strategies to measurable outcomes in audience perception and behavior, particularly across generational lines.

This study seeks to contribute to filling this gap. Its primary objective is to empirically investigate recent trends in regional newspapers amidst the digital age, with a concentrated focus on the relationship between their implemented digital innovations and evolving readership patterns. The research is guided by a central hypothesis: that recent digital innovations by regional newspapers positively influence readership trends among younger demographics. This proposition is grounded in the assumption that digital-native offerings, which align with the media habits of younger audiences, will be met with greater adoption and satisfaction within that group.

To test this hypothesis and explore the broader objective, this paper presents findings from an original quantitative survey (N=415). The analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts of digital adoption to statistically examine key relationships. It investigates the link between the perceived availability of digital versions and overall reader satisfaction. It assesses whether the perceived user-friendliness of mobile applications correlates with their perceived enhancement of the reading experience. It probes the association, if any, between evaluations of e-newspaper content quality and beliefs about their capacity to maintain reader loyalty. Furthermore, it analyzes potential generational divides by comparing the likelihood of younger versus older readers to adopt e-newspaper subscriptions. Finally, it explores perceptions of how digital platforms and initiatives contribute to brand loyalty for newspapers.

By examining these interconnected dimensions, this research aims to provide an evidence-based snapshot of regional newspapers' digital transition from the audience perspective. The findings offer insights into which aspects of digital innovation are successfully engaging readers and, crucially, where significant gaps or misalignments persist. In doing so, the study aims to inform both scholarly understanding and practical strategy, helping regional newspapers navigate their precarious but vital path forward in the digital age.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multi-theoretical framework that integrates Gatekeeping Theory, Second-Level Agenda-Setting (Framing), Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory to explain how digital innovations by regional newspapers intersect with audience behavior, perceptions, and generational readership trends in the digital age. Together, these theories provide a structured lens to examine both the supply side (institutional and technological changes in news production and distribution) and the demand side (audience engagement, satisfaction, and adoption patterns).

Gatekeeping theory in the digital news context

Gatekeeping Theory traditionally conceptualizes news production as a process in which editors and journalists

control the flow of information to the public (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) ^[17, 14]. In the digital era, this process has undergone significant transformation. Platform intermediaries such as search engines, social media platforms, and mobile applications now operate as secondary or hybrid gatekeepers, influencing content visibility, access, and audience reach (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) ^[11]. For regional newspapers, this shift has altered long-standing institutional routines and weakened their exclusive control over news distribution.

Within this study, Gatekeeping Theory provides a foundation for understanding how digital versions, mobile apps, and platform-based dissemination represent not merely technological upgrades, but structural changes in how regional newspapers manage content flow and audience access. The perceived availability of digital versions—examined empirically in this research reflects audience judgments about whether regional newspapers have successfully adapted their gatekeeping role to digital environments. Prior research indicates that when audiences perceive news organizations as accessible and responsive across platforms, overall evaluations of the outlet tend to improve, even if satisfaction does not increase proportionately (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) ^[14, 11].

Second-level agenda-setting and framing

Second-level agenda-setting theory, often referred to as framing, focuses on how media emphasize certain attributes, formats, or interpretive cues rather than merely determining issue salience (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997) ^[9]. In digital news environments, framing extends beyond textual emphasis to include presentation formats, multimedia integration, and user interface design, all of which shape audience perceptions of news quality and relevance (Stroud & Muddiman, 2019) ^[15]. This framing is powerfully evident in visual content. For instance, an analysis of photographic representation in a leading Indian national daily during the Tokyo Olympics revealed a significant gender bias, with women athletes receiving substantially less visual coverage than their male counterparts, thereby reinforcing certain sociocultural narratives (Ahmed, 2022) ^[18].

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the study's examination of content quality perceptions, mobile app experiences, and reader loyalty beliefs. Research suggests that digital news framing through visuals, interactivity, and navigational structure can influence how audiences interpret the value and credibility of news content, though such effects are not always uniform or strong (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020) ^[4, 5]. The lack of statistically significant associations observed in this study between perceived content quality and loyalty beliefs aligns with framing research that emphasizes audience heterogeneity and contextual interpretation rather than deterministic effects.

Diffusion of innovations theory

Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new ideas and technologies spread within a social system over time, emphasizing factors such as perceived usefulness, compatibility with existing habits, and complexity (Rogers, 2003) ^[13]. Applied to journalism, this theory has been used to analyze the adoption of digital subscriptions, mobile news

apps, and e-newspapers by different demographic groups (Westlund & Ekström, 2018) ^[16].

In the context of regional newspapers, digital innovations represent organizational attempts to accelerate adoption among audiences whose news habits are increasingly digital-first. Younger readers, in particular, are often described as early or selective adopters of mobile-based news formats, though research also indicates that adoption does not automatically translate into sustained loyalty or satisfaction (Newman *et al.*, 2023) ^[10]. This framework directly informs the study's hypothesis that digital innovations positively influence readership trends among younger demographics, while also providing a theoretical explanation for the empirically observed weak or non-significant generational divides.

Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory positions audiences as active participants who select media based on their individual needs, such as information, convenience, social connection, or habit (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) ^[8]. Contemporary scholarship applies this framework to digital news consumption, emphasizing how users evaluate platforms based on usability, accessibility, and perceived personal value rather than institutional prestige alone (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020) ^[4, 5].

This theory is particularly relevant to the study's findings regarding mobile app user-friendliness and reading experience. Prior research shows that audiences may recognize the conceptual benefits of digital news apps while simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction with usability or interface design (Westlund & Ekström, 2018) ^[16]. The absence of a significant predictive relationship between perceived app improvement and user-friendliness in this study reflects this evaluative complexity, reinforcing the Uses and Gratifications perspective that audience judgments are multifaceted rather than linear.

Integrative framework for regional newspapers

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent framework for understanding the digital transition of regional newspapers. Gatekeeping Theory explains institutional restructuring, agenda-setting and framing illuminate perceptual dynamics, Diffusion of Innovations accounts for adoption patterns, and Uses and Gratifications clarifies audience-level evaluations. Importantly, existing scholarship cautions that digital innovation alone does not guarantee increased satisfaction, loyalty, or generational renewal (Abernathy, 2018; Hess & Waller, 2017) ^[1, 6].

By situating the study within these established theories, this research avoids technological determinism and instead conceptualizes digital innovation as a contingent process shaped by institutional constraints, audience expectations, and social context. This framework directly supports the study's objective of empirically assessing whether and how digital innovations by regional newspapers influence contemporary readership trends, particularly among younger audiences.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to empirically investigate the relationship between digital innovations and readership trends within the context of regional newspapers. Primary data were collected via a

structured questionnaire disseminated within the Delhi Union Territory, India. A total of 415 valid responses were obtained using a random sampling technique, ensuring a dataset robust enough for statistical analysis. The survey instrument was designed to capture audience perceptions on key variables central to the study's hypotheses, including the perceived availability and quality of digital news platforms, satisfaction with digital offerings, user experience with mobile applications, and beliefs regarding reader loyalty and adoption. To analyze these relationships, a suite of statistical techniques was employed using SPSS software. Specifically, paired samples tests examined the link between digital availability and reader satisfaction; Bayesian estimation assessed the association between mobile app experience and perceived usability; chi-square analyses evaluated connections between content quality, loyalty beliefs, and generational adoption patterns; and further chi-square tests explored perceptions of digital platforms' impact on brand loyalty. The research adhered to standard ethical protocols, including securing informed consent,

guaranteeing participant anonymity, and receiving prior approval from an institutional ethics committee.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings from the quantitative analysis conducted to examine the relationship between recent digital innovations by regional newspapers and readership trends. The results are structured around the core hypotheses investigating availability, satisfaction, generational adoption, and digital platform perceptions. Statistical analyses, including paired samples tests, Bayesian estimation, and chi-square tests, were employed using a dataset of 415 responses.

4.1 Relationship between digital version availability and reader satisfaction

A paired samples analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that a positive relationship exists between the availability of digital versions and reader satisfaction. Table 1 presents the paired statistics and test results.

Table 1: Paired samples test for digital availability and reader satisfaction

Variable	Mean (SD)	Correlation (r)	P-Value	Mean Difference (95% CI)	T (DF)	P-Value
Availability	3.74 (1.144)	.154	.002	0.149 (0.004, 0.294)	2.025 (414)	.043
Satisfaction	3.59 (1.165)					

A statistically significant, albeit weak, positive correlation was found. The significant mean difference and t-test result ($p=.043$) confirm a measurable gap where perceived availability exceeds satisfaction, supporting the hypothesis of a positive but moderate relationship.

4.2 Association between mobile app experience and perceived user-friendliness

Bayesian estimation was used to examine the relationship between agreement that mobile apps improve the reading experience and ratings of app user-friendliness. The posterior estimates are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Bayesian estimates for mobile app experience and user-friendliness

Agreement on Improved Experience	Posterior Mean (User-Friendliness)	95% Credible Interval
Strongly Disagree	3.133	(2.824, 3.441)
Disagree	3.110	(2.799, 3.421)
Neutral	3.105	(2.801, 3.408)
Agree	3.028	(2.696, 3.359)
Strongly Agree	3.011	(2.717, 3.304)

A consistent inverse trend is observed; higher agreement that apps improve the experience corresponds with slightly lower user-friendliness ratings. The overlapping credible intervals across all levels indicate no statistically significant predictive relationship, leading to the rejection of this sub-hypothesis.

4.3 Relationship between e-newspaper content quality and reader loyalty belief

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine if perceptions of e-newspaper content quality influence the belief that they maintain reader loyalty. The test results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Chi-square test for content quality and reader loyalty belief

Test	Value	DF	P-Value
Pearson Chi-Square	23.492	16	.101
Likelihood Ratio	24.118	16	.087

The non-significant results ($p>.05$) indicate no statistical association between the two variables. The null hypothesis is accepted, suggesting that beliefs about reader loyalty are

not significantly influenced by perceptions of digital content quality relative to print.

4.4 Generational differences in e-newspaper adoption likelihood:

A cross tabulation and chi-square analysis were performed to test the hypothesis of a generational divide in adoption likelihood. Key observed counts and the independence test are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Cross tabulation of adoption likelihood by age group (Selected Cells)

Younger Readers' Likelihood	Older Readers: Strongly Disagree	Older Readers: Strongly Agree	Total
Strongly Disagree	22	11	78
Strongly Agree	24	17	90
Total	89	81	415

Table 5: Chi-square test of independence for adoption likelihood

Test	Value	DF	P-Value
Pearson Chi-Square	13.405	16	.643

Interpretation: While the cross tabulation reveals a descriptive pattern where younger readers' strong agreement

often coincides with older readers' strong disagreement, the chi-square test is not statistically significant ($p=.643$). This suggests the observed generational divide in the sample is not strong enough to confirm a systematic association in the population.

4.5 Relationship between digital platform impact and digital initiatives for brand loyalty

A final chi-square test was conducted to assess the association between perceptions of digital platforms' impact and agreement that digital initiatives improve brand loyalty. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Chi-Square test for digital platform impact and initiative agreement

Test	Value	DF	P-Value
Pearson Chi-Square	15.918	16	.459
Likelihood Ratio	16.395	16	.426

Interpretation: The non-significant results ($p>.05$) indicate that perceptions of digital platforms' general impact are statistically independent from agreement with the effectiveness of specific digital initiatives for building brand loyalty. Respondents appear to evaluate these two concepts separately.

5. Discussion

This study set out to empirically examine how recent digital innovations adopted by regional newspapers relate to contemporary readership trends, with particular attention to younger demographics. Guided by established theoretical perspectives and grounded in survey data from 415 respondents, the findings offer a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and limitations associated with digital transformation in the regional newspaper sector. Rather than presenting a uniformly positive or negative picture, the results highlight a pattern of partial alignment and persistent disjunctions between digital availability, audience satisfaction, perceived usability, and loyalty-related beliefs. The first key finding concerns the relationship between the availability of digital versions and reader satisfaction. The paired samples analysis revealed a statistically significant but weak positive correlation, indicating that greater perceived availability of digital formats is associated with marginally higher satisfaction levels. However, the observed mean difference where availability ratings exceeded satisfaction suggests that mere presence of digital offerings does not fully translate into positive reader evaluations. This finding aligns with gatekeeping scholarship emphasizing that adaptation to digital distribution reshapes access without automatically improving audience experience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) ^[14, 11]. From a regional newspaper perspective, the result implies that transitioning content online may successfully expand reach and accessibility while leaving deeper experiential or value-based expectations unmet.

The second major result, derived from Bayesian estimation, examined whether perceptions that mobile applications improve the reading experience are associated with evaluations of app user-friendliness. The analysis revealed overlapping credible intervals across all levels of agreement, indicating no statistically meaningful predictive relationship. Interestingly, the posterior means showed a slight inverse trend, whereby stronger agreement regarding experiential

improvement coincided with marginally lower user-friendliness ratings. This pattern reinforces the argument advanced by Uses and Gratifications Theory that audiences evaluate media platforms across multiple, sometimes competing dimensions (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) ^[8]. While respondents may conceptually acknowledge the advantages of mobile apps such as portability or immediacy these perceived benefits do not necessarily correspond to positive usability assessments. This finding is consistent with earlier research emphasizing that digital news adoption does not imply uncritical acceptance of platform design or functionality (Westlund & Ekström, 2018) ^[16].

The absence of a statistically significant association between perceived e-newspaper content quality and beliefs about reader loyalty further complicates assumptions surrounding digital innovation. The chi-square analysis indicates that respondents do not systematically link digital content quality with expectations of sustained loyalty. This finding is particularly important in light of framing and agenda-setting perspectives, which suggest that content attributes shape audience interpretation but do not exert uniform or deterministic effects (McCombs *et al.*, 1997; Edgerly & Vraga, 2020) ^[9, 4]. For regional newspapers, whose historical strength lies in localized, community-centered reporting, the result implies that content quality alone when translated into digital formats may not be sufficient to anchor loyalty perceptions. Audience judgments of loyalty appear to be influenced by broader factors not captured solely through evaluations of digital content quality.

Generational differences in e-newspaper adoption constituted a central concern of the study's hypothesis. While descriptive patterns in the cross tabulation hinted at contrasting attitudes between younger and older readers, the chi-square test did not confirm a statistically significant association. This outcome suggests that although generational narratives surrounding digital nativity are prevalent, adoption likelihood among younger readers may not diverge as sharply from older cohorts as commonly assumed. This finding aligns with diffusion theory insights that adoption processes are shaped by perceived compatibility and utility rather than age alone (Rogers, 2003) ^[13]. It also resonates with evidence from broader digital news research indicating that younger audiences' engagement with news is selective and context-dependent rather than uniformly enthusiastic (Newman *et al.*, 2023) ^[10].

The final analysis explored the relationship between perceptions of digital platforms' general impact and agreement that specific digital initiatives enhance brand loyalty. The lack of a statistically significant association suggests that respondents distinguish between abstract assessments of digital transformation and evaluations of concrete organizational strategies. This separation reinforces arguments advanced in local journalism scholarship that audiences do not necessarily perceive innovation as inherently beneficial unless it delivers tangible, recognizable value (Hess & Waller, 2017; Abernathy, 2018) ^[6, 1]. For regional newspapers operating under constrained resources, this finding underscores the importance of strategic clarity: digital initiatives must be communicated and experienced as purposeful rather than merely reactive adaptations.

Taken together, the results offer partial support for the study's central hypothesis. While digital innovations are positively associated with certain evaluative dimensions,

such as availability and experiential acknowledgment, these relationships are consistently weak or non-significant when examined through satisfaction, loyalty beliefs, and adoption likelihood. This pattern reinforces the integrative theoretical framework adopted in this study, which cautions against technological determinism and emphasizes the contingent nature of digital transformation. Gatekeeping shifts may expand access, framing may shape perceptions, diffusion processes may encourage experimentation, and uses-and-gratifications dynamics may guide platform evaluation but none operate in isolation or guarantee favorable outcomes.

The discussion highlights that digital innovation in regional newspapers functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for sustaining readership engagement, particularly among younger audiences. The findings suggest that while audiences recognize and engage with digital formats, their evaluations remain complex, differentiated, and cautious. This study therefore contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by empirically demonstrating that the success of digital transition in regional journalism depends not merely on adoption, but on the alignment between institutional strategies, audience expectations, and perceived value within localized media ecosystems.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how recent digital innovations adopted by regional newspapers relate to contemporary readership trends, with a particular focus on younger demographics. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework and original survey data (N=415), the findings indicate that digital transformation in the regional newspaper sector produces measured and uneven outcomes rather than uniform gains in satisfaction, loyalty, or adoption.

The results demonstrate that the availability of digital versions is positively associated with reader satisfaction, but the relationship is weak, suggesting that access alone does not ensure favorable audience evaluations. Similarly, perceptions of mobile applications as improving the reading experience were not significantly associated with user-friendliness, highlighting a disconnect between conceptual appreciation of digital tools and practical usability assessments. Furthermore, perceptions of e-newspaper content quality did not significantly influence beliefs about reader loyalty, and generational differences in adoption likelihood were not statistically confirmed. Together, these findings suggest that digital innovation functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for sustaining readership engagement in regional newspapers. This reinforces insights from comparative media research, which shows that the successful adoption of a communication technology is less about its novelty and more about its integration into existing habits and its perceived utility in addressing specific community needs, as seen in the persistent dominance of radio among farmers in Tanzania (Kasonta *et al.*, 2024)^[7].

By empirically grounding these outcomes in established theories of gatekeeping, framing, diffusion, and uses and gratifications, the study avoids technological determinism and instead underscores the contingent nature of digital adaptation. The findings reinforce the view that audience responses to digital news are complex, evaluative, and shaped by multiple overlapping considerations rather than by innovation alone.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on self-reported survey data, which captures perceptions rather than observed behavior. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to assess changes in attitudes or adoption over time. Third, while generational categories were examined, other influential factors such as income, education, or local media density were not explicitly modeled. Finally, the findings are context-specific and should be interpreted cautiously when generalizing beyond similar regional newspaper environments.

8. Recommendations

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that track shifts in readership behavior as digital strategies evolve. Mixed-method approaches, combining surveys with interviews or usage analytics, could provide deeper insight into why certain digital features fail to translate into satisfaction or loyalty. For practitioners, the findings suggest that regional newspapers should move beyond platform availability and prioritize usability, clarity of value proposition, and alignment with audience expectations. Strategic digital initiatives that emphasize local relevance, ease of use, and transparent engagement may be more effective than technology-driven expansion alone.

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