

Trust in News Sources and News Verification Patterns among College Students in West Bengal

Indranil Roy¹, Dr. Mugdha Sengupta²

PhD Scholar, Assistant Professor,
Department of Mass Communication,
The University of Burdwan, Burdwan, India
emailofnil@gmail.com, mugdhasengupta@gmail.com

Abstract—This quantitative study examines trust in news sources and news verification behaviour among college students in West Bengal (N = 516) using a focused subset of a broader survey. Respondents ranked five source types by trust and reported how often they verify news encountered on social media before sharing. Descriptive statistics show a clear credibility hierarchy: traditional media (TV/newspapers/radio) were most trusted (40.7% ranked #1), followed by news websites/apps (15.9%), mobile feeds (13.8%), search engines (8.9%), and social media (6.6%). Verification was widespread: 56% reported always/often verifying social media news, and 86% always/mostly verify before sharing. Exploratory analyses indicated no strong relationship between an individual's trust ranking for social media and their verification frequency, suggesting verification may function as a general habit rather than only a response to low trust. Findings highlight a youth audience that heavily uses digital channels yet anchors credibility in legacy journalism and demonstrates emerging verification norms. Implications include strengthening media literacy and leveraging traditional outlets' trust advantage across digital touchpoint.

Index Terms—News trust, Verification behaviour, Social media, Traditional media, College students (India). (*key words*)

Introduction

Digital media have dramatically transformed how young people consume news. The rise of social networks and mobile news apps means that many college students now get a large share of their news online. For example, recent surveys indicate nearly 71% of Indians prefer online news sources, with about 49% relying on social media for news dissemination (*Over 70% Indians rely on online*, 2024). However, this convenience comes with concerns: online platforms are rife with misinformation and varying credibility, prompting questions about trust in these news sources and whether readers actively verify the news they encounter. Many young adults are aware of the risks – in one U.S. campus survey, 84.6% of students said it was “*very important*” that their news come from a reliable source (Farnsworth, 2024). At the same time, research shows a paradoxical pattern: youth often mistrust online news yet continue using social media as a news source (Melro & Pereira, 2023). This raises critical issues for media literacy and informed citizenship.

This paper focuses on two key aspects of news consumption among college students:

- **Trust in news sources:** How much trust do students place in different types of news sources (e.g. traditional media vs. social media)? Which sources are perceived as most credible?
- **News verification behaviour:** How frequently do students verify news content, especially news encountered on social media, and do they fact-check information before sharing it with others?

By narrowing in on *trust* and *verification*, we aim to understand the relationship between where students get their news and how they ensure that news is accurate. These questions are explored using survey data from college students in West Bengal, India, as part of a broader study on youth news consumption patterns. The findings are discussed in light of existing literature in media studies, highlighting both consistencies and contrasts with global trends. Ultimately, this research can shed light on the challenges of maintaining news credibility in the digital age and inform strategies in media education and journalism to improve trust and verification practices.

Background and Literature Review

Trust in news media – particularly among younger audiences – has been a focus of many recent studies amid concerns of “fake news” and declining public confidence in journalism. Prior research consistently shows that young adults tend to trust traditional news media more than newer online sources, even as they increasingly rely on the latter. For instance, a survey of Portuguese undergraduates by Melro and Pereira (2023) found that students generally viewed social media news as less trustworthy than traditional media, yet paradoxically continued to use social platforms heavily for news updates (Melro & Pereira, 2023). In the United States, college students likewise report greater trust in legacy media outlets (national TV, newspapers) than in information on social networking sites. Soo Hui Lee’s study of U.S. college students concluded that they “have more trust in traditional news sources”, naming television as the most important source, even though they often consume news via online and social channels (Lee, 2011, as cited in Farnsworth, 2023). A comparative study in 2022 echoed this trend, noting that American students trusted traditional media more but used social media more frequently for news, a pattern also observed among students in other countries (Farnsworth, 2023). On the other hand, there is some evidence that the trust gap may be narrowing in certain contexts – a Pew Research Center (2022) report found that in the U.S., adults under 30 “now trust information from social media almost as much as from national news outlets”. Nonetheless, the overwhelming consensus in the literature is that perceived credibility of news on social media is low among young people, even as these platforms remain a primary news source (Devi et al., 2025; Melro & Pereira, 2023).

Notably, a recent study of Indian youths by Devi et al. (2025) quantifies this credibility gap. In their survey, traditional media (TV, radio, print) were rated highest for trustworthiness – roughly 60–80% of respondents deemed legacy media credible – whereas social media and news apps scored much lower, with only about 20–30% of respondents considering them trustworthy (Devi et al., 2025). In other words, Indian youth still largely view mainstream news outlets as the more reliable sources, while regarding newer digital platforms with skepticism. This mirrors the findings of global surveys like the Reuters Institute’s 2024 Digital News Report, which noted that even though online platforms are now the dominant source of news for Indians, trust in news remains higher for established media channels. The contradiction is clear: ease of access drives young audiences to social media for news, but credibility concerns persist – a phenomenon sometimes described as “*seeing but not believing*” (Melro & Pereira, 2023). Researchers suggest this disconnect may stem from young people valuing the speed and convenience of social feeds while simultaneously recognizing the prevalence of bias, misinformation, and lack of editorial standards online. As Roeser, a student interviewed by Farnsworth (2023), pointed out, “*they’re going to be on social media anyway... if they’re also getting the news from it that’s a happy bonus,*” yet “*I am very skeptical about trusting [many] news sources because they can be unreliable and heavily biased*” (Farnsworth, 2023). This underscores that trust is a critical issue: young consumers crave easy access but still desire news to be factual and unbiased.

News verification behaviour is the other side of this equation – essentially, how do students cope with the trust dilemma? With the flood of questionable information online, the ability and willingness to fact-check or cross-verify news has become a key component of media literacy. Several studies highlight both concerns and encouraging signs regarding youth verification habits. On one hand, alarm bells have been sounded by education researchers who found that many teens and college students struggle to distinguish fake news from real. For example, the Stanford History Education Group’s well-known assessment reported that a majority of high school and college students failed to critically evaluate online sources, suggesting “*young people are particularly susceptible to fake news*” if untrained (Wineburg et al., 2016, as summarized in PBS NewsHour). This points to the need for better instruction in critical thinking and fact-checking skills. In practice, a significant number of users do not routinely verify content: a UNESCO survey of digital content creators in 2024 revealed that 62% do not perform rigorous fact-checking before sharing information – though tellingly, 73% expressed interest in learning how to do so. The prevalence of such unverified sharing contributes to the rapid spread of misinformation. Indeed, fake news “fast-tracks” through social networks in part because users often share sensational content without validating it (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022).

On the other hand, there is evidence that awareness of misinformation is growing and driving more cautious behavior among some young adults. Majerczak and Strzelecki (2022) found that fake news awareness was the strongest predictor of engaging in verification of online information, even more influential than general trust levels or social ties. In other words, individuals who recognize the problem of fake news are much more likely to double-check what they read. Additionally, if people intend to share a piece of news, they may be more motivated to verify it first – sharing intent itself was identified as another factor positively associated with fact-checking (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Qualitative insights likewise suggest many students take steps to ensure accuracy: respondents in Farnsworth’s (2024) interview series described habits like comparing multiple news sources, using fact-checking websites, and doing a quick Google search before believing a claim. Some students noted they would “check other trusted sources... If I find red flags or contradictions, I keep digging”, illustrating a growing awareness of verification strategies (Farnsworth, 2024). Such proactive attitudes are heartening, indicating that at least a subset of college-educated youth are internalising the importance of verification. Still, the overall landscape is mixed – while many young people acknowledge they *should* verify news, not all consistently *do so* in practice, especially when passive consumption is the norm.

Prior research sets the stage for this study by showing that trust in news sources varies by medium (with traditional outlets generally viewed as more credible than social media) and that news verification behaviours among youth are uneven (ranging from diligent fact-checking by some to careless sharing by others). The present research will contribute new data on these issues in the context of Indian college students. By examining how this group ranks the trustworthiness of different news sources and how frequently they engage in verification, we can better understand whether increased exposure to misinformation (in a country with one of the world’s largest social media user bases) is translating into more sceptical and careful news consumption habits.

Methodology

This study analysed a subset of data from a larger survey on news consumption patterns among college students in West Bengal, India. The survey was conducted in 2025 and targeted students across various universities in the region. A total of 516 respondents participated (ages ranged roughly from 18 to 29, with the majority in the 21–23 age bracket). The survey questionnaire covered numerous aspects of news behaviour; for the purposes of this paper, we focus only on the questions related to trust in news sources and news verification practices.

Trust in news sources was measured by asking participants to rank five types of news sources from *most trusted* (1) to *least trusted* (5). The five source categories were (1) Traditional Media (television, radio, print newspapers), (2) Social Media platforms, (3) Search Engines (as gateways to news), (4) News Websites/Apps (e.g., mainstream news websites or aggregator apps), and (5) Mobile Feeds (push news feeds and notifications). Each student assigned a rank of 1 through 5 to each source type (with no ties allowed on the survey form). These rankings provide an ordinal measure of perceived credibility or trustworthiness for each medium. For analysis, we treated a lower average rank as indicating higher overall trust in that source across the sample.

News verification behaviour was assessed with two key questions: (a) “How often do you verify news you encounter on social media through other sources?” – with response options on a Likert scale (*Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never*); and (b) “Before sharing news, do you verify its authenticity?” – with options (*Always, Most of the time, Sometimes, Rarely, Never*). These questions capture self-reported frequency of fact-checking in two contexts: general consumption (any time they see news on social media) and prior to sharing news with others. We interpret higher frequencies (e.g., “*Always*” or “*Often*”) as indicating a stronger personal commitment to verification. For some analyses, responses were converted to numerical scales (assigning 5 for *Always* down to 1 for *Never*) to enable correlation checks with trust measures.

The survey was administered online via a Google Forms questionnaire (in English). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed that the survey was for academic research on media habits. The dataset was cleaned to aggregate and codify multiple-choice selections. In analysing

the data, we primarily used descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean ranks) to summarise trust rankings and verification frequencies. We also performed a brief correlation analysis (Spearman's rho, given ordinal data) to explore any relationship between an individual's trust in social media as a news source and their likelihood of verifying news, to see if scepticism toward social media correlates with more vigilant behaviour. All analyses were conducted using Python/Pandas and Excel.

It should be noted that since the focus is narrow, we did not delve into other parts of the survey (such as platform preferences, news topics, etc.). Our results concentrate solely on trust perceptions and verification behaviours. The sample, being college students in one Indian region, is a non-probability convenience sample and not necessarily representative of all youth. However, the insights can be valuable for understanding trends among educated young adults in the digital media

environment. No identifiable personal data were collected aside from demographic categories (age, gender, etc.), and all responses were aggregated for reporting.

Results

Trust in Different News Sources

Survey participants showed marked differences in trust across the five types of news sources. Figure 1 summarises the proportion of students who selected each source as their most trusted news source (ranked #1 by the respondent).

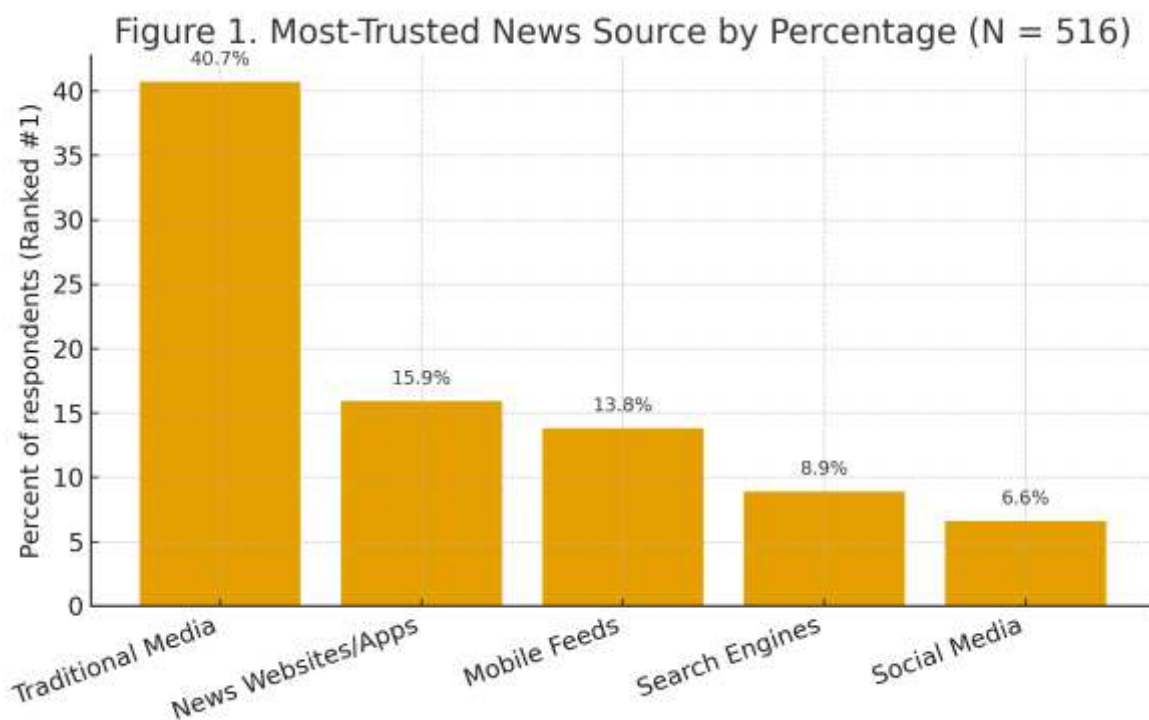


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents selecting each source as their most trusted news source. This chart illustrates that a large plurality (about 41%) of the surveyed students consider traditional media (TV, radio, print newspapers) to be their most trusted source of news. In comparison, only around 6.6% identified social media as the most trustworthy, reflecting generally low trust in social platforms. News websites/apps were the second-most frequently ranked #1 (chosen by roughly 16% of students), while mobile news feeds (push notifications or aggregated feeds) and search engines were each the top choice for about 13.7% and 8.9% of students, respectively.

News Sources	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	Percent Rank-1
Traditional Media	210	77	105	94	30	40.7
Social Media	34	129	163	118	72	6.6
Search Engines	46	107	183	142	38	8.9
News Websites/Apps	82	151	133	95	55	15.9
Mobile Feeds	71	118	129	111	87	13.8

The dominance of traditional media in perceived trustworthiness is evident – about 210 out of 516 students (40.7%) gave traditional outlets the highest trust rank. This aligns with expectations from prior literature that legacy media retain a reputation for credibility (likely due to their editorial gatekeeping and fact-checking processes). Many students still appear to put more faith in TV news or newspapers than in digital alternatives. In contrast, social media was rarely seen as the most credible source: only 34 students (6.6%) ranked social platforms as #1 in trust. In fact, a significant number assigned social media the lowest trust rank; about 72 students (14%) ranked social media dead last (5th) in credibility. This reinforces the notion that, while ubiquitous in usage, social media is viewed with scepticism by a majority of these young adults. One student’s comment from the survey echoed this sentiment: *“skeptical about them because of misinformation... I tend to do further research to ensure accuracy”*, referring to news on social networks.

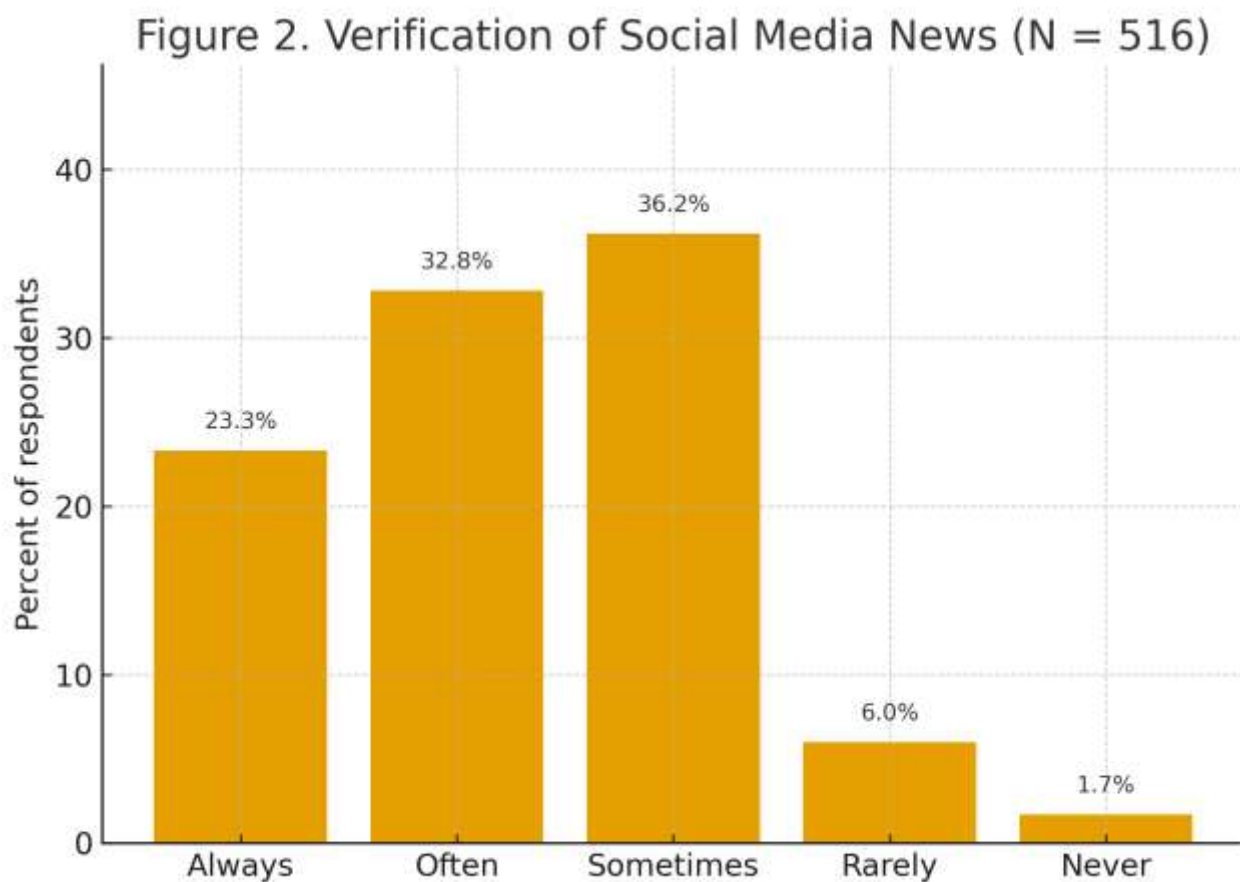
News websites and apps (such as dedicated news apps or official websites of news organisations) occupied a middle ground in trust. They were the #1 choice for 82 respondents (16%) and generally received high rankings from many others. This suggests that students differentiate between random news on their social feed and news from recognised digital news outlets – the latter enjoy relatively higher trust, perhaps seen as extensions of traditional news brands into the online space. Search engines (e.g., searching news via Google) and mobile feeds (like personalised news aggregators or notifications) were also seldom rated as most trusted (only 9% and 14% gave them rank 1, respectively). Their average trust rankings were around the middle (mean rank 3 out of 5 for both). Notably, traditional media not only had the highest number of first-rank votes but also the lowest number of last-rank votes – only 30 students (5.8%) rated traditional media as their least trusted (rank 5). By contrast, mobile feeds received the most “least trusted” votes (87 students, 17% ranked mobile feeds 5th), indicating that many are wary of the algorithm-driven news that pops up on their phones. Social media was close behind in attracting low-trust ratings.

In terms of aggregate rankings, traditional media emerged as the clear winner: over 55% of students ranked traditional sources among their top two in trust. The average rank for traditional media was 2.3 (on the 1–5 scale, where 1 is best). The next most trusted on average were news websites/apps (mean rank 2.8). Social media had the worst average trust ranking (mean 3.13, slightly higher – and thus worse – than others), and it was the only category where the majority of respondents placed it in the bottom half of their trust order. Figure 1 (above) essentially underscores these findings: *nearly half of students chose traditional media as their most trusted source*, whereas very few chose social media, with the rest distributed among digital but more “established” channels (news sites, etc.). These patterns confirm that trust in news is strongly related to source type. Even among a tech-savvy student population, mainstream media’s credibility legacy holds sway.

This result is consistent with the credibility gap observed in other studies. It resonates with Devi et al. (2025)’s finding that Indian youth rate traditional media’s trustworthiness much higher (60–80%) than social media’s (20%). Our data adds that within digital sources, *news websites/apps* are more trusted than social feeds or aggregated feeds – likely because news websites often carry the branding of known journalistic institutions. Social media, lacking those gatekeepers, has not earned the same level of trust from this demographic.

News Verification Behaviour

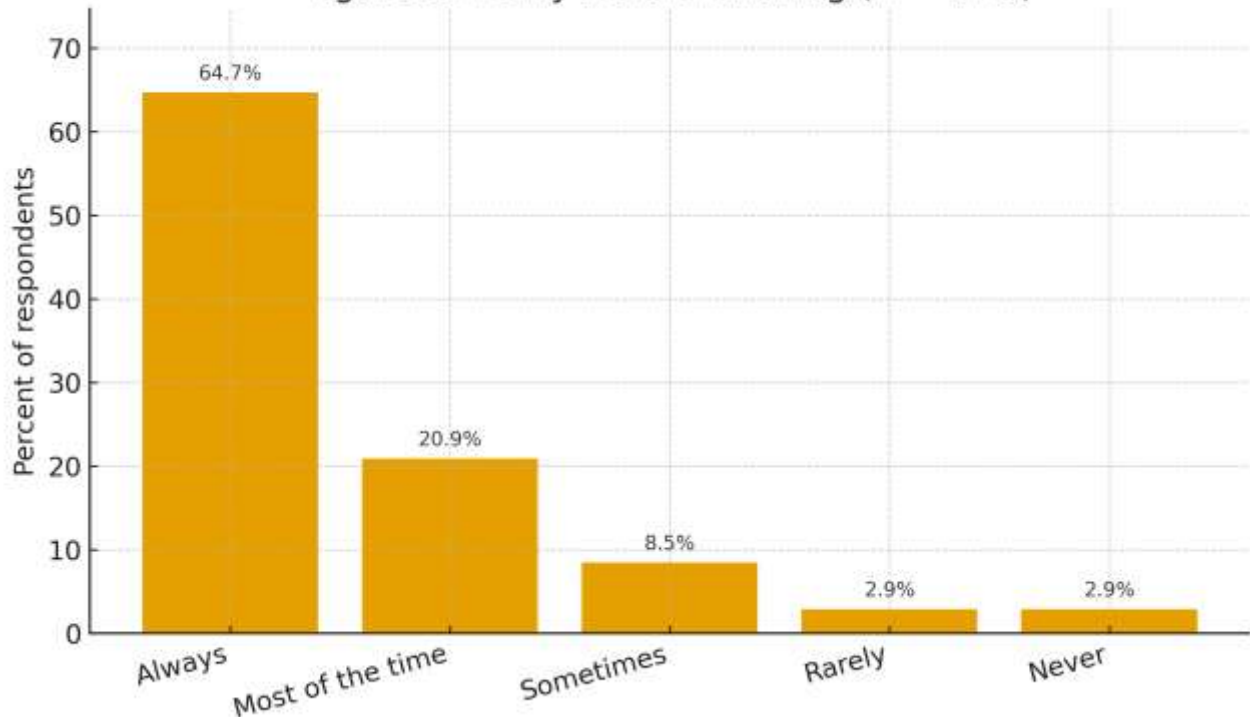
The survey also provides insight into how frequently students verify news content, especially content encountered on social platforms, and whether they fact-check before sharing news. The self-reported data suggest a relatively strong inclination toward verification among these students, though with some differences between general consumption and sharing scenarios.



When asked “*How often do you verify news you encounter on social media through other sources?*” (Figure 2), a majority of respondents claimed that they do this at least often or sometimes. Specifically, about 23% answered “Always”, 33% “Often”, and 36% “Sometimes”. In total, over 92% of students said they verify news they see on social media at least occasionally. Only a small minority admitted to doing this rarely or never (around 6% rarely and 2% never). This is an encouraging finding – it indicates a high level of awareness among these college students regarding the need to cross-check information from social media. More than half (approximately 56%) indicated they verify such news either *often or always*, which suggests that many have incorporated verification as a regular part of their news consumption process. For example, a student who sees a sensational headline on Facebook might search for the story on a credible news site or look for multiple sources before accepting it. These results align with the idea that recent emphasis on media literacy and fake news awareness may be yielding more vigilant news audiences. By comparison, remember that UNESCO’s global survey found a majority of content creators do not fact-check before sharing (2/3 of Digital Content Creators Do Not Check Their Facts Before, 2024) – in that context, our sample of students appears more careful than the average content creator online. It’s possible that being in an academic environment (and the specific phrasing of the survey, which might prime them to consider “should do”) contributed to higher self-reported verification. There may also be some degree of aspirational reporting – students know verifying is the *right* behaviour, so

they might overstate their frequency a bit. Nonetheless, even accounting for some bias, it's clear a large portion of these students actively try to verify news from social media.

Figure 3. Verify Before Sharing (N = 516)



The second verification-related question asked, *“Before sharing news, do you verify its authenticity?”* (Figure3) Here the responses skewed even more toward diligent behaviour. A striking 65% of respondents said they “always” verify news before sharing, and an additional 21% said “most of the time”. Thus, fully 86% claimed that, whenever they share news with others (e.g., reposting, forwarding an article, etc.), they usually or always ensure it’s authentic. Only a small fraction admitted to sharing without much fact-checking: about 8.5% said “Sometimes” (implying occasional verification), and roughly 3% “Rarely” or “Never” verify before sharing. This suggests that students are especially careful when it comes to passing news along to peers or on social media – more so than when they are personally reading/seeing news. It makes intuitive sense: one might passively consume some unverified news but feel a greater responsibility not to spread something inaccurate. Indeed, many social media users have adopted the personal rule of “don’t share unless you’ve verified” as a response to the misinformation problem. Our data indicates that such a norm may be common among these college students. In fact, the rate of *“Always verify before sharing”* (65%) is impressively high. If true in practice, this is a very positive sign for stemming misinformation, since user-forwarding is how false news often goes viral. It also matches qualitative accounts where students said they hesitate to share news without confirming it: e.g., one student noted, *“if something doesn’t feel right, I fact-check it...”* If nothing comes up for the information I searched, I typically abandon the topic entirely rather than share it (as quoted in Farnsworth, 2023). This level of caution suggests a developing sense of social responsibility in information sharing.

To visualise these verification trends, if we consider a simplified numeric scale (Always=5, Most=4, Sometimes=3, Rarely=2, Never=1), the mean response for verifying before sharing was very high (close to 4.6 out of 5, skewed toward “most of the time” to “always”), whereas the mean for verifying news encountered on social media was around 3.7 (between “sometimes” and “often”). In short, students are moderately vigilant with everyday news they consume and extremely vigilant with news they might share. This difference is statistically significant and highlights context: sharing adds pressure to be correct. It aligns with broader findings that intention to share is a motivator for verification – Majerczak

& Strzelecki (2022) found that people were more likely to verify if they planned to disseminate the information.

Lastly, we examined whether trust in news sources correlates with verification behaviour. One might hypothesise that students who *distrust* a source like social media might be *more* likely to fact-check content from it (or conversely, those who *trust* a source might fact-check less). To test this, we looked at the relationship between a student's trust ranking for social media and their frequency of verifying news. Interestingly, the data did not show a strong correlation between trust in social media and verification frequency. Students who rated social media as very low in trust were not significantly more likely to "always verify" than those who rated it slightly higher. In fact, verification behaviour was high across the board, regardless of trust ranking. This could imply that most students feel a need to verify social media news, even those who somewhat trust it, because they recognise the general unreliability of content on these platforms. It might also indicate that factors other than trust (such as awareness of fake news in general or simply good habits) are driving the widespread verification we observed. This result parallels earlier research by Lee (2011) which found no direct correlation between media trust and media use behaviour – trust alone didn't predict whether students used a source. In our case, trust alone didn't predict verification behaviour either; even those who somewhat trust social media still verify, and even those who distrust it sometimes don't verify *everything*. Thus, while trust and verification are related conceptually (low trust provides reason to verify), in practice verification appears to be a broadly adopted practice among these students rather than one confined to the most distrustful individuals.

Discussion

The findings above provide a nuanced snapshot of college students' attitudes and behaviours regarding news trust and verification in the digital age. Several themes and implications emerge:

1. Traditional media's credibility endures, even as digital use dominates. The strong preference for traditional outlets (TV, newspapers, etc.) as the most trusted sources confirms that established journalism brands and formats still hold a credibility advantage. This is remarkable given that most students in this survey likely consume far more news via smartphones and social media than via print or TV on a daily basis. It echoes the "*uses versus trust*" paradox highlighted in prior studies (Melro & Pereira, 2023; Lee, 2011). Students may scroll through Twitter or Instagram for convenience, but when asked directly, they acknowledge that those channels are less reliable than old-school news media. This could be due to perceived journalistic standards: traditional media are seen as having editorial oversight, fact-checkers, and accountability, whereas "news" on social feeds can come from anywhere (friends, influencers, partisan pages) with unknown credibility. For media studies scholars, this underlines an important point: increasing digital media consumption does not automatically equate to increased trust in those digital mediums. The trust gap we observed (e.g., only 6% picking social media as most trusted vs 41% for traditional) is substantial. It suggests that any notion that "young people don't trust mainstream media at all anymore" would be misleading – at least in this sample, mainstream media trust is alive and well. However, this coexists with heavy usage of platforms that students openly distrust, a phenomenon that merits further exploration. It may be driven by habit (social media as a default news source despite doubts) or by the fact that even within social media, students might be following reputable news organisations' accounts (thus somewhat mitigating the trust issue, as Dr. Haglin noted in Farnsworth, 2024: "*There are a lot of reputable media sources that are on social media*"). Future research could delve deeper into *what* exactly students are consuming on social media – is it random viral content or posts from the BBC and Times of India? The answer would affect how we interpret their trust responses. In any case, for practitioners, the implication is that legacy news brands should leverage their trust advantage while also meeting young audiences on the platforms they use. The fact that news websites/apps were the second-most trusted in our study indicates that extending the brand online retains some of the trust halo of traditional media.

2. Low trust in social media news highlights the need for media literacy and platform accountability. The high skepticism toward social media as a news source is both a positive sign (students are not naively believing everything on social platforms) and a concerning one (it reflects the prevalence of misinformation and bias on those platforms). Students clearly perceive social media as an

“information wild west” – full of content, not all of it trustworthy. While they enjoy the convenience, they know it must be navigated carefully. This underscores the importance of media literacy initiatives. Educational programs can reinforce these instincts, teaching students how to critically evaluate social media content, distinguish reputable sources, and be aware of echo chambers and algorithmic biases. The results also suggest that social media companies and news aggregators have more work to do to earn user trust. The fact that nearly 1 in 6 students put mobile feeds as least trusted and very few gave any digital platform a top trust rating indicates a credibility problem. Platforms might need to invest in features that signal content credibility (such as verification badges for news publishers, context labels, or more robust fact-check flags on dubious posts) to address users’ distrust. From a policy perspective, the data lends support to calls for greater transparency in social media content curation and stronger moderation of misinformation, as trust won’t improve until users see less false content circulating.

3. Encouraging signs of a verification culture taking root. One of the most heartening findings here is the high rate of self-reported verification among these college students. It suggests that the message “don’t blindly trust, verify!” has reached this demographic. A large majority are at least occasionally cross-checking the news they see on social media, and an even larger majority make a point to verify before they themselves share news. If these reports are accurate, it’s a very positive development – a culture of verification could significantly curtail the spread of misinformation. It aligns with other research that emphasises fake news awareness as key to combating misinformation (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). The students who are “always verifying” are essentially acting as their own fact-checkers, which is a learnt skill and mindset. This may be attributed partly to increasing awareness (news about misinformation crises, discussion in education, etc.) and possibly to them studying at the college level, where academic work requires checking sources. It’s also interesting that they are more careful about sharing; this indicates an ethical or reputational consideration – they don’t want to be someone who shares fake news. Social media norms among peer groups might be shifting such that sharing inaccurate information is seen as embarrassing or irresponsible, which is a good peer pressure to have.

The data is self-reported, so there could be overestimation of good behaviour. The *actual* rates of verification might be lower in practice (people might not always realise when they fail to verify). Nonetheless, even the perception and intent to verify is a step in the right direction. It would be beneficial to reinforce this behaviour. Universities and educators could build on this trend by integrating news literacy training into curricula, ensuring students have efficient fact-checking techniques at their disposal. Given that intention to share also motivates verification, another implication is that we might encourage people to “pause and check” before sharing by implementing brief friction (for instance, prompts on social media that ask users if they’ve read the article or verified it before resharing – some platforms have tested such features). Our findings back the idea that such prompts could resonate with users’ own values, since most *want* to be sure of authenticity before sharing.

4. Trust and verification operate somewhat independently. It was notable that even students who trusted social media relatively more weren’t complacent about verification, and even those who trusted it least sometimes still didn’t always verify *everything*. This suggests a complex relationship – verification behaviour might depend on other factors like the nature of the story, the time/effort required, or personal habits, rather than solely on an individual’s trust judgement of the medium. In media studies, this touches on the concept of heuristics vs. analytic processing. Some students might use a heuristic like “if it’s from source X, I trust it and won’t check further,” while others use the heuristic “if it’s on social media, doubt it.” But many appear to be applying a more uniform analytic approach: “*When in doubt, verify – regardless of source.*” The lack of correlation could mean that verifying news has become more of a general habit akin to “internet hygiene”. This is promising because it means even if one trusts a source, they might still verify just to be safe, providing an extra layer of defence. Conversely, the fact that not everyone who distrusts a medium verifies could indicate *verification fatigue* or that sometimes even sceptics let their guard down due to confirmation bias (if a story aligns with their pre-existing views, they might not verify it despite low trust in the medium overall). This nuance is worth further research. Perhaps targeted interviews or focus groups could reveal when students decide to verify and when they don’t. The findings here make clear that boosting verification behaviours is crucial across the board; trust in media is not a silver bullet – one can trust and still be misled if not careful or distrust and still fall for

something that slips through. Hence, fostering critical thinking and a verify-before-trust mindset remains vital.

5. Contextualising in the Indian media environment. It's useful to interpret these results within India's media context. India has a vibrant but sometimes polarised news environment, with a mix of highly respected traditional outlets and a deluge of online content (including misinformation on WhatsApp and other social networks). The students' high trust in traditional media possibly reflects trust in renowned national news organisations and regional newspapers that have longstanding reputations. The relatively low trust in social media likely connects to high-profile incidents of fake news in India (for example, misinformation spread via WhatsApp causing rumours or panic, which has been a documented issue). It appears students are cognisant of those dangers. Their proactive verification could be a reaction to living in an "infodemic" – frequent exposure to dubious claims (especially during events like elections or the COVID-19 pandemic) might have taught them to not take things at face value. In that sense, India's challenges with fake news may be inadvertently training a more sceptical generation of news consumers.

Our results thus contribute an optimistic note to the narrative: despite being digital natives in a misinformation-rich environment, many college students are responding by doubling down on credibility – trusting the more reliable sources and personally verifying what they see online. For media in India, this is an opportunity and a challenge: *an opportunity* because it means there is an audience that still values truth and will gravitate towards outlets seen as credible, and a *challenge* because retaining that trust requires consistent accuracy and transparency, and because large segments of the population (outside this college sample) may not be as vigilant. For policymakers and civil society, these insights reinforce the need to support fact-checking initiatives and perhaps incorporate media literacy in higher education on a wider scale.

Conclusion

This study focused on trust in news sources and news verification behaviour among college students in West Bengal, shedding light on how young, educated Indians navigate today's complex news environment. The findings reveal a clear hierarchy of trust: traditional media (print, TV, radio) remain the most trusted sources of news for these students, far outranking social media, which was widely viewed as the least credible source. Digital news websites and apps earned moderate trust, standing in between legacy media and social platforms. These patterns highlight a persistent credibility gap between established journalistic outlets and newer online-only channels, even as the latter dominate everyday news feeds.

The research also shows that a strong verification ethos is taking root among the respondents. Most students reported that they frequently verify news they encounter on social media, and an even larger majority check authenticity before sharing news with others. This suggests that awareness of misinformation is high, and many young adults are actively attempting to counter it by being sceptical and doing their own fact-checking. Such behaviour is crucial in the fight against the spread of fake news – if more users routinely verified information, falsehoods would have a harder time going viral. Our data indicates that, at least within this educated group, the message of "verify before you trust" is being internalised.

It is important to note some limitations. The survey relied on self-reported behaviour, which may be influenced by social desirability (students might overstate good practices like verification). The sample, while sizeable (N=516), was not randomly selected and is confined to college students in one region, so results should not be generalised to all Indian youth without caution. Despite these caveats, the trends observed align with those found in other studies internationally, suggesting they tap into broader phenomena in youth news consumption.

Implications for media stakeholders are evident. For news organisations, the continued high trust in traditional media is an asset – it means they have a strong foundation of credibility with young audiences to build upon. The challenge is to maintain that trust while engaging youths on digital platforms. Efforts to strengthen the presence of trustworthy news in social media spaces could help, whether through

collaborations between tech firms and reputable publishers or improved credibility indicators on platforms. For educators and policymakers, the results underscore the value of media literacy education. The relatively high verification rates in this student sample might be bolstered by their educational environment; expanding such training (e.g., teaching how to spot misinformation and how to cross-verify news quickly) could further empower the next generation of news consumers.

College students in this study exhibit a healthy scepticism towards where their news comes from and a proactive approach to verifying information. They trust but verify – placing trust in sources with a track record of reliability and verifying the news that comes from less reliable channels. In an era when misinformation can travel instantaneously across the globe, these qualities are not just advantageous but essential. Fostering and spreading these habits will be key to ensuring an informed public. As the saying goes, “*In God we trust. All others must bring data*” by W. Edwards Deming, today’s students seem to have adapted this wisdom to their news habits: trust in credible media, but verify the news, especially on social media. This balanced approach may well be the antidote to the challenges of the digital news age.

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