Examining the Media Consumption Patterns of Iranian Users in Cyberspace: A Media Communication Management Approach

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<u>**Abstract**</u>

This study aims to investigate the relationship between users' trust in media, digital infrastructure, demographic characteristics, and media consumption patterns among Iranian users over the age of 15. A quantitative and correlational research design was used to examine the relationships between multiple variables simultaneously. The statistical population included Iranian users aged 15 and above with access to cyberspace. Using Cochran's formula, a sample of 384 participants was selected through multi-stage cluster sampling. Data were collected via a researcher-made questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The validity of the instrument was confirmed by experts, and its reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$). Variables measured included demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, residence), media consumption motives (information-seeking, entertainment, social interaction), trust in media (domestic and foreign), frequency of media use (official, domestic social, foreign social), and digital infrastructure (internet access, smart devices). The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between trust in domestic media and its consumption (Gamma = 0.42, $p < 0.001$). A one-way ANOVA showed that higher levels of digital infrastructure were associated with greater virtual media consumption (F = 6.52, p = 0.002). Chi-square tests indicated significant differences in media consumption based on age ($X^2 = 18.73$, p = 0.001), gender ($X^2 = 5.54$, p = 0.003), and education ($X^2 = 21.65$, $p < 0.001$). Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that all three motives—information ($\beta = 0.34$), social interaction ($\beta = 0.26$), and entertainment ($\beta = 0.18$)—significantly predicted the type of media used by respondents ($p < 0.005$ for all). The study confirms that trust in media, digital access, demographic factors, and motivational drivers all play critical roles in shaping users' media consumption behaviors in the digital landscape of Iran.

Keywords: Media trust, digital infrastructure, media consumption, demographic differences, media motives, Iran

1. Introduction

In the digital era, media consumption has undergone substantial transformation, especially in societies where digital infrastructure is expanding and socio-political limitations shape user behavior. Iran presents a unique context for examining media consumption due to its complex interaction between traditional media institutions, emergent digital platforms, and users' behavioral shifts in cyberspace. The emergence of new communication technologies, social media platforms, and virtual engagement mechanisms has not only expanded the access to media content but also introduced new patterns of media selection, trust evaluation, and purpose-driven consumption (Ahmed & Zia, 2022). This study aims to explore the media consumption

patterns of Iranian users in cyberspace, emphasizing the role of digital infrastructure, trust in media, demographic characteristics, and motivational factors within the framework of media communication management.

In recent years, the Uses and Gratification Theory has provided a valuable lens to investigate how users actively select and use media to fulfill specific needs—informational, social, or entertainment-related. This theoretical framework helps contextualize how Iranian users interact with both domestic and international media platforms (Ahmed & Zia, 2022).

Moreover, trust plays a pivotal role in determining the frequency and type of media consumed. As shown in the work of Hosseini and Moeini, Iranian users exhibit stratified trust toward different media types, often favoring international platforms over state-run channels due to perceptions of bias and censorship (Hosseini & Moeini, 2022).

Social media, in particular, has become a critical platform for interaction, content creation, and identity construction in Iran. According to Koohikamali et al., Iranian users engage with social platforms not merely for entertainment but as a space for strategic disclosure and digital participation shaped by socio-political realities (Koohikamali et al., 2024). This is further echoed by Mirghaderi, who discusses how user engagement on social platforms often translates into unpaid labor, especially in influencer-driven economies (Mirghaderi, 2021). In a follow-up study, she highlights the ethical dilemmas and labor exploitation faced by social media users who perform digital work under algorithmic pressures and monetization incentives (Mirghaderi, 2022). These dynamics complicate the traditional dichotomy of producer and consumer in the media space, blurring boundaries through participatory cultures and platform capitalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital migration and reshaped user interaction with media. Hamza et al. argue that shifts in media consumption in Pakistan before, during, and after the pandemic mirror broader behavioral transformations that are equally applicable to neighboring Iran, where lockdowns and physical distancing measures reinforced virtual dependency (Hamza et al., 2025). In Iran, the digital sphere has become a parallel civic arena where users, particularly youth, explore issues related to identity, rights, and cultural norms (Tabatabaei et al., 2025). The digital native population, as discussed by Tabatabaei et al., engages with social media in a way that reflects both cultural values and aspirations for digital citizenship, often navigating between localized norms and global discourses (Tabatabaei et al., 2025).

Motivational factors behind media consumption—such as information-seeking, entertainment, and social interaction—remain central to understanding how and why users engage with particular platforms. Sundarsih and Sudiarti argue that youth behavior in digital spaces is primarily driven by the desire for connectivity and personal expression, and less so by traditional institutional messaging (Sundarsih & Sudiarti, 2023). These motives are reflected in the Iranian context, where limited public spheres push users toward social media for interactive and alternative discourse. Beenu's research on adolescents' social media use further reveals how motivations vary by age, gender, and socio-economic status, leading to diversified platform preferences and interaction styles (Beenu, 2023).

The relationship between digital infrastructure and media consumption is another crucial dimension. As Moradi shows in her study of visual and emotional media in Iranian Kurdistan, users' access to smartphones and broadband significantly influences their level of participation and the kind of content they interact with (Moradi, 2024). Infrastructure not only determines access but also influences the depth of engagement and the capacity to create or curate content. Noorymotlagh forecasts that this trend will continue as digital marketing becomes more specialized, user-centered, and reliant on advanced data analytics in Iran (Noorymotlagh, 2023). These technological advancements are reshaping not only consumption but also the expectations users have from media platforms in terms of customization, privacy, and credibility.

Another important but often overlooked aspect of media consumption is its environmental impact. Naeem et al., in two separate but related studies, analyze the digital carbon footprint of various social media platforms and find that users are largely unaware of their environmental impact, despite being heavy digital consumers (Naeem et al., 2023a, 2023b). This insight introduces a new layer of ethical consideration in media usage, especially as Iran continues to expand its digital infrastructure without concurrent environmental awareness campaigns.

In addition to technological and motivational variables, demographic characteristics play a key role in shaping media behavior. As shown by Irum et al., variables such as age, gender, and education significantly influence not only media platform selection but also levels of civic engagement and digital activism (Irum et al., 2025). These findings align with those of Ali et

al., who note that library user satisfaction in digital settings also varies significantly by demographic group, reinforcing the idea that user expectations are highly individualized and context-sensitive (Ali et al., 2021).

The social and political functions of media in Iran are also worthy of attention. Navarro and Peres-Neto, in their analysis of the "Hair for Freedom" movement, demonstrate how Iranian users have employed social media platforms for interreligious and political activism, often leveraging digital spaces for collective identity formation and resistance narratives (Navarro & Peres-Neto, 2023). This underlines the importance of social media as more than a tool for communication—it is a medium of empowerment and ideological contestation.

The multidimensionality of media consumption becomes even more evident when examining specific cases such as tourism and service industries. Balouchi and Khanmohammadi use fuzzy logic to assess tourist preferences for different media platforms and highlight that trust, convenience, and content relevance are critical in shaping user decisions (Balouchi & Khanmohammadi, 2015). This approach can be extended to a broader analysis of user media behavior across sectors in Iran, especially as the country's digital ecosystem becomes increasingly commercialized.

Finally, mental health implications of social media use have become a significant concern in recent years. Abu et al. investigate the psychological impact of prolonged social media engagement among Malaysian university students and find correlations between media intensity and stress, depression, and anxiety (Abu et al., 2025). Similar concerns can be extrapolated to the Iranian context, where socio-political tension, economic instability, and restricted civic spaces may compound the psychological burden of digital engagement.

In sum, the study of Iranian users' media consumption patterns must be contextualized within a broader framework that integrates infrastructure access, trust in media, motivational dynamics, and demographic diversity. Digital spaces in Iran are not merely platforms for content consumption; they are arenas of expression, contestation, labor, and identity. By synthesizing insights from Iranian and international studies, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how users navigate media in constrained yet digitally vibrant environments.

2. Methods and Materials

The research method is quantitative and based on correlational analysis. This method allows for the simultaneous analysis of multiple variables and testing of causal relationships. The statistical population consisted of Iranian users over the age of 15 with access to cyberspace. The sample size was determined to be 384 individuals using Cochran's formula. Sampling was conducted using a multi-stage cluster sampling method. Data were collected through a researcher-made questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The validity of the instrument was confirmed by expert judgment, and its reliability was approved with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient (overall alpha = 0.87).

The variables under investigation included:

Demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, place of residence)

Media consumption motives (information, entertainment, social interaction)

Level of trust in media (domestic and foreign)

Extent of media usage (official media, domestic and foreign social networks)

Digital infrastructure (internet access, smart devices)

Table 1. Distribution of gender, age, and place of residence

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	200	52%
	Female	184	48%
Age	15–24 years	150	39%
	25–34 years	134	35%
	Over 35 years	100	26%
Place of residence	Urban	270	70%
	Rural	114	30%

3. Findings and Results

This section first examines the descriptive statistics of the research variables and then proceeds to inferential analysis.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Educational Levels

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Below high school diploma	125	32.7	32.7	32.7
High school diploma	114	29.7	29.7	62.4
Bachelor's degree	69	18.0	18.0	80.4
Master's degree and above	36	9.4	9.4	89.8
No response/Unspecified	40	10.4	—	100

This table shows that the highest percentage of respondents had educational attainment below high school diploma (32.7%) and high school diploma (29.7%). About 18% held a bachelor's degree, and approximately 9.4% had a master's degree or higher. Additionally, around 10.4% of the respondents did not answer the question or their educational information was unspecified.

The level of television network consumption ranked first, followed by radio, newspapers, and domestic messaging platforms.

Table 3. Valid Percentages of Respondents' Domestic Media Consumption

Type of Media	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Almost Always (%)	Total (N)
Islamic Republic of Iran TV networks	10.2	21.9	31.3	36.7	384
Radio networks	45.6	23.1	22.2	9.1	384
Newspapers	71.0	15.0	11.2	2.8	384
Domestic messaging apps	81.2	4.2	10.4	4.2	384

This table indicates that the highest rate of domestic media consumption pertains to the Islamic Republic of Iran TV networks, with approximately 36.7% of respondents stating that they "almost always" use them. This is followed by radio, newspapers, and domestic messaging apps, in descending order of consumption. Notably, over 81% of respondents reported that they never use domestic messaging platforms.

According to the table, satellite TV networks ranked first in terms of overall consumption, followed by Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

Table 4. Valid Percentages of Respondents' Foreign Media Consumption

Type of Media	Never (N)	Never (%)	Rarely (N)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (N)	Sometimes (%)	Almost Always (N)	Almost Always (%)
Satellite TV	208	54.1	66	17.2	59	15.4	51	13.3
Telegram	133	34.6	46	12.0	127	33.0	78	20.3
WhatsApp	181	47.0	54	14.0	83	21.6	66	17.4
Instagram	134	34.8	52	13.5	107	27.8	91	23.9

The table above shows the foreign media consumption patterns among the 384 respondents participating in the study. As observed, the level of foreign media use varies among Iranian users, with each platform occupying a different share of usage.

Satellite TV networks have the highest rate of non-usage; 54.1% of respondents stated that they never use these media. Only 13.3% reported that they "almost always" use satellite channels, indicating their relatively lower popularity compared to other foreign media.

In contrast, social networks such as Instagram and Telegram have a significantly stronger presence. Specifically, 23.9% of respondents stated that they "almost always" use Instagram, and 20.3% reported similar usage levels for Telegram. This highlights the prominent role of social media in Iran's digital landscape.

WhatsApp, with 17.4% of respondents indicating "almost always" usage, ranks third, suggesting its substantial application among users.

In summary, it can be concluded that among foreign media, digital platforms and social networks dominate consumption, whereas traditional media such as satellite television have comparatively lower popularity.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant positive relationship between users' trust in the media and their level of domestic media consumption.

Table 5. Spearman's or Gamma Correlation Coefficient

Trust in Media	Gamma Correlation Coefficient	Statistical Significance (p)	Result
Low to High	0.42	0.000	Significant

An increase in users' trust in domestic media is directly associated with an increase in their consumption of these media.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between the level of digital infrastructure (internet and smartphone access) and the extent of virtual media consumption.

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA

Digital Infrastructure Group	Average Virtual Media Use	F	Significance (p)
Low	2.1		
Medium	3.4	6.52	0.002
High	4.6		

Users with better access to digital tools exhibit higher levels of virtual media consumption.

Table 7. Relationship Between Digital Infrastructure and Virtual Media Use

Digital Infrastructure Level	Average Media Use
Low	2.1
Medium	3.4
High	4.6

Hypothesis 3: There are significant differences in media consumption types based on demographic characteristics (age, gender, education).

Table 8. Chi-Square Test for Comparison Among Age, Gender, and Educational Groups in Media Type Usage

Demographic Variable	Chi-Square Value (X^2)	Degrees of Freedom	Significance Level
Age	18.73	4	0.001
Gender	5.54	1	0.003
Education	21.65	2	0.000

There are significant differences in users' media type preferences based on age, education, and gender.

Hypothesis 4: Media consumption motives (information-seeking, social interaction, entertainment) influence the type of media selected.

Table 9. Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient	t Value	Significance Level (p)
Information Motive	0.34	4.2	0.000
Social Interaction Motive	0.26	3.5	0.001
Entertainment Motive	0.18	2.8	0.005

All three types of motives are significant predictors of users' media selection.
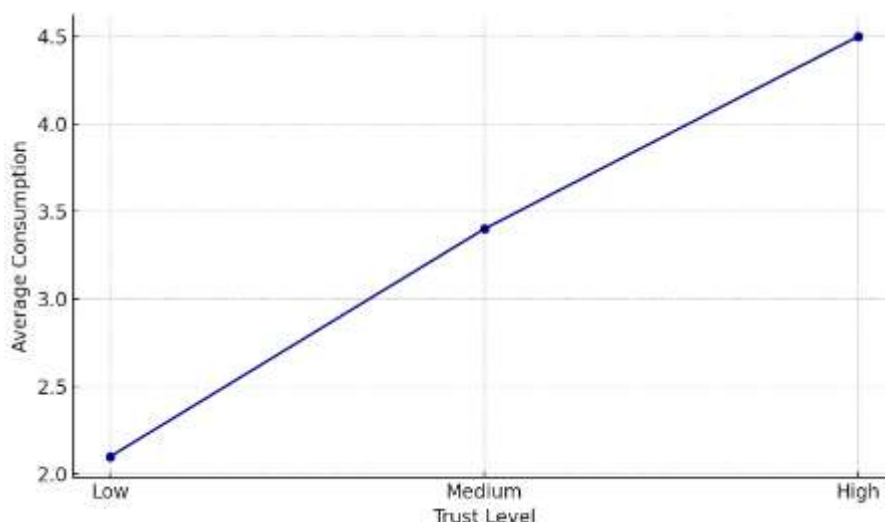
Figure 1: Trust Levels in Media and Average Domestic Media Consumption

Trust Level: Low, Medium, High
Average Consumption: Based on a Likert scale score from 1 to 5

The higher the users' level of trust in domestic media, the higher their media consumption levels.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the patterns of media consumption among Iranian users in cyberspace, focusing on the relationships between trust in media, digital infrastructure, demographic characteristics, and motivational factors. The results confirmed that all four hypothesized relationships were statistically significant, offering a comprehensive understanding of how structural and psychological variables influence digital behavior in Iran. This section discusses each of the key findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, providing a deeper interpretation of the results.

The first hypothesis examined the relationship between users' trust in media and their level of domestic media consumption. The findings indicated a statistically significant and positive correlation, suggesting that users who demonstrate higher levels of trust in media are more likely to engage with domestic media sources. This aligns with the work of Hosseini and Moeini, who emphasized that the perceived credibility of media content strongly influences usage frequency among Iranian audiences (Hosseini & Moeini, 2022). Trust acts as a cognitive filter through which users evaluate the reliability of media messages, and this trust is largely shaped by past experiences, perceived bias, and political alignment. In societies like Iran, where state-controlled media often dominates the public sphere, building and maintaining user trust becomes a key determinant of continued media engagement. Moreover, this relationship can be interpreted through the lens of the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that users selectively engage with media that aligns with their expectations and trust thresholds (Ahmed & Zia, 2022).

The second hypothesis assessed whether there is a significant relationship between digital infrastructure and virtual media consumption. The ANOVA results revealed that users with higher access to digital tools—such as smartphones and high-speed internet—demonstrated significantly higher media usage. This finding corresponds with the conclusions drawn by Moradi, who highlighted that infrastructural availability in regions such as Iranian Kurdistan shapes the affective and visual experiences of digital users (Moradi, 2024). Similarly, Koohikamali et al. noted that users with better infrastructure are more likely to engage in active disclosure and interaction on digital platforms (Koohikamali et al., 2024). As the digital divide narrows with technological diffusion, usage patterns are increasingly dictated by levels of access, digital literacy, and platform availability. This also validates Noorymotlagh's forecast that specialized digital marketing in Iran will continue to grow in sophistication as infrastructural capacities improve (Noorymotlagh, 2023). The implications are clear: without equitable infrastructure development, digital participation will remain uneven across socio-economic and geographic boundaries.

The third hypothesis explored whether demographic characteristics—age, gender, and education—are significantly associated with different types of media consumption. The chi-square analysis confirmed that all three demographic variables

had statistically significant associations with media preference. These findings are consistent with the literature. For example, Beenu's research on adolescent users revealed that younger individuals prefer platforms that prioritize interactivity and multimedia content, whereas older demographics may lean toward more traditional sources (Beenu, 2023). Irum et al. also found that demographic characteristics influence not only platform selection but also the depth of civic engagement users exhibit through digital tools (Irum et al., 2025). Additionally, gender dynamics in Iran, as discussed by Koohikamali et al., shape disclosure practices and media engagement patterns, with female users often adopting more cautious strategies in public digital spaces due to cultural and security constraints (Koohikamali et al., 2024). Education level, likewise, affects media literacy and critical thinking, leading to more discerning consumption among more educated users. Thus, demographic segmentation remains vital for understanding the nuances of digital engagement in Iran.

The fourth hypothesis focused on motivational variables—specifically information-seeking, entertainment, and social interaction—and their impact on the choice of media. The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that all three motives were significant predictors of media preference. These findings reinforce the applicability of the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that users are active agents in media selection based on personal and social needs (Ahmed & Zia, 2022). Sundarsih and Sudiarti noted that in the digital age, especially among youth, the primary motives for media use are emotional regulation, social validation, and instant connectivity (Sundarsih & Sudiarti, 2023). Similarly, Abu et al. emphasized that university students who spend significant time on social media for entertainment and interaction are also at greater risk of psychological stress, underscoring the dual nature of media motives—both fulfilling and potentially harmful (Abu et al., 2025). The motivational diversity also resonates with findings by Hamza et al., who observed shifts in media motives across different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that external contexts influence internal media-related goals (Hamza et al., 2025).

In addition to these four main hypotheses, the study's descriptive findings offered valuable insights into actual user behavior. The data showed a higher preference for international platforms like Instagram and Telegram over domestic ones, with domestic messaging apps experiencing minimal engagement. This aligns with the conclusions of Mirghaderi, who asserted that Iranian users often view global platforms as more trustworthy and liberating compared to state-monitored domestic alternatives (Mirghaderi, 2022). The same study also explored how users contribute labor through their interaction with these platforms, often without compensation, thereby complicating the economic and ethical dynamics of digital participation. Moreover, the sociopolitical relevance of media was emphasized in the study by Navarro and Peres-Neto, which illustrated how social media movements such as "Hair for Freedom" in Iran serve as platforms for activism, transcending mere consumption and entering the realm of resistance and identity politics (Navarro & Peres-Neto, 2023).

This study also resonates with broader environmental concerns raised in recent literature. Naeem et al. explored how different platforms contribute to users' digital carbon footprints and discovered widespread lack of awareness, particularly in developing regions (Naeem et al., 2023a, 2023b). While this dimension was not directly measured in the current study, the growing importance of sustainable digital behavior suggests that future research should account for ecological awareness as a factor influencing media consumption.

Finally, the strategic use of social media for targeted outcomes, such as self-promotion or digital marketing, is increasing. Balouchi and Khanmohammadi demonstrated that platform selection among tourists is largely based on trust, utility, and relevance—factors that equally apply to everyday users in Iran (Balouchi & Khanmohammadi, 2015). In professional and commercial spheres, users increasingly rely on algorithmic insights, audience analytics, and engagement rates to make decisions about where and how to publish content. These behaviors highlight the merging of personal and professional media use, a trend that is growing among Iranian influencers and content creators.

While this study offers valuable insights into media consumption patterns among Iranian users, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported data through a structured questionnaire may introduce response bias, particularly regarding sensitive issues like media trust and platform preference. Second, the study's sample, though diverse, may not fully capture regional disparities in digital access and literacy across rural and underserved provinces. Third, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe longitudinal changes in media behavior, especially in response to political or

technological shifts. Finally, due to constraints in questionnaire length, certain dimensions—such as emotional impact, cognitive overload, or digital well-being—were not explored.

Future research should consider longitudinal or panel studies to examine how media consumption evolves over time in response to contextual changes such as political events, internet regulations, or global crises. Additionally, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups could provide richer data on the emotional and cognitive experiences of users, particularly those in marginalized or underrepresented communities. Expanding the scope to include metrics such as ecological awareness, misinformation sensitivity, or digital fatigue could also yield deeper insights into sustainable and healthy digital engagement. Lastly, comparative studies between Iranian users and those from neighboring countries with similar socio-political dynamics would be valuable.

Policy-makers, media managers, and platform developers should consider strategies to build and restore trust in domestic media through transparency, user engagement, and content diversification. Investment in digital infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas, should be prioritized to bridge participation gaps. Educational programs that promote digital literacy, critical media consumption, and platform accountability are essential for empowering users to make informed choices. Finally, local content creators and influencers should be supported through ethical monetization models that value their labor and encourage responsible content dissemination in alignment with cultural and social norms.

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