



Digital News Exposure and Youths' Perceptions of Mainstream Media Credibility in Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined digital news consumption and how youths in Jalingo Metropolis, Taraba State, Nigeria reconfigure their trust in mainstream media. Guided by Media Trust Theory, it used a qualitative descriptive design and conducted 20 Key Informant Interviews and four Focus Group Discussions with digitally active youths from January to April 2026. Data were analysed thematically and textually. The study found that digital news exposure is part of youths' everyday media practices. This happens through intentional searches, incidental encounters, peer circulation, and routine engagement across Facebook, WhatsApp, X, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and digital newspapers. Digital platforms are recognized for their speed, accessibility, and responsiveness. In contrast, mainstream media offer strengths in verification, accuracy, professionalism, comprehensive reporting, and institutional accountability. However, political influence, selective reporting, and delayed coverage generate scepticism. The study concludes that digitalisation has reconfigured rather than displaced trust in mainstream media, producing a conditional, function-specific, comparative, and dynamically negotiated pattern of confidence.

Keywords: digital news exposure, mainstream media, media trust, youth, Jalingo metropolis, Nigeria

Introduction

Digital technology has rapidly transformed how young people access, interpret, and evaluate news. The proliferation of smartphones, affordable internet, and social media has enabled news consumption on platforms characterised by speed, personalisation, and user interaction (Westlund, 2015; Gomba, Nsereka, & Itieke-Idamieba, 2025). Platforms such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, blogs, and digital newspapers now serve as primary sources of political, social, and public information for youths (Mann, 2026; Battocchio et al., 2023). In Nigeria, young people prefer digital platforms for their speed, convenience, accessibility, and up-to-date content (Ayobolu, 2024; Umeh, Ihejirika, & Ihechu, 2025). The central research question concerns how increased exposure to digital news influences trust in mainstream media. This relationship remains ambiguous, as digital exposure may weaken, strengthen, or alter media trust.

Exposure to news from multiple sources enables young people to compare narratives, identify discrepancies, and develop increased scepticism toward mainstream news. Conversely, encountering misinformation, fake news, and political bias online may prompt greater reliance on mainstream media for fact-checking (Murillo, 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). Digital exposure can also foster conditional trust, whereby individuals rely on mainstream media for certain topics while also considering social media, alternative digital sources, and personal networks. The central issue is determining when digital news exposure weakens, strengthens, or alters trust in mainstream media.

Understanding this relationship requires distinguishing between digital news exposure, media credibility, and media trust. Digital news exposure refers to how often and how much



individuals encounter news on digital platforms. Media credibility refers to the perceived accuracy, reliability, fairness, professionalism, and believability of news content. Media trust concerns individuals' willingness to rely on news organisations and their reporting. Increased exposure to digital news does not necessarily increase or decrease trust. Encounters with professional journalism, user-generated content, political messaging, misinformation, and fake news can influence how young people evaluate mainstream media (Azeez et al., 2026; Bosah, 2018).

In Nigeria, mainstream media maintain advantages such as professional standards, editorial oversight, established routines, and regulatory frameworks (Akinfemisoye, 2014; Akinfemisoye, 2013). Nevertheless, factors including political influence, selective reporting, delayed news delivery, and editorial control can erode trust among young audiences (Katu, 2016; Obun-Andy, Aluko, & Olajuwon, 2025). Digital news does not simply supplant traditional media; rather, young people engage with both digital and mainstream sources, evaluating each for credibility and trustworthiness based on topic, source, and perceived reliability (Ahlers, 2006). This tension is particularly relevant to Jalingo, where social media and digital news portals offer real-time updates, political opinions, and discussions about local and national topics (Asaju & Munya, 2024; Benjamin, 2025). Mainstream media remain part of the information landscape because of their established journalistic and editorial systems (Akinfemisoye, 2014). Having both types of sources lets young people compare stories, judge credibility, and decide if mainstream news deserves their trust. Research shows digital platforms have not simply replaced traditional media (Benjamin, 2025; Apuke & Omar, 2020).

Despite changing reliance on mainstream journalism (Oladokun et al., 2026; Ogbodo et al., 2026; Success & Maiwada, 2026), limited attention has been given to how digital news exposure shapes different forms of media trust among youths. Existing studies do not fully explain whether digital exposure produces scepticism, encourages verification through mainstream outlets, or generates more selective and conditional trust. Marchi (2012) and Umeh, Ihejirika, and Ihechu (2025) show that preference for digital platforms does not establish whether youths reject mainstream media, continue to rely on them, or move strategically between sources. The unresolved issue is how digital exposure reorganises the evaluative processes through which youths judge mainstream media as credible, reliable, and trustworthy.

Against this background, the present study investigates digital news exposure and trust in mainstream media among youths in Jalingo. It identifies the digital news sources youths use, assesses their perceptions of mainstream media trust, and explores the relationship between digital exposure and trust. Rather than assuming a single outcome, the study examines whether digital news exposure diminishes trust, reinforces trust through fact-checking, or leads to more selective and conditional judgments about different news sources.

Review of Related Literature

Digital Transformation and Changing Patterns of Youth News Exposure

The expansion of digital technologies has transformed youth news consumption through smartphones, affordable internet, social media, and digital journalism, creating a continuous, interactive, personalised, and participatory information environment (Pavlik, 2024). Nigerian media organisations have consequently expanded their digital platforms, while digital media have decentralised information production and challenged mainstream media's traditional gatekeeping role (Apejoye & Mutsvairo, 2024; Suntai & Targema, 2017).



Digital news exposure includes both intentional and incidental encounters, as algorithms increasingly integrate news into everyday online activities (Barnidge, 2023). Nigerian youths encounter political information deliberately and accidentally on platforms such as Facebook, demonstrating the combined influence of audience agency and platform architecture (Akerele & Azeez, 2026; Umoh, 2025). Frequent exposure, however, does not necessarily indicate deliberate engagement or acceptance.

In Nigeria, expanding internet access, smartphone ownership, and digital literacy have increased youths' access to diverse news sources (Agbeyangi, Makinde, & Odun-Ayo, 2024). Over 70 per cent reportedly obtain breaking news primarily through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X, attracted by immediacy, multimedia content, and participation (Okocha & Chigbo, 2024; Casero-Podara et al., 2019). In Jalingo, social media facilitate rapid information sharing and public engagement (Asicus, 2026; Apuke, Ugondo, & Lingbuin, 2025), while internet access and exposure to digital news are associated with political awareness and participation (Mande et al., 2025). However, existing studies do not establish whether increased digital exposure changes perceptions of mainstream media.

Digital News, Mainstream Media, and the Reconfiguration of News Authority

Digital news has fundamentally altered the authority traditionally associated with mainstream media. Radio, television, and newspapers derive legitimacy from professional journalism, editorial gatekeeping, institutional accountability, ethical standards, and verification procedures (Oso, 2013; Yusnaini et al., 2025). In contrast, digital platforms decentralise information production by enabling citizens to produce, circulate, and contest news beyond conventional editorial structures (Suntai & Targema, 2017; Chioma, 2024). However, this development is a reconfiguration rather than a complete displacement of mainstream media authority. The rapid spread of information via social media has compelled journalists to adapt newsroom routines. Mainstream media remain significant during elections, emergencies, and major public events because of their association with verification and institutional responsibility (Benjamin, 2025; Odunlami & Banjo, 2025). Nigerian audiences also continue to access digital editions of established newspapers, valuing their comprehensiveness and credibility (Apuke & Omar, 2020). This pattern is evident in Taraba State, where youths increasingly obtain news through digital platforms but still consult mainstream media to verify sensitive information (Gana, Ekharefo, & Asemah, 2025; Isa, Asicus, & Obong, 2025). In Jalingo, high social media engagement coexists with ongoing use of conventional media (Asicus, 2026; Benjamin, 2025). News authority is now distributed across interconnected platforms rather than fully transferred from mainstream to digital media. The unresolved issue is how this reconfiguration influences youths' trust in mainstream media.

Media Credibility and the Construction of Trust in a Hybrid Media Environment

Understanding trust requires distinguishing digital news exposure, media credibility, and media trust. Digital news exposure concerns how often and through what means individuals encounter digital news. Media credibility concerns perceived accuracy, objectivity, consistency, and professional competence (Gil et al., 2025). Media trust is broader, referring to confidence in news organisations' reliability, fairness, accuracy, transparency, and professional responsibility (Paliszkiewicz & Gołuchowski, 2025; Fawzi & Steindl, 2026). Thus, frequent digital exposure does not necessarily imply acceptance, just as general distrust of mainstream media does not preclude their use for verification. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) argue that credibility



increasingly depends on audiences' comparative evaluations rather than institutional status alone. Ayih et al. (2026) found that youths in Taraba may perceive mainstream media as politically selective while still using them for verification, while Apuke and Omar (2020) show continued valuation of established newspapers through digital editions. Mainstream media therefore retain credibility in particular informational contexts even where general confidence may decline.

The hybrid media environment also produces competing sources of scepticism. Digital platforms facilitate the spread of fake news and unverified citizen-generated content (Morgan, 2018; Ahmad, Abdulrauf & Joseph, 2024). Perceived political bias, ownership influence, sensationalism, and limited editorial independence may undermine confidence in mainstream media (Odunlami & Banjo, 2025). The unresolved question is whether exposure to these sources weakens trust in mainstream media or reinforces their value as institutions for verification.

Youth Media Practices and the Digital-Mainstream Media Nexus

Youth media practices increasingly reflect a hybrid information environment where young audiences move between digital and mainstream media according to their informational needs. Digital platforms offer speed, accessibility, interactivity, multimedia content, and personalisation. Youths may still rely on mainstream media for verification, depth, and institutional authority (Wee, 2017; Peters et al., 2022). Nigerian studies similarly show that youths value internet news for its accessibility, speed, and diversity, while still encountering news through mainstream organisations and social media (Oyero, 2013; Olise, 2021). Digital exposure therefore does not necessarily displace conventional media but may encourage continual comparison between sources (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). This pattern is also evident in Jalingo, where social media have become important for youth information sharing and civic engagement (Uzuegbunam, 2015; Imoka, 2023), while digital reporting has accelerated news circulation (Benjamin, 2025). Less, youths in Taraba continue to consult mainstream media when information is sensitive or requires confirmation (Garba & Wanapia, 2015). The literature therefore suggests complementary rather than substitutive media use. However, existing studies focus more on consumption patterns and political participation than on whether movement between digital and mainstream sources strengthens, weakens, or produces conditional trust in mainstream journalism.

Competing Evidence on Digital News Exposure and Trust in Mainstream Media

The most contested issue is whether digital news exposure erodes, reinforces, or transforms trust in mainstream media. One strand of research suggests erosion. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) found that frequent digital news consumption among Nigerian university students reduced confidence in mainstream media. Fawzi and Steindl (2026) similarly associated increased digital exposure with greater scepticism. Repeated comparison with faster, more diverse, and competing digital narratives may therefore weaken established media authority. A second strand of research suggests reinforcement. Isa, Asicus, and Obong (2025), Mann (2026), and Oyero (2013) demonstrate that audiences may rely more heavily on radio and television to verify information encountered online. Kim and Park (2023) and Apuke, Omar, and Tunca (2023) similarly found that youths use mainstream media to authenticate digital information. Digital exposure may therefore increase the value they place on professionally verified journalism.

A third perspective suggests transformation rather than a simple increase or decline in trust. Oyero (2013), Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020), and Apuke and Omar (2020) indicate that audiences increasingly compare digital and mainstream sources. Trust may therefore become conditional and source-specific, with youths preferring digital platforms for speed and diversity, while relying on



mainstream media for verification. These competing findings indicate that the relationship between digital news exposure and trust in mainstream media cannot be understood as simply positive or negative. Differences in media systems, digital literacy, platform use, information needs, and verification practices may explain divergent outcomes. Limited research directly examines how the intensity and forms of digital exposure shape youths' trust in mainstream media, particularly in smaller urban settings.

Unresolved Issues and the Substantive Research Gap

The existing literature shows that Nigerian youths increasingly rely on digital news, while mainstream media remains relevant for verification and authoritative information. However, limited research has examined how the frequency, intensity, platform, and intentional or incidental nature of digital news exposure influence youths' perceptions of mainstream media credibility. There is insufficient evidence on how exposure to misinformation, citizen journalism, competing narratives, and alternative digital sources affects assessments of mainstream media accuracy, fairness, objectivity, professionalism, independence, timeliness, and responsiveness. Additionally, a contextual and explanatory gap persists in Jalingo, Taraba State. Most studies have focused on social media use, political communication, and youth participation rather than the implications of digital news exposure for mainstream media credibility. As a result, it remains uncertain whether digital exposure erodes, reinforces, or transforms youths' confidence in radio, television, and established newspapers and under what conditions these outcomes occur. This study addresses this gap by investigating how youths in Jalingo compare digital and mainstream news sources and how these comparisons shape their perceptions of mainstream media credibility within an increasingly hybrid media environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Media Trust Theory, specifically the formulation by Kohring and Matthes (2007), which defines media trust as a multidimensional evaluation of how effectively news organisations fulfill informational and journalistic roles. Trust develops through assessments of news selection, accuracy, reliability, factual presentation, and journalistic judgement rather than through consumption alone. Fawzi et al. (2021) differentiate media trust from credibility, scepticism, and media use. Fisher (2016) highlights its contextual and evaluative nature. In this framework, digital news exposure serves as the explanatory variable and perceived mainstream media credibility as the outcome, with digital exposure potentially weakening, reinforcing, or transforming credibility.

Media trust is inherently comparative and conditional within a high-choice media environment. Audiences assess news organisations in relation to alternative sources and interpersonal networks (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ognyanova, 2019). In Jalingo, youths may compare platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube, blogs, and digital newspapers with traditional media, including radio, television, and established newspapers. These comparisons can erode credibility when digital sources are perceived as faster and more responsive, reinforce credibility when misinformation increases reliance on professional journalism, or transform credibility when digital media are used for discovery and mainstream media for verification and depth (Fisher, 2016; Knudsen et al., 2022).

This study conceptualises credibility as a multidimensional construct, following Kohring and Matthes (2007) and Metzger and Flanagin (2007). Digital exposure is assessed in terms of frequency, intensity, duration, platform diversity, and whether encounters are intentional or



incidental. Mainstream media credibility is evaluated based on accuracy, reliability, objectivity, fairness, professionalism, independence, timeliness, transparency, and responsiveness. This theoretical framework enables a systematic examination of whether digital news exposure weakens, reinforces, or transforms youths' perceptions of mainstream media credibility in Jalingo.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore youths' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of digital news exposure and mainstream media credibility in Jalingo, Taraba State. This approach enabled participants to articulate how they access digital news, evaluate competing information sources, and form or revise perceptions of mainstream media credibility. Rather than statistically estimating associations, the design facilitated a contextual understanding of the meanings, experiences, and evaluative processes through which youths navigate a hybrid media environment (Poth, 2018; Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025).

Study Area

The study was conducted in Jalingo Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. As the state capital, Jalingo offers a relevant context for examining evolving youth news practices due to its increasing internet connectivity, widespread smartphone use, active social media engagement, presence of tertiary institutions, government establishments, and media organisations. The area also includes youths with diverse educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing variation in experiences of digital and mainstream news consumption.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised youths aged 18 to 35 years residing in Jalingo who consumed news through at least one digital and one mainstream media source. We selected this group because Nigerian youths increasingly use digital platforms while continuing to access radio, television, and newspapers (Azeez et al., 2025).

Sampling Technique

Participant Categories and Sample Size. We used purposive sampling to recruit information-rich participants who met the eligibility criteria (Patton, Sawicki, & Clark, 2015). Participants varied by gender, age, education, occupation, and media-use patterns. Our data included 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) and four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 6 to 8 participants each, involving students, civil servants, journalists, youth leaders, business owners, content creators, and other digitally active youths. We determined the sample size based on thematic saturation.

Data Collection

The study collected data through semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), guided by the study objectives and theoretical constructs. The questions addressed digital news exposure, preferred platforms, mainstream media credibility, and perceptions of accuracy, fairness, objectivity, professionalism, and trust. Interviews provided detailed individual accounts, while FGDs captured both shared and divergent perspectives. We conducted sessions in English, using Hausa when necessary. With participants' consent, we audio-recorded the sessions and supplemented them with field notes. We transcribed the recordings verbatim and translated Hausa responses into English. We translated Hausa responses into English.



Data Analysis

We analysed the data thematically, following Braun and Clarke (2006), through repeated reading, coding, categorisation, and theme development. We compared convergent and divergent accounts across participant groups and data sources to identify patterns in digital exposure, platform preferences, credibility, comparative evaluation, and trust. We also conducted textual analysis to examine how participants expressed credibility and trust (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Poth, 2018). Triangulation, member checking, documentation, and maintaining an audit trail enhanced the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1988).

Ethical Considerations

Participants received information about the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw without penalty. We obtained informed consent before data collection. We protected participants' anonymity and securely stored recordings, transcripts, and field notes for research purposes only. Institutional permission and ethical approval were obtained prior to fieldwork work.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Patterns and Level of Exposure to Digital News Platforms among Jalingo Youths

The findings show that digital news exposure among Jalingo youths is high, continuous, and part of daily routines, reflecting the broader shift toward mobile, interactive, multi-platform news consumption (Ahlers, 2006; Westlund, 2015; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Peters et al., 2022). Participants reported checking WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and digital newspapers throughout the day for updates (KII with Male Undergraduate, Angwan Sarki, Jalingo LGA, 18 January 2026; KII with Female Civil Servant, Mafindi, Jalingo LGA, 24 January 2026). This aligns with evidence of increasing incidental and social-media-based news exposure among Nigerian youths (Mande et al., 2025; Akerele & Azeez, 2026) and the expanding role of ICT in information access in Nigeria and Taraba State (Agbeyangi et al., 2024; Gana et al., 2025; Apuke et al., 2025). Digital news has become a routine information practice rather than just an alternative source.

Exposure is also socially mediated and often incidental. Participants noted encountering news through Facebook and TikTok without deliberate searches (FGD with Female Youths, Korofi, Jalingo LGA, 18 February 2026), showing how algorithms and social networks shape news encounters (Barnidge, 2023; Mande et al., 2025). Others observed that breaking stories often circulate on WhatsApp and Facebook before appearing on television (FGD with Male Youths, Sabon Gari, Jalingo LGA, 11 February 2026), reflecting the growing speed and convergence between digital and institutional journalism (Benjamin, 2025; Apejoye & Mutsvairo, 2024). However, this accessibility also exposes youths to misinformation, disinformation, and citizen-generated content, complicating credibility assessments (Ahmad et al., 2024; Marchi, 2012; Apuke et al., 2023; Morgan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2026). Findings support Media Trust Theory's view that trust emerges from evaluations of journalistic performance and broader social and institutional conditions (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ognyanova, 2019). A participant's reliance on digital platforms for convenience but radio for verification illustrates selective rather than exclusive media loyalty (KII with Male Business Owner, Gindi Dorowa, Jalingo LGA, 10 March 2026). Digital platforms are valued for speed and accessibility, while mainstream media retain relevance through verification, professionalism, and accountability (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Oyero, 2013; Yusnaini et al., 2025). The central implication is that



digital news exposure has not replaced mainstream media but has transformed how youths evaluate credibility and trustworthiness.

Sources and Digital News Consumption Preferences among Jalingo Youths

The findings show that Jalingo youths engage in multi-platform, functionally differentiated news consumption, reflecting a shift toward mobile, interactive, and networked news environments (Ahlers, 2006; Westlund, 2015; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Peters et al., 2022). They use Facebook and WhatsApp for routine updates and social circulation, X for breaking political developments, and digital newspapers for detailed reporting and confirmation. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide visual and simplified content, especially for younger users. This aligns with evidence that Nigerian youths increasingly integrate social media into everyday information practices (Gomba et al., 2025; Umeh et al., 2025). A male ICT entrepreneur noted he uses X for early updates before consulting Daily Trust, Premium Times, and Punch for comprehensive accounts (KII with Male ICT Entrepreneur, Turaki, Jalingo LGA, 17 February 2026). This suggests digital platforms function as entry points, while mainstream media remain important for elaboration and verification.

Social networks, platform features, and perceived usefulness shape source preferences. Facebook and WhatsApp support interpersonal circulation, while TikTok and other visual platforms simplify complex issues. However, accessibility does not guarantee credibility. A female participant observed that TikTok creators could explain political issues effectively but might exaggerate or provide unsupported information (FGD with Female Youths, Angwan Sarki, Jalingo LGA, 19 March 2026), reflecting wider concerns about misinformation and citizen-generated content (Ahmad et al., 2024; Apuke et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2026). A journalist similarly noted that youths move across platforms depending on whether they seek breaking news, analysis, or confirmation (KII with Journalist, Sabon Gari, Jalingo LGA, 8 April 2026).

The evidence therefore indicates functional rather than exclusive media preferences. Digital platforms are valued for speed, accessibility, interaction, and discovery, while mainstream media remain relevant for verification, depth, contextualisation, and professional standards (Akinfemisoye, 2013, 2014; Bosah, 2018; Apejoye & Mutsvairo, 2024). Differences in participants' confidence across sources reinforce the view that credibility is multidimensional and comparative (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021). Digital news has not displaced mainstream media but has reshaped how youths compare and evaluate competing sources based on accuracy, completeness, timeliness, responsiveness, and reliability.

Perceptions of the Credibility and Trustworthiness of Mainstream Media among Jalingo Youths

The findings indicate that mainstream media retain an important but increasingly conditional role in youths' credibility assessments. Participants associated radio, television, and established newspapers with verification, editorial oversight, and institutional accountability, while viewing digital platforms as faster, more accessible, and interactive. This reflects the emergence of hybrid news consumption, where youths combine rather than replace mainstream and digital sources (Ahlers, 2006; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Peters et al., 2022; Westlund, 2015). A female teacher trusted radio because she perceived the information as being verified before broadcast. A male student considered television more credible than Facebook because journalists were expected to authenticate information despite social media's speed (KII with Female Teacher, Korofi, Jalingo LGA, 16 February 2026; KII with Male Student, Turaki, Jalingo LGA, 13 March



2026). These views show that youths assess credibility by balancing immediacy and verification, confirming that digitalisation has transformed rather than displaced established journalism (Akinfemisoye, 2014; Apejoye & Mutsvairo, 2024; Yusnaini et al., 2025).

Credibility evaluation is increasingly comparative, particularly when youths encounter controversial or uncertain information online. A female participant explained that she waits for television news to confirm shocking social media reports before accepting them as genuine (FGD with Female Youths, Angwan Gadi, Jalingo LGA, 21 March 2026). Such verification practices reflect multi-source credibility assessment in digital environments (Metzger & Flanagin, 2007; Gil et al., 2025), where misinformation and manipulated content complicate judgments of reliability (Apuke et al., 2023; Azeez et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). Although print newspapers are less preferred, their digital versions retain credibility because of institutional reputation and professional standards (KII with Commercial Driver, Gindi Dorowa, Jalingo LGA, 12 April 2026; Apuke & Omar, 2020; Ayobolu, 2024). However, perceptions of political influence, selective reporting, and delayed coverage weaken confidence in mainstream media. A male youth noted that perceived avoidance of sensitive issues encourages young people to seek alternative accounts online (FGD with Male Youths, Sabon Gari, Jalingo LGA, 23 April 2026). The findings therefore support Media Trust Theory's view that credibility is multidimensional, comparative, and conditional, shaped by accuracy, professionalism, independence, transparency, and reliability (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Ognyanova, 2019). Digital platforms challenge mainstream media through speed, participation, and alternative perspectives, while established media retain authority through verification and accountability. Thus, digitalisation simultaneously preserves, contests, and reshapes mainstream media credibility among Jalingo youths.

Digital News Exposure and Its Influence on Trust in Mainstream Media among Jalingo Youths

Interview and focus group evidence indicates that digital news exposure has reconfigured, not diminished, youths' trust in mainstream media. Digital platforms increasingly serve as initial sources of information, while television, radio, and established newspapers remain important for verification and contextualization. This reflects the broader movement toward fragmented, mobile, interactive, and multi-platform news consumption (Ahlers, 2006; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Peters et al., 2022; Westlund, 2015), supported by Nigeria's expanding digital environment (Agbeyangi et al., 2024) and social media adoption in Taraba State (Apuke et al., 2025; Gana et al., 2025). A female entrepreneur explained that online exposure encouraged her to compare digital reports with television before accepting them. A male civil servant relied on radio for verification because of its perceived editorial reliability (KII with Female Entrepreneur, Mafindi, Jalingo LGA, 26 March 2026; KII with Male Civil Servant, Angwan Gadi, Jalingo LGA, 5 April 2026). Digital exposure has therefore made trust more conditional, comparative, and evaluative, consistent with scholarship linking media trust to credibility, journalistic performance, and information quality (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Digital exposure has encouraged youths to compare competing sources and question previously accepted information. A participant noted that social media increased young people's tendency to scrutinise news claims (FGD with Male Youths, Korofi, Jalingo LGA, 20 February 2026), reflecting the growing importance of incidental and socially mediated news exposure (Barnidge, 2023; Mande et al., 2025). However, alternative digital accounts may weaken



confidence in mainstream media when they highlight issues perceived as underreported, delayed, or selectively presented. A female youth explained that online reports sometimes revealed issues absent from television coverage, leading her to consult multiple sources before forming conclusions (FGD with Female Youths, Turaki, Jalingo LGA, 18 March 2026). This supports arguments that citizen and alternative journalism challenge conventional gatekeeping while expanding access to competing narratives (Akinfemisoye, 2013, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2024). Digital exposure reduces exclusive reliance on mainstream media while raising expectations for accuracy, completeness, responsiveness, and independence.

Misinformation and unreliable online content reinforce the value of mainstream media as verification institutions. Concerns about fake news, manipulated content, and misinformation increase the importance of evaluating sources and seeking confirmation (Apuke et al., 2023; Morgan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2026). A female NGO worker used digital platforms for immediate updates but relied on mainstream media for confirmation, while a male student associated established media with greater reliability for important information (KII with Female NGO Worker, Angwan Sarki, Jalingo LGA, 9 April 2026; KII with Male Student, Sabon Gari, Jalingo LGA, 18 April 2026). These findings show that reduced reliance on mainstream media does not necessarily indicate declining trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Fawzi et al., 2021). Consistent with Media Trust Theory, trust among Jalingo youths is dynamic, conditional, and comparative: digital platforms dominate discovery and immediacy, while mainstream media retain authority through professionalism, verification, and reliability (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Ognyanova, 2019). Thus, digital news exposure simultaneously challenges, reduces dependence on, and reinforces trust in mainstream media depending on how youths assess competing sources.

Discussion of Findings

Digitalisation has transformed the news environment where Jalingo youths encounter and evaluate information. News consumption increasingly occurs through intentional searches, incidental exposure, peer circulation, social interaction, and algorithmically curated feeds. This reflects a shift from single-medium consumption to mobile, interactive, and multi-platform news repertoires (Ahlers, 2006; Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Peters et al., 2022; Westlund, 2015; Wee, 2017). Nigeria's expanding digital communication environment (Agbeyangi et al., 2024) and youths' growing use of social media in Taraba for political, agricultural, environmental, and public-interest information further reinforce this transformation (Apuke et al., 2025; Gana et al., 2025). In Jalingo, news is increasingly embedded in everyday digital routines rather than accessed only through deliberate searches. Facebook and WhatsApp facilitate interpersonal circulation, X provides rapid updates, digital newspapers offer detailed reporting, and YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide accessible visual content. This differentiated use reflects how young audiences select platforms based on their informational needs (Podara et al., 2019; Imoka, 2023; Okocha & Chigbo, 2024). However, frequent exposure does not necessarily indicate preference or trust. Digitalisation has produced differentiated news repertoires rather than simply replacing conventional journalism (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Yunsaini et al., 2025).

This changing media environment has reshaped how people assess mainstream media credibility. Radio, television, and established newspapers continue to benefit from perceptions of professional journalism, editorial scrutiny, verification, contextualization, and institutional accountability. However, these advantages coexist with concerns about political influence, selective reporting, delayed coverage, and limited responsiveness to emerging issues. Such



tensions reflect the multidimensional nature of media trust, involving judgments about accuracy, reliability, fairness, competence, and institutional performance (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021; Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Digital platforms have expanded the criteria youths use to evaluate journalism as they increasingly compare mainstream reporting with information from citizen journalists, influencers, commentators, and other online sources. In Nigeria, this reflects a media environment where institutional journalism operates alongside alternative and participatory forms of news production (Akinfemisoye, 2013, 2014; Bosah, 2018; Apejoye & Mutsvairo, 2024). Consequently, institutional reputation alone no longer guarantees unconditional trust. Mainstream media must continually demonstrate their value through accuracy, responsiveness, and verification.

Cross-platform verification has become central to how youths negotiate credibility and trust. Moving from social media to television, radio, digital newspapers, or other established outlets is a comparative process through which competing claims are assessed. Credibility concerns judgments about the quality, accuracy, and reliability of information. Trust reflects broader confidence in a source's dependability. A social-media source may help identify emerging events but may be insufficient for confirmation. Meanwhile, mainstream media may retain credibility for verification despite concerns about independence or bias. This distinction matters in an environment shaped by misinformation, disinformation, citizen journalism, and manipulated content (Metzger & Flanagin, 2007; Ahmad et al., 2024; Apuke et al., 2023; Azeez et al., 2026; Odunlami & Banjo, 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). Digital abundance produces a paradox: unreliable online information can increase the perceived importance of professional journalism. In contrast, perceived weaknesses in mainstream reporting can strengthen the legitimacy of alternative digital sources.

The broader implication is that media trust among Jalingo youths is conditional, comparative, and function-specific rather than fixed or binary. Digitalisation does not simply weaken or preserve confidence in mainstream media. Instead, it redistributes trust across different informational functions. Digital platforms are valued for discovery, speed, accessibility, participation, and alternative perspectives. Mainstream media retain advantages in verification, professional competence, contextualization, and institutional accountability. This interpretation reconciles competing perspectives in the literature by showing that digital exposure may reduce mainstream media reliance when immediacy and diversity are prioritised, while reinforcing their value when accuracy and confirmation are required (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Fawzi et al., 2021; Fawzi & Steindl, 2026). It also extends Media Trust Theory by demonstrating that trust is an ongoing evaluative process shaped by source performance, informational purpose, competing media environments, and social contexts of exposure (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Fawzi et al., 2021; Ognyanova, 2019). In Jalingo, youths do not simply choose between digital and mainstream media. Instead, they allocate confidence based on each source's perceived strengths and limitations.

Conclusion

This study concludes that youths in Jalingo navigate a hybrid media environment where digital and mainstream media perform distinct but complementary functions. Digital platforms are valued for immediacy, accessibility, responsiveness, and emerging information. Mainstream media retain credibility through verification, accuracy, professional standards, and authoritative reporting. Digitalisation has therefore not simply displaced or preserved trust in mainstream media



but transformed it into a conditional, comparative, and function-specific process. Consistent with Media Trust Theory, youths may question mainstream media for delayed reporting, political influence, or selective coverage while still relying on them for confirmation and institutional accountability. The study demonstrates that cross-platform verification reshapes media trust. Digital platforms challenge mainstream media in speed and responsiveness while reinforcing their value for reliable verification. Digitalisation is better understood as a reconfiguration of the conditions through which mainstream media credibility is evaluated rather than a straightforward replacement by digital news.

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The AI tool, particularly Grammarly was used for editing.
