

From Screen to Society: Electronic Media and the Reshaping of Socio-Cultural Practices among Rural Women in Rewari District, Haryana, India

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The rapid diffusion of television, mobile telephony and internet-enabled platforms into rural India has opened a new channel through which long-standing social and cultural arrangements are questioned, negotiated and occasionally revised. This study examines how exposure to electronic media relates to the social and cultural practices of rural women in Rewari district, Haryana — a state characterised by strong economic performance alongside persistently adverse gender indicators. A quantitative descriptive design was administered to survey 400 married women aged 18–60 years drawn from 14 villages across three community development blocks using a multistage stratified sampling method. Data were gathered through a researcher-administered structured interview schedule and analysed in SPSS 25.0 using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests of association, Pearson product-moment correlations, independent-samples Z-tests and one-way analysis of variance. Mobile phone ownership was reported by 68.8% of respondents and varied significantly by age, literacy and caste. The influence of electronic media on both social and cultural practices declined significantly with respondent age and with number of living children, and rose with educational attainment and forward-caste status. Content type mattered: entertainment, educational, health and livelihood programming were significantly associated with changed practices, whereas news and devotional content were not. Slightly more than half the sample reported at least one barrier to media use, the most frequent being household and care work rather than infrastructure. The findings position electronic media as a conditional rather than automatic instrument of change, and indicate that time, poverty and digital skills — not device availability alone — now constitute the binding constraint on rural women's media engagement.

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1 Introduction

Electronic media has become one of the more consequential forces shaping social change in contemporary India. The spread of affordable smartphones, near-universal television access and inexpensive mobile data has drawn rural populations into information environments that were, until recently, largely urban. For rural women in particular, these technologies represent an unusual kind of opening: a channel to information, education, entertainment and economic opportunity that does not require leaving the household. McQuail (2010) characterised mass communication as a social and cultural process through which media, audiences and society continuously act upon one another; in rural India that process is now unfolding at considerable speed.

National survey evidence documents both the scale and the unevenness of this shift. The fifth round of the National Family Health Survey recorded that 33.3% of Indian women aged 15–49 had ever used the internet, against 57.1% of men, with the gap widest in rural areas (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2022). Haryana performed better than the national average, at approximately 48% of women, though it remained behind Delhi, Kerala and Punjab. Subsequent survey rounds indicated rapid catch-up, with women's ever-use of the internet rising nationally to roughly 64% and rural ever-use to approximately 59% by 2023–24. The direction of travel is unambiguous, but access alone is a weak proxy for meaningful use: disparities by age, education, income and gender continue to shape both the extent and the character of women's media engagement.

Haryana offers a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this question. The state combines high per capita income and strong post-Green Revolution agricultural performance with some of the country's least favourable gender indicators (Chauhan, 2025). While India's overall population sex ratio recorded 1,020 females per 1,000 males in NFHS-5, Haryana remained among the minority of states with fewer women than men, at 926 females per 1,000 males

(IIPS & ICF, 2022). Son preference, restricted female mobility, limited land rights and continued observance of veiling practices persist alongside measurable gains in female literacy and health. Women's daily lives in rural Haryana are governed by norms that constrain movement, public interaction and independent decision-making, and economic growth has not dissolved these constraints so much as reorganised them.

This produces a tension rather than a straightforward trajectory. Increasing exposure to television, mobile phones and social platforms connects rural households to urban and global cultural repertoires, contributing to shifts in family values, gender norms and everyday practice (Uberoi, 2006; Desai & Andrist, 2010). Recent Indian research indicates that mass media informs rural women about social issues, development programmes and legal entitlements, and in doing so unsettles inherited beliefs and habits (Kumar & Lahaik, 2022). At the same time, digital access does not translate mechanically into empowerment; benefits accrue where access is accompanied by usable skills and genuine autonomy over the device (Madra-Sawicka et al., 2020). Structural barriers — poverty, unequal command over economic resources and gender-based violence — continue to reproduce inequality even as education and legal rights expand (Anderson, 2024). Media exposure may therefore widen horizons without immediately widening choices.

Existing scholarly articles on Haryana has concentrated on changing family structure, patriarchal institutions, education policy and women's economic empowerment, largely in urban settings or in districts other than Rewari. Comparatively little work has examined how electronic media specifically intersects with the social and cultural practices of rural women in a district where patriarchal norms remain strongly enforced. Designing balanced digital literacy and community development interventions requires understanding both the enabling and the disruptive effects of media exposure. This study addresses that gap by investigating how electronic media relates to the socio-cultural lives of rural women in Rewari district.

1.1 Objectives

1. To describe the demographic and socio-economic profile of rural women respondents in Rewari district.
2. To identify the pattern and extent of electronic media use among rural women.
3. To assess the association between electronic media use and the social practices of rural women.
4. To assess the association between electronic media use and the cultural practices of rural women.
5. To examine the challenges and barriers rural women encounter in accessing and using electronic media.
6. To derive policy-relevant recommendations for the constructive use of electronic media in enhancing the socio-cultural lives of rural women.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

This section situates the study within research on media effects, patriarchal social organisation and the gendered digital divide in India, and identifies the gap the present analysis addresses.

2.1 Media system dependency theory

The analysis is grounded in media system dependency theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). The theory holds that individuals become progressively dependent on media to the extent that media resources are instrumental in achieving personal and social goals. The stronger the dependency for information, understanding, orientation, interaction and entertainment, the greater the potential of media to shape perception, attitude and behaviour. The theory is well suited to the present setting because it treats dependency as variable rather than uniform, and therefore predicts differentiated rather than blanket effects.

Applied to rural women, the framework suggests several mechanisms. Regular reliance on mobile phones and social platforms may reshape patterns of communication, sustain ties with kin

outside the village and generate new forms of social networking. Sustained exposure to media content may introduce alternative repertoires of dress, cuisine, leisure, family relations and expectations regarding marriage, education, employment and gender roles. Critically, the theory predicts that these influences vary with the level and nature of dependency. The present study therefore treats demographic position — age, education, caste, family type, employment and income — as conditioning media dependency, and operationalises dependency itself through frequency of use, content type, device ownership and purpose of use.

2.2 Patriarchal norms and the status of rural women

Patriarchy remains central to the organisation of socio-cultural practice in rural India. Singh et al. (2022), constructing the India Patriarchy Index, conceptualise patriarchy as a multidimensional system of gendered positioning within families encompassing male domination, patriolocality, son preference and gendered economic roles. Son preference operates directly on intra-household bargaining: Alakshendra and Li (2020) find that women with at least one son participate more extensively in household financial and other decisions, demonstrating how cultural preference translates into differential decision-making power.

Sarkar and Das Gupta (2024) argue that patriarchal norms embedded in social and cultural structures perpetuate inequality by restricting access to education, healthcare and economic opportunity, while Goel and Ravishankar (2021) show that such entrenched practices limit women's participation in household and community decision-making even where formal legal entitlements exist. Pal and Haldar (2016) report that most rural women were excluded from decisions on the purchase or sale of farm equipment, land preparation and agrochemical use.

This structure carries directly into technology use. Garg (2021), examining the intersection of gender, rural location and literacy in a Punjab village, found that although most women did not

personally own a mobile phone, they were nonetheless familiar with and used the devices of others. Iqbal (2021), through ethnographic work with young people in rural Wayanad, Kerala, found that men acquired smartphones considerably earlier than women, and that women's internet use was further constrained by limited autonomy over personal devices and by surveillance of their online activity. Bala and Singhal (2018), analysing the gender digital divide in Uttar Pradesh, similarly report that even where women have access to internet services and enabled devices, household work and prevailing socio-cultural expectations restrict the time they can spend online. Access, in short, is necessary but not sufficient.

2.3 Electronic media and changing socio-cultural practice

A parallel literature documents media's capacity to shift attitudes and behaviour. Bhatt and Singh (2017) identify television as a principal source of information, education, entertainment and general knowledge for rural women. Kumar and Lahaik (2022) find that media exposure contributes to visible socio-economic and cultural change expressed in dress, food habits, patterns of speech, autonomy in decision-making and willingness to debate. Ghosh (2026) documents substantial media- and globalisation-driven change in Indian wedding ceremonies, with marriage practices becoming progressively more individualised as modern repertoires circulate.

Life-course position also matters. Kalaiselvi et al. (2014) show that women's participation in household decision-making in rural Haryana increases with age, indicating that social position is not fixed but shifts across the life course. Technology adoption interacts with this: Mohyuddin and Begum (2013) find that domestic appliances such as washing machines, grinders,

refrigerators and pressure cookers reduce time and labour in rural households, freeing capacity for media consumption, social participation, income contribution and caregiving. Gupta and Kumari (2025), working in Haryana specifically, report that access to smartphones and the internet enhanced rural women's knowledge, health awareness, educational opportunity, communication and community participation, and contributed to confidence and decision-making ability.

2.4 Research gap

Three gaps emerge. First, most Indian studies of media and rural women either aggregate across states or focus on settings with weaker patriarchal enforcement than Haryana. Second, studies that do address Haryana concentrate on economic empowerment or health outcomes rather than on social and cultural practice as such. Third, the literature rarely distinguishes between content types, treating media exposure as undifferentiated when there is reason to expect that devotional programming and health programming carry very different implications for practice. The present study addresses these gaps through a district-level survey that disaggregates by content type and by demographic position.

2.5 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. Exposure to electronic media through television, mobile phones, the internet and social platforms generates media dependency, indexed by frequency of use, device ownership, content type and purpose of use. Dependency in turn is expected to relate to social practices (decision-making, mobility, social contact and rights awareness) and cultural practices (dress, food, marriage and ritual observance). Both exposure and outcomes are conditioned by demographic characteristics and by access barriers operating at the household and infrastructure level.

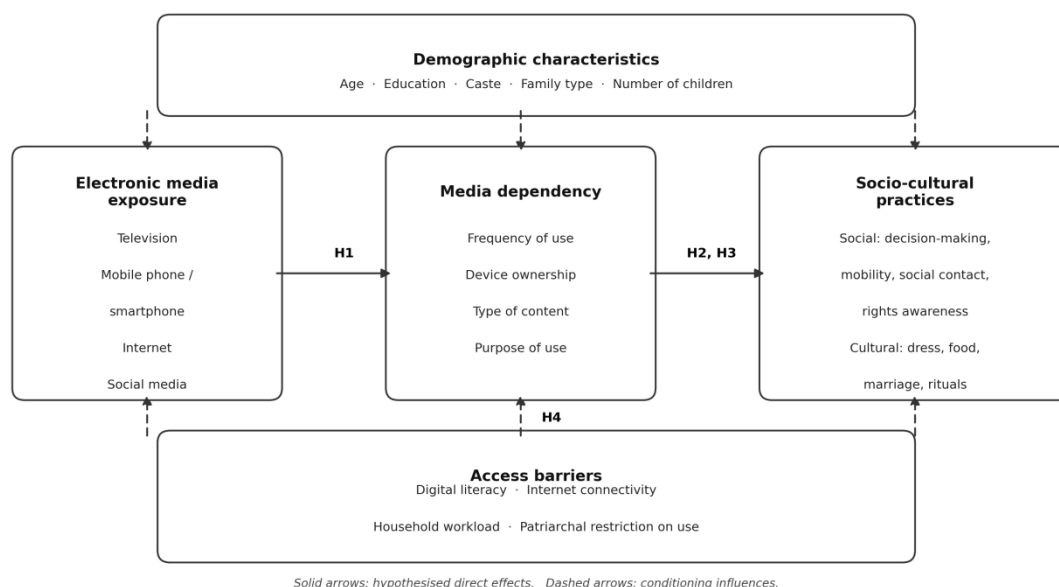


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework linking electronic media exposure, media dependency and socio-cultural practices among rural women

Four hypotheses follow:

H1 Demographic characteristics of respondents are significantly associated with the extent of their electronic media use.

H2 Electronic media use is significantly associated with the social practices of rural women.

H3 Electronic media use is significantly associated with the cultural practices of rural women.

H4 The challenges women face in accessing electronic media are significantly associated with their demographic position.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. A survey method was selected as appropriate for systematically capturing patterns of media use, attitudes and reported behavioural outcomes across a comparatively large sample within a bounded geographic area.

3.2 Study setting

Fieldwork was conducted in Rewari district, Haryana, covering 14 villages across the Jatusana, Khol and Rewari community development blocks. Blocks were selected to secure

representation of rural populations with differing levels of exposure to electronic media, differing distance from the district headquarters and differing infrastructure profiles.

3.3 Sampling design and sample size

A multistage Stratified (Disproportionate to size) sampling method was applied. 400 respondents from 14 villages and 3 community development blocks were randomly selected for this study. Inclusion criteria were: married women aged 18–60 years, resident in the selected villages, with access to at least one form of electronic media, and willing to participate in the study

3.4 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured interview schedule developed by the first author for this study. The instrument comprised four sections: socio-demographic profile; extent and pattern of electronic media exposure; purpose and nature of media use; and the influence of electronic media on social and cultural practices. Items in the practice sections were scored on a Likert 5 point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree response format and summed to yield composite social practice and cultural practice scores. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The Social Practices scale consists of 15 items and its Cronbach's alpha is

.963; the Cultural Practices scale consists of 15 items and its Cronbach's alpha is .911. This indicates that both dimensions have high level of internal reliability. The interview schedule was pre-tested among 30 respondents outside the main study areas to check clarity and reliability.

3.5 Data collection procedure

Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews administered by the first author in the regional language. Alongside the structured schedule, the researcher held individual and small-group conversations with respondents to develop contextual understanding of local socio-cultural practice and of the constraints women described. The first author had worked in the study area for approximately five years prior to data collection, which facilitated access and appeared to increase respondents' willingness to discuss changes in household and community life following the diffusion of digital technologies.

3.6 Data analysis

Responses were coded, tabulated and analysed in SPSS version 25.0. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe demographic characteristics and reported challenges. Chi-square tests of independence examined associations between demographic variables (age, education, caste) and both mobile phone ownership and reported challenges. Pearson product-moment correlations examined relationships between age, number of children and social and cultural practice scores. Because type of content accessed was recorded as a dichotomy (accessed / did not access), independent-samples Z-tests were used to compare the mean social and cultural practice scores of consumers and non-consumers of each content category; Levene's test was used to decide whether the equal-variance or unequal-variance statistic should be reported. One-way analysis of variance examined differences in practice scores across caste and education categories. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed. Before data collection, respondents received a clear explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, the categories of data to be collected, and arrangements for data storage. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and identifying information was handled so as to protect participants' privacy. No incentive was offered for participation, and respondents were free to withdraw at any point.

4 Results

4.1 Profile of respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic and socio-economic profile of the 400 respondents. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 60 years, with the largest concentrations in the 30–39 (31.0%) and 20–29 (30.8%) categories; 21.0% were aged 40–49 and 4.8% were 50 or older. The sample was overwhelmingly Hindu (99.3%), consistent with the religious composition of the study area. Most respondents (87.5%) were born in rural areas and married within rural areas, while 12.5% were born in urban areas and married into rural households.

Educational attainment was concentrated at basic levels: 70.8% had completed education between primary and higher secondary stages, 15.0% were illiterate and 13.8% had studied to graduation. Joint families remained predominant (72.3%), though slightly more than a quarter of respondents (27.8%) lived in nuclear households. Number of living children in the household with 58.0% reporting three to four children and 37.0% reporting five or more. The sample includes older cohorts whose completed fertility reflects earlier norms and also higher fertility reflects the persistence of son preference. Two-thirds of households (68.0%) had their own drinking water connection. Mobile phone ownership stood at 68.8%.

Table 1 Demographic and socio-economic profile of respondents (N = 400)

Characteristic	n	%
<i>Age (years)</i>		
18-19	50	12.5
20-29	123	30.8
30-39	124	31.0
40-49	84	21.0
50 -60	19	4.8
<i>Religion</i>		
Hindu	397	99.3
Christian	3	0.8
<i>Place of birth</i>		
Rural	350	87.5
Urban	50	12.5
<i>Educational qualification</i>		
Illiterate	60	15.0
Primary to higher secondary	283	70.8
Graduation and above	55	13.8
<i>Caste category</i>		
Forward	58	14.5
Backward	71	17.8
Scheduled Caste	271	67.8
<i>Type of family</i>		
Joint	289	72.3
Nuclear	111	27.8
<i>Number of living children</i>		
Up to 2	20	5.0
3-4	232	58.0

Characteristic	n	%
4 and above	148	37.0
<i>Source of drinking water</i>		
Own connection	272	68.0
Common source	128	32.0
<i>Owns a mobile phone</i>		
Yes	275	68.8
No	125	31.3

Percentages may not sum to 100.0 owing to rounding. Educational qualification was not recorded for two respondents (0.5%); the n and percentages shown for that variable are of the 398 respondents with valid data.

4.2 Demographic correlates of mobile phone ownership

Chi-square tests examined associations between age, education, caste and personal mobile phone ownership (Table 2). All three associations were statistically significant.

Ownership declined sharply with age. Among women aged 20–29, 85.4% owned a phone, compared with 71.8% of those aged 30–39 and only 42.7% of those aged 40 and above, $\chi^2(3, N = 400) = 49.46, p < .001$. Education showed an equally pronounced gradient: 74.7% of literate respondents owned a device against 35.0% of

illiterate respondents, $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 37.43, p < .001$. This gap points to a compounding disadvantage in which those least equipped to navigate digital content are also least likely to have independent access to it.

Ownership also varied by caste, $\chi^2(2, N = 400) = 7.38, p = .025$. Backward-caste women reported the highest rate of ownership (80.3%), followed by forward-caste women (74.1%), while Scheduled Caste women reported the lowest (64.6%). The gap for Scheduled Caste respondents is plausibly attributable to lower household income and, in some households, tighter restriction on independent device use. H1 is supported.

Table 2 Chi-square tests of association between demographic characteristics and mobile phone ownership (N = 400)

Characteristic	Owns phone n	Does not own n	% owning	Test statistic
<i>Age (years)</i>				
Below 20	37	13	74.0	$\chi^2 = 49.46, df = 3, p < .001$
20–29	105	18	85.4	
30–39	89	35	71.8	
40 and above	44	59	42.7	

Characteristic	Owns phone n	Does own n	not % owning	Test statistic
<i>Educational qualification</i>				
Illiterate	21	39	35.0	$\chi^2 = 37.43$, df = 1, p < .001
Literate	254	86	74.7	
<i>Caste category</i>				
Forward	43	15	74.1	$\chi^2 = 7.38$, df = 2, p = .025
Backward	57	14	80.3	
Scheduled Caste	175	96	64.6	

Test statistics apply to the characteristic block within which they appear.

4.3 Age, family size and socio-cultural practices

Pearson correlations examined the relationship between age, number of living children and the two practice composites (Table 3). Age was negatively and significantly correlated with both social practices ($r = -.303$, $p < .001$) and cultural practices ($r = -.230$, $p < .001$): as age increased, the reported influence of electronic media on practice declined. Number of living children showed the same pattern, correlating negatively

with social practices ($r = -.262$, $p < .001$) and cultural practices ($r = -.179$, $p < .001$).

Two interpretations are consistent with these results. Older women may hold more firmly to inherited practice and engage less with digital devices, while women with larger families face heavier domestic demands and, frequently, competition for the household device from children using it for schooling or entertainment. The correlations are modest in magnitude, indicating that age and family size condition rather than determine the relationship.

Table 3 Pearson correlations between demographic characteristics and the influence of electronic media on socio-cultural practices (N = 400)

Variable pair	r	P	Inference
<i>Social practices</i>			
Age	-0.303	< .001	Significant
Number of children	-0.262	< .001	Significant
<i>Cultural practices</i>			
Age	-0.230	< .001	Significant
Number of children	-0.179	< .001	Significant

4.4 Content type and socio-cultural practices

Because the theoretical framework predicts differentiated rather than uniform media effects, mean practice scores were compared between consumers and non-consumers of each content category using independent-samples Z-tests (Table 4). The pattern is clearly differentiated. Women who accessed entertainment ($Z = 3.12$, $p = .002$), educational programming ($Z = 4.10$, $p < .001$), health information ($Z = 4.86$, $p < .001$) and livelihood-related content ($Z = 2.70$, $p = .008$) scored significantly higher on social practices than women who did not, and the same four categories produced significant differences on cultural practices. Health-related content produced the largest difference in both domains (5.65 points on social practices, 3.55 points on cultural practices).

News and current affairs produced no significant difference on either social ($Z = 0.57$, $p = .571$) or cultural practices ($Z = 1.66$, $p = .098$), and devotional and musical content showed, if anything, a slight negative difference that did not reach significance. This is theoretically informative: the content categories associated with change are those offering models of alternative practice or actionable information, whereas devotional programming reinforces existing cultural frameworks and news consumption among these respondents appears too shallow to register. H2 and H3 are supported, with the qualification that support is content-specific.

Table 4 Z-test comparison of social and cultural practice scores between consumers and non-consumers of each type of electronic media content (N = 400)

Type of content accessed	Social practices			Cultural practices		
	M (SD)	Yes / No	Z (p)	M (SD)	Yes / No	Z (p)
News and current affairs (n = 197 / 203)	64.77 (11.93) 64.03 (14.00)	/	0.57 (.571) ^a	68.68 (9.40) / 66.94 (11.42)		1.66 (.098) ^a
Entertainment (n = 330 / 70)	65.32 (12.82) 60.03 (13.09)	/	3.12 (.002)	68.38 (10.30) / 65.04 (11.06)		2.43 (.016)
Educational programmes (n = 77 / 323)	68.26 (7.73) / 63.47 (13.83)		4.10 (< .001) ^a	70.13 (6.83) / 67.24 (11.13)		2.91 (.004) ^a
Health-related information (n = 130 / 270)	68.21 (8.84) / 62.56 (14.25)		4.86 (< .001) ^a	70.19 (6.64) / 66.64 (11.76)		3.85 (< .001) ^a
Livelihood-related information (n = 76 / 324)	67.46 (10.32) / 63.67 (13.47)	/	2.70 (.008) ^a	70.37 (5.48) / 67.19 (11.28)		3.58 (< .001) ^a
Other (devotional songs, spiritual talks) (n = 65 / 335)	63.14 (10.62) / 64.64 (13.42)	/	-0.85 (.396)	66.88 (7.44) / 67.97 (10.99)		-0.77 (.442)

Note. Figures are means with standard deviations in parentheses for respondents who reported accessing each content category (Yes) and those who did not (No), followed by the independent-samples test statistic with its two-tailed

probability. ^a Levine's test was significant at the .05 level; the equal-variances-not-assumed statistic is reported.

4.5 Caste, education and socio-cultural practices

One-way analysis of variance examined differences in practice scores across caste and educational categories (Table 5). All four tests were significant at the .05 level.

Forward-caste women recorded the highest mean scores for both social ($M = 69.43$) and cultural practices ($M = 72.78$), with Backward-caste women lowest on social practices ($M = 60.37$) and Scheduled Caste women lowest on cultural practices ($M = 66.38$). Economic stability, higher educational attainment, better connectivity and greater exposure to urban settings plausibly afford forward-caste women more autonomy and more discretionary time in which to engage with media content.

Educational attainment produced a monotonic gradient in both domains. Social practice scores rose from illiterate respondents ($M = 58.50$) through those with primary to higher secondary education ($M = 65.02$) to graduates ($M = 67.34$), and cultural practice scores followed the same order ($M = 63.08$, $M = 68.22$ and $M = 70.47$ respectively). In each domain the steeper increment falls between illiteracy and basic schooling rather than between schooling and graduation, a pattern the post hoc comparisons confirm. The graduate subgroup remains the smallest of the three ($n = 55$), and estimates for that category should be treated with some caution.

Table 5 One-way analysis of variance for caste, education and the influence of electronic media on socio-cultural practices

Source	df	SS	MS	F	Group means
<i>Caste × social practices</i>					
Between groups	2	2623.58	1311.79	8.03**	G1 = 69.43
Within groups	397	64893.80	163.46		G2 = 60.37
					G3 = 64.37
<i>Caste × cultural practices</i>					
Between groups	2	2101.92	1050.96	9.96**	G1 = 72.78
Within groups	397	41873.27	105.47		G2 = 69.11
					G3 = 66.38
<i>Education × social practices</i>					
Between groups	2	2674.31	1337.16	8.16**	E1 = 58.50
Within groups	395	64755.30	163.94		E2 = 65.02
					E3 = 67.34
<i>Education × cultural practices</i>					

Source	df	SS	MS	F	Group means
Between groups	2	1777.58	888.79	8.34**	E1 = 63.08
Within groups	395	42093.27	106.57		E2 = 68.22
					E3 = 70.47

*G1 = Forward caste; G2 = Backward caste; G3 = Scheduled Caste. E1 = Illiterate; E2 = Primary to higher secondary; E3 = Graduation and above. Effect sizes computed from the sums of squares reported above: caste $\times$ social practices $\eta^2 = .039$, $\omega^2 = .034$; caste $\times$ cultural practices $\eta^2 = .048$, $\omega^2 = .043$; education $\times$ social practices $\eta^2 = .040$, $\omega^2 = .035$; education $\times$ cultural practices $\eta^2 = .041$, $\omega^2 = .036$. ** $p < .01$.*

Because the group variances were unequal, Games–Howell post hoc comparisons were computed for all four analyses (Table 6). For caste, forward-caste women differed significantly from backward-caste women (MD = 9.06, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.83, 14.30]) and from Scheduled Caste women (MD = 5.06, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.02, 8.10]) on social practices, while the backward-caste to Scheduled Caste contrast was not significant (MD = -4.00, $p = .140$). Cultural practices showed the same structure: forward caste differed from backward caste (MD = 3.66, $p = .009$) and from Scheduled Caste (MD = 6.39, $p < .001$), while the latter two did not differ (MD = 2.73, $p = .092$). The caste effect is therefore driven by the distinctiveness of the forward-caste group rather than by a graded hierarchy running across all three categories, and the interpretation offered above should be read as applying to that contrast specifically.

For education, illiterate respondents differed significantly from both the primary-to-higher-

secondary group and the graduate group on social practices (MD = -6.52, $p = .039$ and MD = -8.85, $p = .004$) and on cultural practices (MD = -5.14, $p = .042$ and MD = -7.39, $p = .004$). The primary-to-higher-secondary and graduate groups did not differ significantly in either domain ($p = .120$ and $p = .112$). The operative threshold is thus literacy itself rather than the level of schooling subsequently attained — a finding that carries directly into the barrier analysis reported below.

Effect sizes are small by conventional benchmarks. Caste accounted for 3.9% of variance in social practices and 4.8% in cultural practices (η^2), and education for 4.0% and 4.1% respectively; the more conservative ω^2 estimates are .034, .043, .035 and .036. The group differences are statistically reliable but modest in magnitude, which is consistent with the conditional account of media influence advanced in this paper rather than with a strong determinist reading.

Table 6 Games–Howell post hoc comparisons of social and cultural practice scores by caste and educational qualification (N = 400)

Comparison (I – J)	Mean difference	SE	p	CI lower	CI upper
<i>Caste $\times$ social practices</i>					
Forward – Backward	9.06	2.20	< .001	3.83	14.30
Forward – Scheduled Caste	5.06	1.28	< .001	2.02	8.10
Backward – Scheduled Caste	-4.00	2.09	.140	-8.98	0.98

Comparison (I – J)	Mean difference	SE	p	CI lower	CI upper
<i>Caste × cultural practices</i>					
Forward – Backward	3.66	1.21	.009	0.78	6.55
Forward – Scheduled Caste	6.39	0.87	< .001	4.35	8.44
Backward – Scheduled Caste	2.73	1.29	.092	−0.34	5.80
<i>Education × social practices</i>					
Illiterate – Primary to higher secondary	−6.52	2.61	.039	−12.77	−0.27
Illiterate – Graduation and above	−8.85	2.68	.004	−15.25	−2.44
Primary to higher secondary – Graduation and above	−2.32	1.17	.120	−5.10	0.45
<i>Education × cultural practices</i>					
Illiterate – Primary to higher secondary	−5.14	2.08	.042	−10.13	−0.15
Illiterate – Graduation and above	−7.39	2.23	.004	−12.70	−2.08
Primary to higher secondary – Graduation and above	−2.25	1.11	.112	−4.90	0.40

Games–Howell procedure, selected because group variances were unequal. CI = 95% confidence interval for the mean difference. Only non-redundant comparisons are shown; the reversed contrast for each pair carries the same p value with the sign of the mean difference and the bounds reversed.

4.6 Barriers to electronic media access

Slightly under half the sample (47.5%) reported no significant difficulty in accessing electronic media, meaning that 52.5% encountered at least one barrier (Table 7). The most frequently cited

constraint was household and care work, reported by 23.8% of respondents, followed by difficulty navigating online platforms (18.3%). Infrastructure was a comparatively minor concern: only 7.8% cited internet connectivity. Explicit spousal restriction was reported by 2.8%.

Table 7 Distribution of challenges reported in accessing electronic media (N = 400)

Challenge reported	N	%
Difficulty navigating online platforms	73	18.3
Poor internet connectivity	31	7.8
Husband does not permit extended use	11	2.8

Challenge reported	N	%
Household chores and childcare leave no time	95	23.8
No significant challenge	190	47.5
Total	400	100.0

That time and skills outrank connectivity is the substantive finding here. In a district where devices are widely available, the binding constraint on women's media engagement is no longer the network but the working day.

Chi-square tests examined whether reported challenges varied by age (Table 8). Difficulty navigating online platforms rose steeply with age, from 12.0% among women under 20 to 33.0%

among those aged 40 and above, $\chi^2(3, N = 400) = 20.95, p < .001$, consistent with the literacy gradient identified in Table 2. Household and care burdens followed a different distribution, peaking among women aged 20–29 (33.3%) and 30–39 (29.8%) — the years of intensive childrearing — and falling to 8.7% among women aged 40 and above, $\chi^2(3, N = 400) = 23.25, p < .001$. Connectivity problems did not vary significantly by age.

Table 8 Chi-square tests of association between age and challenges reported in accessing electronic media (N = 400)

Challenge	< 20 %	20–29 %	30–39 %	40+ %	Test statistic
Navigating online platforms	12.0	11.4	15.3	33.0	$\chi^2 = 20.95, df = 3, p < .001$
Internet connectivity	14.0	8.1	6.5	5.8	$\chi^2 = 3.58, df = 3, p = .310$
Husband restricts use	4.0	5.7	0.0	1.9	$\chi^2 = 8.03, df = 3, p = .045^a$
Household chores / childcare	16.0	33.3	29.8	8.7	$\chi^2 = 23.25, df = 3, p < .001$
No significant challenge	54.0	41.5	48.4	50.5	$\chi^2 = 3.05, df = 3, p = .384$

Percentages denote the proportion within each age group reporting the challenge. ^a One or more cells had an expected count below five; this result should be interpreted with caution and verified using Fisher's exact test.

Reported challenges also varied by caste (Table 9). Household and care work was reported by 43.1% of forward-caste women, against 22.9% of Scheduled Caste women and 11.3% of Backward-caste women, $\chi^2(2, N = 400) = 18.22, p < .001$. Correspondingly, Backward-caste women were most likely to report no significant challenge (57.7%), compared with 48.0% of

Scheduled Caste and 32.8% of forward-caste respondents, $\chi^2(2, N = 400) = 8.07, p = .018$. Neither navigation difficulty nor connectivity varied significantly by caste.

This finding runs counter to a straightforward advantage narrative. Forward-caste women, who recorded the highest practice scores in Table 5 and comparatively high device ownership in

Table 2, also reported the heaviest time constraints. Material advantage evidently coexists with, and may in some respects intensify,

normative expectations regarding domestic responsibility and restricted leisure. H4 is supported.

Table 9 Chi-square tests of association between caste category and challenges reported in accessing electronic media (N = 400)

Challenge	Forward %	Backward %	SC %	Test statistic
Navigating online platforms	17.2	15.5	19.2	$\chi^2 = 0.56$, df = 2, p = .755
Internet connectivity	6.9	9.9	7.4	$\chi^2 = 0.55$, df = 2, p = .759
Husband restricts use	0.0	5.6	2.6	$\chi^2 = 3.88$, df = 2, p = .144 ^a
Household chores / childcare	43.1	11.3	22.9	$\chi^2 = 18.22$, df = 2, p < .001
No significant challenge	32.8	57.7	48.0	$\chi^2 = 8.07$, df = 2, p = .018

Percentages denote the proportion within each caste category reporting the challenge. ^a One or more cells had an expected count below five; this result should be interpreted with caution and verified using Fisher's exact test.

Reported challenges varied most sharply of all by literacy (Table 10). Difficulty navigating online platforms was reported by 53.3% of illiterate respondents against 12.1% of literate respondents, $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 58.24$, p < .001 — the largest single association observed in this study. Household and care work ran in the opposite direction, cited by 26.8% of literate women against 6.7% of illiterate women, $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 11.38$, p = .001, and literate respondents were correspondingly more likely to report no significant challenge at all (50.6% against 30.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 400) = 8.67$, p = .003. Neither

connectivity nor spousal restriction varied significantly by literacy.

The contrast between these two rows is analytically important. For illiterate women the binding constraint is the interface itself; for literate women, who can already operate the device, the constraint becomes the working day. Barriers here are sequential rather than cumulative: resolving the skills constraint does not remove the obstacle so much as relocate it, which implies that digital literacy provision and time-burden interventions are complements rather than alternatives.

Table 10 Chi-square tests of association between educational qualification and challenges reported in accessing electronic media (N = 400)

Challenge	Illiterate %	Literate %	Test statistic
Navigating online platforms	53.3	12.1	$\chi^2 = 58.24$, df = 1, p < .001
Internet connectivity	10.0	7.4	$\chi^2 = 0.50$, df = 1, p = .480

Challenge	Illiterate %	Literate %	Test statistic
Husband restricts use	0.0	3.2	$\chi^2 = 2.00$, df = 1, p = .158 ^a
Household chores / childcare	6.7	26.8	$\chi^2 = 11.38$, df = 1, p = .001
No significant challenge	30.0	50.6	$\chi^2 = 8.67$, df = 1, p = .003

Illiterate n = 60; literate n = 340. Percentages denote the proportion within each group reporting the challenge. ^a One or more cells had an expected count below five; this result should be interpreted with caution and verified using Fisher's exact test.

5 Discussion

This study set out to examine how exposure to electronic media relates to the social and cultural practices of rural women in a district where patriarchal norms remain strongly enforced. The results support a conditional rather than a uniform account of media influence: exposure is associated with changed practice, but the magnitude and direction of that association depend on who is watching, what they are watching and how much uninterrupted time they command.

5.1 Access is stratified, and the stratification compounds

Mobile phone ownership reached 68.8% of the sample, but the distribution was markedly uneven. The steep age gradient — 85.4% among women in their twenties against 42.7% among those aged 40 and above — reflects both generational adoption patterns and the specific uses that draw younger women online, including access to information on government welfare schemes and the use of the phone as a safety resource. Women described using mobile phones to alert family members or authorities when facing domestic violence, dowry-related pressure or conflict with in-laws, a function that gives ownership a protective dimension beyond information access.

The literacy gradient is more troubling. Illiterate women, at 35.0% ownership against 74.7% among literate respondents, face a compounding disadvantage: they are least able to navigate text-based interfaces and least likely to possess a device on which to develop that capacity. This aligns closely with Bala and Singhal (2018), who found that access without usable skill produces

little benefit, and with the broader argument that digital access supports empowerment only when accompanied by meaningful capability (Madra-Sawicka et al., 2020). Literate women's higher ownership appears partly instrumental: schools now transmit homework and performance updates through digital channels, giving mothers of school-age children a concrete reason to acquire and retain a device.

The caste pattern is less straightforward than a simple hierarchy would predict. Backward-caste women recorded the highest ownership rate, exceeding forward-caste women. Households in this category in Rewari are frequently engaged in small-scale cultivation, dairy production and petty trade, activities in which women share operational responsibility with male household members and for which reliable communication is functionally necessary. Ownership here follows livelihood requirement rather than status, a finding that complicates the assumption that digital access maps neatly onto social hierarchy.

5.2 Content type determines whether exposure translates into change

The differentiated group differences in Table 4 constitute the study's most theoretically substantive result. Entertainment, educational, health and livelihood content were each significantly associated with changed practice; news and devotional content were not. Media system dependency theory anticipates precisely this, since dependency forms around content that serves goals the individual actually holds.

The pattern is legible in terms of women's stated concerns. Entertainment programming — particularly serial drama — functions as a psychological outlet and as a source of vicarious

models: respondents described identifying with narrative situations resembling their own and using the medium to process emotion. It also carries cultural transmission, exposing women to folk forms from Haryana and from neighbouring Punjab and Rajasthan. Health content serves women's position as primary caregivers, supplying information on nutrition, childcare and responses to household health emergencies. Livelihood content is used instrumentally, for tailoring, beautician skills, handicraft and animal husbandry techniques. Each of these categories offers either an alternative model of practice or directly actionable knowledge. Devotional content, by contrast, reinforces existing cultural frameworks and would not be expected to correlate with change — its slight negative coefficient, though non-significant, is consistent with that reading.

The null result for news deserves comment, since news is conventionally assumed to be the civically consequential category. One plausible explanation is that news consumption among these respondents is incidental — occurring when a male household member controls the television — rather than chosen, and therefore generates little dependency in the theoretical sense.

5.3 The binding constraint is time, not infrastructure

Perhaps the most policy-relevant finding is that household and care work (23.8%) outranked connectivity (7.8%) as a reported barrier by a factor of three. In a state with comparatively strong digital infrastructure, the constraint on rural women's media engagement has shifted from the network to the working day. Rural women in Rewari, particularly in joint households, describe a near-continuous sequence of cooking, cleaning, water collection, childcare, care of in-laws, animal feeding, firewood collection and fodder gathering that leaves little discretionary time.

Age, education and caste patterns reinforce this reading. Time constraints peaked among women aged 20–29 and 30–39, the years of most intensive childrearing, while navigation difficulty

peaked among women aged 40 and above, tracking the literacy distribution. The education analysis makes that tracking explicit: illiterate women were more than four times as likely as literate women to cite difficulty navigating online platforms (53.3% against 12.1%), while literate women were four times as likely to cite household and care work (26.8% against 6.7%). Skills and time are therefore not competing explanations but successive ones, each binding on a different group. The finding that forward-caste women reported the heaviest time burden (43.1%) despite their material advantages suggests that normative expectations regarding domestic responsibility and restricted leisure can operate independently of, and sometimes counter to, economic position. Comparatively few women (2.8%) reported explicit spousal prohibition — but explicit prohibition is arguably the least interesting form of constraint, since a domestic workload that consumes all available hours accomplishes the same exclusion without requiring anyone to forbid anything.

Three further constraints emerged from field conversations rather than from the structured schedule. Younger and middle-aged women commonly cannot watch television alongside in-laws or senior male household members, restricting both viewing time and content choice. Some younger women are discouraged from owning phones because of anxieties about relationships outside the household. And children's use of the family device for schooling and entertainment further compresses women's access — a form of intra-household competition that the pandemic-era shifts to digital schooling has intensified.

5.4 Media exposure works on some practices more readily than others

The results indicate movement in decision-making participation, rights awareness, social contact, food habits, dress and attitudes towards children's equal treatment and early marriage — findings broadly consistent with Kumar and Lahaik (2022) and with Gupta and Kumari's (2025) Haryana-based work on technology adoption. Yet the practices most closely tied to

family honour and public presentations have proved more durable. Observance of veiling and of traditional attire at family functions and social celebrations persists largely intact, even among women whose everyday practice has shifted considerably in other respects.

This asymmetry is analytically important. Media exposure appears to operate most readily on practices that are individually enacted and low in social visibility, and least readily on practices that are collectively enforced and publicly displayed. A woman may revise her food preferences or her view of daughters' education without confronting anyone; she cannot abandon veiling at a wedding without a visible breach. Change is therefore proceeding unevenly, and studies that aggregate across practice domains risk overstating it.

6 Limitations

The study was conducted in a single district, and Rewari's relatively strong infrastructure and proximity to the National Capital Region limit generalisation to less connected districts of Haryana or to states with weaker digital penetration. The sample was limited to married women aged 18–60 with existing access to at least one form of electronic media, which excludes both unmarried women and those with no access at all. The latter exclusion is consequential, since women entirely outside the media environment are precisely those for whom digital exclusion is most severe.

7 Conclusion

Electronic media is contributing to measurable change in the social and cultural practices of rural women in Rewari district. A state long characterised by strongly enforced patriarchal norms is registering gradual shifts in household decision-making, communication, rights awareness, dress and food practice, and attitudes towards marriage — but these shifts are neither uniform nor automatic. Younger and better-educated women show substantially greater change than older and less-educated women, who continue to hold to inherited practice. Content matters: material offering alternative models or actionable knowledge is associated with change, while devotional and news content is not.

The study's central practical finding is that the primary constraint on rural women's media engagement is no longer device availability or network coverage but the combination of domestic time burden and digital skill. Slightly more than half the sample reported at least one barrier, and household work outranked connectivity threefold. Interventions that supply devices or extend coverage without addressing time poverty and functional digital literacy are therefore unlikely to reach the women who would benefit most. The positive potential of electronic media can be realised through digital literacy programming, promotion of responsible use and culturally sensitive content that advances gender equality while respecting cultural identity.

7.1 Implications

The findings position electronic media as an agent of socio-cultural change rather than merely a source of entertainment, and support treating it as an instrument of rural development. Three implications follow for practice. Programmes seeking to reach rural women should prioritise content in the categories demonstrably associated with change — health, livelihood and educational programming — rather than assuming that undifferentiated exposure produces benefit. Interventions should address the household time economy directly, since digital access without discretionary time yields little. And digital literacy provision should be designed for non-readers, since the women least able to navigate online platforms are also those least likely to own a device on which to practise.

7.2 Recommendations

1. Conduct regular digital literacy programmes for rural women, with particular attention to the 18–35 age group, at village, gram panchayat and block levels.
2. Establish digital literacy and resource centres at village, panchayat and block levels providing continuing access to training, internet facilities and information on education, health, employment and government services.

3. Run awareness campaigns on the safe, responsible and productive use of electronic media, including recognition of misinformation and online safety.
4. Electronic media campaign should target not only women but also husbands, fathers, in-laws and other family members , emphasizing the importance of shared decision making and equal distribution of family responsibilities
5. Government departments, panchayats and civil society should collaborate with media platforms to produce locally relevant awareness programmes in Hindi and regional languages making them accessible to rural communities.
6. Government channels, Media content creators , You Tubers, reel makers, should be encouraged to produce culturally relevant and locally accessible , gender transformative contents that promote higher education of girls, greater involvement of men, boys and parents and community leaders in endorsing gender equality, socialization of boys and girls and women centric legal right based and available support services contents.
7. Self help Groups (SHGs) which continue to serve as important change agents in rural communities should be capacitated through training in diverse thematic areas that enhance socio-cultural practices of rural women

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8. Declarations

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Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent to publish Not applicable. The manuscript contains no individual person's identifying data.

Data availability The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author contributions Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. Data collection and analysis were performed by Maria Roselin M. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Maria Roselin M, and G. Metilda Buvaneswari supervised the study and critically revised the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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