

Article

Media Literacy and Social Capital: Indian Citizens' Attitudes Toward Media and Established Institutions

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Abstract

This study investigates the dynamics between media use, online activity, media literacy, and institutional trust among Indian citizens through a survey of adults distributed in six languages. Drawing on social capital theory, this study investigates how various media behaviors relate to perceptions of institutional actors such as governments, non-profits, and corporations as those actors increasingly seek digital avenues to reach constituencies. Findings underscore the significant relationships between media use, media literacy and positive views of democratic institutions, while online activities themselves did not appear to be significant. Notably, media literacy emerges as having a key positive tie to trust in political and state institutions as well as private, media, technology, and non-profit institutions. These results shed light on the nuanced relationship between digital engagement and perceptions of institutional credibility within the Indian context.

Keywords: institutional trust; media use; online interaction; media literacy; social capital

1. Introduction

Institutions such as governments, old and new media, financial corporations, and non-profits as systems of social organization uphold societal order through consensus and shared norms of individual conduct, and this societal structure relies on citizens' confidence and trust in institutional efficacy. The cultivation of institutional trust is fundamental to fostering a community participation in a civil democratic society, as institutional structures encourage collective involvement across political, economic, and social systems (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2002). Furthermore, heightened levels of trust correlate with enhanced delivery of public services and the promotion of democratic behaviors like cooperation and adherence (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2016). Yet, the emergence of digitalization of media introduced novel consumption patterns often associated with diminished trust in institutions (Mari et al., 2022; Verboord et al., 2025). At its foundation, understanding the trust in relationships between individuals and social structures can yield insights into how networks, relationships, and interactions can contribute to our understanding of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). However, discerning the precise impact of societal trends in a period of technological change on institutional trust has posed a challenge.

Media institutions and messages have a pivotal role in shaping social trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000), suggesting that individuals' perceptions of institutions and their representatives are influenced by the media content they consume. Yet, not extensively considered in previous work is the advancement of social



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media and technology companies as societal institutions, which can be especially relevant to understanding societal norms and expectations in a country such as India (Mukherjee, 2024). As Tsfati and Ariely (2014) noted, much of the previous work on institutional trust has been conducted in Western countries. This study expands recent scholarship to understand underlying factors correlated to institutional trust and the construction of social capital among Indian media users, seeking to shed light on the intricate dynamics shaping public trust in institutions in the digital age.

1.1. Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). He emphasized the importance of network size and the accumulation of past social capital for individuals. Bourdieu highlighted the profit motive as the primary reason for individuals to engage in and maintain network connections, noting that this profit may not always be economic but can ultimately be reduced to economic terms. Coleman’s (1988) definition of social capital aligns closely with Bourdieu’s but from a different theoretical perspective. Coleman viewed social capital as “some aspect of social structure” that facilitates actions of individuals or corporate actors within that structure (p. 98). He combined functionalist and rational theories, seeing social capital as both a bonding mechanism that integrates social structure and a resource that agents can utilize. Coleman emphasized that social structure precedes individual agents and that embedded social capital serves as a resource for them. Putnam’s (1993) strictly functionalist approach characterized social capital as “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 35). Putnam particularly emphasized the role of trust in fostering interpersonal cooperation, which he saw as a crucial aspect of social capital. In this view, aspects of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust aid in coordinating and cooperating for mutual advantage (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom & Ahn, 2003). While all three scholars converge on the importance of social networks and relationships in social capital theory, Coleman’s emphasis on structural aspects of social capital, and Putnam’s underscoring trust and norms in fostering cooperation and civic engagement combined highlight the need for understanding the relationship between individuals and institutions.

Within this structural-relational conceptualization, organizations, as institutional underpinnings, play a crucial role in facilitating the development of social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). For social capital to thrive, it must be integrated within and connected to formal political and legal structures (Rothstein & Kumlin, 2001; Stolle, 2002). Social capital is inseparable from institutions of politics or governance within civil society. Further advancing this idea, Booth and Richard (1998) showed that individual or collective trust in formal institutions predicts general societal trust, lending credence to the idea that social capital is an outcome rather than a cause of institutional structure. Formal institutions such as government and legislative bodies—as well as media outlets and corporations—can either promote or hinder the development of social capital (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Fennema & Tillie, 2001).

1.2. Institutional Trust

Warren (2020) argued that deliberative democracy in mass societies is reliant on what have been characterized as shortcuts, such as representational governance, divisions of labor, and trust relationships, both between individuals and other individuals and individuals and institutions of power. In essence, citizens must believe that high-quality

institutions will function as expected for democracy to function as expected (see also Rohrschneider, 2005). Thus, institutional trust is the conviction or anticipation that the government and other bodies of social power will act in accordance with established norms and principles (Chu & Shen, 2017; Hetherington, 2005; Norris, 2017; Tyler & Degoe, 1996). High levels of institutional trust are recognized as a critical gauge of the overall political health of a democratic system (Dalton, 2004; Pharr & Putnam, 2000) and of community information exchange (Thorson & Edgerly, 2017; Watson & Cavanah, 2015). Political trust lays the groundwork for the stability and efficient operation of society in its entirety (Hooghe, 2011; Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2018; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Strömbäck et al., 2016). Yet, trust in government is not the only essential component of trust in institutions.

1.3. Media Use, Interactivity, and Literacy

Three elements of media that are valuable to consider in how they correlate to democratic action are media consumption, online activity and interactivity, and the critical and productive elements of digital media literacy (Park et al., 2023). Both terrestrial and digital media have progressively taken center stage as powerful actors facilitating an array of social, psychological, or political processes (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Oliver et al., 2019; Thorson & Edgerly, 2017). Much of what individuals learn about the world beyond their immediate experiences is conveyed through media content. Consumption of media can be a primary influencer in shaping individuals' social identities and the cultivation of social capital (Shah et al., 2001; Slater, 2007).

Media outlets within these democratic systems are responsible for shaping trust in the institutions they cover while simultaneously being subject to evaluations of trustworthiness based on their own performance (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Verboord et al., 2025). Trust in politics tends to be higher among regular consumers of traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers (Brosius et al., 2022; Ceron, 2015; X. Chen & Shi, 2001; Li, 2004; Wu, 2015). Notably, recent structural social changes resulting from technological advancement have additional layered trust in the technology itself on top of the extant social structures (for example, see Brown et al., 2025; Capiola et al., 2023; Valori et al., 2024). In the present media landscape, there is a noticeable separation between what is often referred to as “mainstream” or “legacy” news media (traditional TV broadcasters, newspapers, radio) and digital-only media (Edgerly et al., 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). The expansion and integration of various media platforms—especially digital platforms—have resulted in the emergence of novel forms of media consumption, some of which are linked to lower levels of institutional trust (Ceron, 2015; Mari et al., 2022). Media content emphasizing negativity, incivility, and lack of substance has contributed to the increasing public mistrust in government and institutions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1996). Given these previous findings, we propose that:

H1. *Higher reported media use is positively associated with higher levels of institutional trust.*

Given the indispensable role of media in society, understanding interactivity becomes crucial. Interaction between individuals in digital space facilitates interpersonal communication (Kioussis, 2002; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) and encompasses elements such as synchronization, authority, usage, diverse options, guidance, hypertextuality, participation, and receptiveness (Kioussis, 2002; Rafaeli & Ariel, 2007). Digital technology and online spaces are often associated with high interactivity while traditional media have low interactivity (Ariel & Avidar, 2015). More recently, human–computer interactivity has faced new challenges in trust from sources such as development of algorithmic decision-making,

automation, and artificial intelligence (Akar, 2025; Brown et al., 2025; Bujold et al., 2024, Höddinghaus et al., 2021; Valori et al., 2024).

Evidence that online interactivity can increase political engagement has been building for several decades (Chae et al., 2019). For example, Wang (2007) showed that using the Internet for political expression correlates with higher political interest, trust in government, and efficacy, thereby boosting political participation like voting and campaign involvement. Similarly, Mou and Lin (2017) highlighted the important relationship between online information, social capital, and active social media engagement in a health crisis. Thus, the growth of digital functionalities that allow for civic engagement, community interactions, and networking activities foundational to the development of social capital have necessitated further inspection of online interaction as a moderator of deliberative democracy. Given these previous findings, we propose that:

H2. *Higher reported online interactivity is positively associated with higher levels of institutional trust.*

Expanding on this argument about functionality, media literacy has emerged as an important aspect of digital media consumption. Media literacy conceptually refers not just to the amount that individuals engage with various forms of media but how they do it. This is inclusive of consuming media content, producing their own media content, crucially assessing others' content, and accomplishing tasks using digital media (Buckingham et al., 2005; Tugtekin & Koc, 2019). Media literacy's significance is grounded not just in the volume of media exposure but also in recognizing the crucial role of creating and assessing civic information in fostering the development of democracy, cultural engagement, and active citizenship (Cho et al., 2025; Koltay, 2011).

To further this point, Park et al. (2023) found that online interactions and media literacy predicted civic engagement activities, drawing online users into a rich tapestry of democratic and community issues. Thus, users who knew how to navigate online tools—users that consume news online, produce their own content, and comment on others' perspectives—were likely more attuned to community issues. This was further compounded by the finding that media-literate individuals—those who were comfortable both consuming and producing as well as critically assessing media content online—were additionally more likely to be civically connected. These compounding connections between online interaction and media literacy are important to understand how social capital is constructed. Given these previous findings, we propose that:

H3. *Higher reported media literacy is positively associated with higher levels of institutional trust.*

Despite India's role as the world's largest democracy and one of the largest media markets (Chadha, 2017; Kemp, 2025), the relationship between democratic institutions and media in this country remains understudied. Civic engagement has become an institutional priority in India in recent years (Bajaj & Wahl, 2017; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) after low levels of civic engagement have been reported (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019), and the country has experienced some democratic backsliding (Nord et al., 2025). These conditions position India as a compelling site for our work, leading us to the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent can media use, online interactivity, and media literacy predict trust in Indian institutional actors?

Finally, as interactivity and literacy have become increasingly entangled with institutions, the digital media content producers and the technology companies responsible for interconnectivity and interoperability. Machines have transitioned from background actors to "relational mechanisms that shape human associations, organizational processes,

and social structures” (Lumineau et al., 2023, p. 23), and further study of perceptions of technology companies as institutions becomes necessary (see also, Bailey et al., 2022; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). Thus, we additionally ask:

RQ2: To what extent can those factors predict trust in (a) Indian media and (b) technology companies operating in India?

2. Method

Indian citizens who were 18 years old or older were asked to self-report their levels of trust in democratic institutions, media consumption, common online activities, perceptions of media literacy in an online survey. The survey was translated from English to Hindi, Marathi, Telegu, Bengali, and Tamil to reach a wider audience. About 70.4% of Indians speak one of these six languages as their first (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2022). They are the six most common languages spoken in India.

Recruiting messages were then posted in about two dozen Facebook groups about India or for an Indian audience (e.g., All India Research Scholars Association (AIRSA), India, <https://facebook.com/groups/1643838189095506/>, accessed on 6 September 2023, 19.8 K members; Travel India IN, <https://facebook.com/groups/335979383522877/>, accessed on 6 September 2023, 101.5 K members; All India NGO/Trust/Society Group, <https://facebook.com/groups/187188345826192/>, accessed on 6 September 2023, 23.1 K members; and Best homestays in India, <https://facebook.com/groups/1775611362751271/>, accessed on 6 September 2023, 452.6 K members). Then, one of the authors used snowball sampling through their personal network to recruit additional responses. In these two efforts, participants who agreed were entered to win one of five \$20 USD gift cards as an incentive. Finally, additional responses were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk using the CloudResearch service (Hauser et al., 2023; Litman et al., 2017). Participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk were paid \$1.20 USD for completing the survey, which pilot testing demonstrated would take about 9 min. Participants received a written statement about the study before completing the survey to fulfill informed consent responsibilities. The authors’ institutional human subjects review office approved this study. A total of 1368 valid responses were collected (Table 1). The data was analyzed using the SPSS software package, version 29.

Table 1. Summary of respondents.

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Language	Hindi	71	5.2
	English	1151	84.1
	Bengali	6	0.4
	Marathi	3	0.2
	Telegu	8	0.6
	Tamil	129	9.4
Gender	Male	857	68.2
	Female	365	29.1
	Non-binary	34	2.7
Age	18–24	422	33.4
	25–34	339	26.8
	35–44	392	31.0
	45–54	78	6.2
	55–64	24	1.9
	65+	9	0.7

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Employment	Working full-time	636	50.8
	Working part-time	157	12.5
	Unemployed	39	3.1
	Homemaker or stay-at-home	33	2.6
	Student	358	28.6
	Retired	12	1.0
	Other	16	1.3
Marital status	Married	670	54.4
	Living with a partner	37	3.0
	Widowed	8	0.6
	Divorced/Separated	8	0.6
	Never been married	508	41.3
Education	Literate, no formal schooling	23	1.9
	SSC or HSC	153	12.6
	Some college	211	17.3
	Graduate, general	522	42.9
	Graduate, professional	308	25.3

2.1. Sample

Respondents selected English ($n = 1151$, 84.1%) and Tamil ($n = 129$, 9.4%) as the most common languages in which to complete the survey. Participants were mostly male ($n = 857$, 68.2%), and 9 in 10 respondents reported their age range to be 18–24 years old ($n = 422$, 33.4%), 25–34 years old ($n = 339$, 26.8%), or 35–44 years old ($n = 392$, 31.1%). Full-time employees ($n = 636$, 50.8%) comprised about half of the sample, with more than 9 in 10 reporting working outside of the home at least some amount or being a student. More than half of the sample were married ($n = 670$, 54.4%), and more than 2 in 3 ($n = 830$, 67.2%) had completed a college degree. Of the nine Indian Postal Index Number zones, the most common response came from Zone 6 ($n = 699$, 51.2%), which is in the heavily populated Southern portion of India and includes Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and union territories of Puducherry and Lakshadweep.

2.2. Variables

We asked respondents to state the degree to which they trusted 18 specified institutions in India to capture an overall measure of trust in legal, political, financial, and media organizations in their country and participants' communities using a seven-point Likert-type scale. As [Chu and Shen \(2017\)](#) argue, institutional trust can be constructed through measuring perceptions of political actors in government and non-political actors such as law enforcement. As such, respondents were asked to share the extent to which they trusted the Indian presidency, prime ministry, parliament, state assembly, the election commission, reserve bank, armed forces, police, and courts as well as political parties (BJP, Congress party, and regional parties).

To additionally conceptualize institutions as organizations and structures that contribute to the mutual advancement of society ([Putnam, 1993](#); [Ostrom & Ahn, 2003](#)) and provide democratic shortcuts ([Warren, 2020](#)), we also asked respondents to share their perceptions of technology companies; financial institutions; non-government organizations,

giving examples for each item; and media platforms (radio stations, television stations, and print or online news outlets). Cronbach's α for the 18 items ($n = 1091$, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.12$) was 0.94.

Three components of the constructed variable emerged using an exploratory factor analysis with a Varimax rotation ($KMO = 0.942$). The first includes elected and appointed bodies of the state (presidency, prime ministry, parliament, state assembly, the election commission, reserve bank, and the majority party in the federal government—the BJP). Because of this, we have identified this component as political ($n = 1174$, $M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.35$) because it is most strongly associated with political actors. The second component is what we have identified as opposition ($n = 1198$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.56$) because it includes only the Congress party—the led opposition to the BJP—and other regional parties. The third component includes what we have identified as inclusive of non-state actors (radio, television, print news, for-profit companies, financial institutions, and non-government organizations) along with state actors without political appointment (armed forces, police, and courts). Because of this, we have identified this component as apolitical, ($n = 1143$, $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.17$) while acknowledging that there are political elements of these institutions. The dimension reduction explained 65.0% of the total variance.

Additionally, we identified a media trust variable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$) from the radio, television, and print responses ($n = 1204$, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.40$). Finally, we asked a single question about trust in technology institutions ($n = 1214$, $M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.49$), giving examples of companies (Infosys, IBM, Microsoft, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Amazon, Google) commonly thought (Saura García, 2024) to be responsible for developing the elements of interoperability and interconnectivity that have led to technology companies being perceived as “relational mechanisms that shape human associations, organizational processes, and social structures” (Lumineau et al., 2023, p. 23). Given that TCS and Infosys are two of the largest technology sector employers in India (Srivastava, 2026), and Microsoft, IBM, Amazon, and Google are commonly listed as examples of large and powerful global technology companies (Saura García, 2024), these six companies were selected to serve as examples of technology institutions.

Respondents also identified how often they read a newspaper, watched television, consumed online news, or streamed video from services such as Amazon Prime or Netflix (Table 2) from the following choices: “more than 10 times a day,” “between 6 and 10 times a day,” “between 2 and 5 times a day,” “once a day,” “2–3 times a week,” “4–6 days a week,” “once a week,” and “did not use in the last week.” After reverse coding, streaming ($n = 1309$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 2.19$) was most common, followed by online news ($n = 1310$, $M = 4.03$, $SD = 2.04$), television ($n = 1316$, $M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.16$), and newspaper ($n = 1305$, $M = 2.77$, $SD = 2.11$).

Table 2. Media use and social media use.

	Descriptive Statistics
Read a newspaper	$n = 1305$, $M = 2.77$, $SD = 2.11$
Watched television	$n = 1316$, $M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.16$
Read or watch news online	$n = 1310$, $M = 4.03$, $SD = 2.04$
Streamed video online	$n = 1309$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 2.20$
Social media use	$n = 1080$, $M = 37.05$, $SD = 17.84$

Participants then identified from a list of 14 social media channels (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitch, Twitter, Viber, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and WeChat) the ones that they used the most using the same

choices at the media use variable (Park et al., 2023). We removed TikTok from the list of choices as the platform was prohibited in India (Ellis-Petersen, 2020).

Given that social media use has been argued to have contributed to a lack of institutional trust (Ceron, 2015; Mari et al., 2022), we created an additive index of social media use with heavy users across multiple platforms reporting higher scores and those avoiding social media showing lower scores. This approach mimicked Park et al.'s (2023) study of civic engagement and media use. Respondents reported ($n = 1080$) social media use ranging from 0 (the lowest possible) to 98 (the highest possible) with a mean score of 37.05 and a standard deviation of 17.84.

To measure the extent to which respondents interacted with digital technology and content, we asked nine questions ($n = 1204$, $M = 0.59$, $SD = 0.29$) about participants' online activities (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). In considering the relationship between civic engagement and media use, online activities, and media literacy, Park et al. (2023) included questions about the respondent's experience with behaviors such as posting or reacting to something on social media, building a website, or sharing music/videos they have created. We used these questions verbatim. The 12 media literacy questions came from D. T. Chen et al.'s (2011) conceptualization as productive, consumptive, critical, and functional (see also Park et al., 2023; Tugtekin & Koc, 2019). Three questions from each of these factors (Tugtekin & Koc, 2019) were included, such as collaborating with others online, developing media content for others to view online, critically assessing online content, and using search engines to find information. Following Park et al. (2023), participants were asked about their "confidence in the ability to help others" use media literacy tools to reduce social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993; Jang & Irwin, 2021; Oral, 2020). Cronbach's α for this measure ($n = 1187$, $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.19$) was 0.93.

Control variables included gender (male = 1), age (35–44 = 1), employment status (student = 1), marital status (married = 1), and education (graduate degree completed = 1).

3. Results

We used linear regressions to measure the relationships between media use, online interactivity, and media literacy and various constructs of institutional trust. Overall institutional trust, as well as trust in political institutions, oppositional institutions, apolitical institutions, media institutions, and technology institutions were treated as outcome variables. For each outcome variable, we entered the control variables, media use variables, the online interaction variable, and the media literacy variables into separate models.

3.1. Democratic Institutions

To address the hypotheses, the constructed institutional trust variable was entered as the outcome variable (Table 3). A small adjusted R^2 of 0.272 was significant ($F(12, 796) = 26.114$, $p < 0.05$). Within the control variables, only married respondents emerged as significant ($\beta = 0.079$, $p < 0.05$), but weakly contributed positively to the model. Under media use, newspaper reading ($\beta = 0.100$, $p < 0.05$) and televisions watching ($\beta = 0.078$, $p < 0.05$) both showed weak positive contributions as well. Online news consumption ($\beta = -0.112$, $p < 0.05$), use of streaming services ($\beta = -0.091$, $p < 0.05$), and use of social media ($\beta = -0.071$, $p < 0.05$) all had weak negative contributions. Thus, the first hypothesis was partially supported, with traditional media contributing positively to the model and digital media contributing negatively. Online interaction alone was not significant, meaning the second hypothesis was not supported. Media literacy ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < 0.05$) stood out as the strongest predictor of institutional trust, revealing that the third hypothesis was supported. Respondents indicated that simply being active online did not have a significant

relationship with institutional trust either positively or negatively, while respondents who critically assessed online information were also more trusting of democratic institutions.

Table 3. Linear regression results, dependent variables: institutional trust, political, opposition.

		Institutions (β)	Political (β)	Opposition (β)
Demographics	Gender (male = 1)	0.002	−0.011	−0.039
	Age (35–44 = 1)	0.056	0.061	0.040
	Employment (full-time = 1)	0.042	0.059	0.047
	Marital status (married = 1)	0.079 *	0.068	0.103 *
	Education (graduate degree completed = 1)	0.054	0.087 *	−0.021
Media use	Newspaper	0.100 *	0.086 *	0.118 *
	Television	0.078 *	0.116 *	−0.084 *
	Online news	−0.112 *	−0.078 *	−0.175 *
	Streaming services	−0.091 *	−0.081 *	−0.079 *
	Social media	−0.071 *	−0.097 *	0.056
Online interactions		0.050	0.000	0.106 *
Media literacy		0.415 *	0.373 *	0.184 *
Adjusted R ²		0.272 *	0.238 *	0.134 *

* = $p < 0.05$.

To address the first research question, the constructed variables for political institutions, oppositional institutions, and apolitical institutions were entered as outcome variables into separate linear regressions.

3.2. Political Institutions

A small adjusted R² of 0.238 was significant ($F(12, 837) = 23.065, p < 0.05$) when considering the degree of trust in political institutions such as the presidency, parliament, and appointed government officials. Within the control variables, only highly educated respondents emerged as significant ($\beta = 0.087, p < 0.05$) but weakly contributed positively to the model. Under media use, newspaper reading ($\beta = 0.085, p < 0.05$) and televisions watching ($\beta = 0.116, p < 0.05$) both showed weak positive contributions as well. Online news consumption ($\beta = -0.078, p < 0.05$), use of streaming services ($\beta = -0.081, p < 0.05$), and use of social media ($\beta = -0.097, p < 0.05$) all had weak negative contributions. Media literacy ($\beta = 0.373, p < 0.05$) again stood out as having the strongest ties to positive institutional trust, while online interaction alone was not significant.

3.3. Oppositional Actors

A small adjusted R² of 0.134 was significant ($F(12, 845) = 12.049, p < 0.05$) when considering the degree of trust in political oppositional institutions including minority political parties. Within the control variables, only married respondents emerged as significant ($\beta = 0.103, p < 0.05$), but weakly contributed positively to the model. Under media use, newspaper reading ($\beta = 0.118, p < 0.05$) showed weak positive contributions as well. Unlike with political actors, television watching ($\beta = -0.084, p < 0.05$) contributed negatively, while both online news consumption ($\beta = -0.175, p < 0.05$) and use of streaming services ($\beta = -0.079, p < 0.05$) also contributed negative perceptions. Use of social media was not significant. Additionally separating itself from the political institution construct, online interactions themselves ($\beta = 0.106, p < 0.05$) contributed positive perceptions of trust, yet media literacy ($\beta = 0.184, p < 0.05$) had the strongest ties to positive institutional trust, albeit still a weak contributor to the model.

3.4. Apolitical Actors

A small adjusted R^2 of 0.243 was significant ($F(12, 818) = 23.231, p < 0.05$) when considering the degree of trust in apolitical institutions such as the military, police, and courts, as well as non-governmental institutions and for-profit companies (Table 4). No control variables were significant. Under media use, televisions watching ($\beta = 0.081, p < 0.05$) showed weak positive contributions. Online news consumption ($\beta = -0.081, p < 0.05$) and use of social media ($\beta = -0.094, p < 0.05$) all had weak negative contributions. Newspaper reading and streaming service use were not significant. Media literacy ($\beta = 0.492, p < 0.05$) again had the strongest ties to positive institutional trust, while online interaction alone was not significant.

Table 4. Linear regression results, dependent variables: apolitical, media, technology.

		Apolitical (β)	Media (β)	Technology (β)
Demographics	Gender (male = 1)	0.018	−0.002	0.046
	Age (33–44 = 1)	0.043	0.043	0.072 *
	Employment (full-time = 1)	0.008	0.028	−0.012
	Marital status (married = 1)	0.057	0.026	0.104 *
	Education (graduate degree completed = 1)	0.030	0.021	−0.054
Media use	Newspaper	0.068	0.065	0.026
	Television	0.081 *	0.093 *	0.021
	Online news	−0.081 *	−0.066	−0.047
	Streaming services	−0.055	−0.043	−0.012
	Social media	−0.094 *	−0.215 *	−0.072
Online interactions		0.059	0.026	0.027
Media literacy		0.492 *	0.411 *	0.344 *
Adjusted R^2		0.243 *	0.202 *	0.161 *

* = $p < 0.5$.

3.5. Media and Technology

To address the second research question, we used (a) media trust and (b) technology institutional trust as outcome variables. Media trust behaved similarly to the other trust variables with a small significant adjusted R^2 of 0.202 ($F(12, 848) = 19.166, p < 0.05$). No control variables were significant. Under media use, televisions watching ($\beta = 0.093, p < 0.05$) showed weak positive contributions. Use of social media ($\beta = -0.215, p < 0.05$) had weak negative contributions. Newspaper reading, online news consumption, and streaming service use were not significant. Media literacy ($\beta = 0.411, p < 0.05$) again had the strongest ties to positive institutional trust, while online interaction alone was not significant.

Trust in multi-national technology companies had weaker explanatory power than the media institutions with a small significant adjusted R^2 of 0.161 ($F(12, 851) = 14.807, p < 0.05$). Within the control variables, only respondents aged 35–44 ($\beta = 0.072, p < 0.05$) and married respondents ($\beta = 0.104, p < 0.05$) emerged as significant but weakly contributed positively to the model. No media use variables were significant. Media literacy ($\beta = 0.344, p < 0.05$) again had the strongest ties to positive institutional trust, while online interaction alone was not significant.

4. Discussion

We surveyed residents of India to consider the relationship between media use, online activities, and the degree to which individuals trust social institutions in an understudied part of the globe with a large population. Digital media consumption and production have

become a vital component of community and social issue communication (Park et al., 2023; Thorson & Edgerly, 2017). Likewise, the degree to which individuals trust government, companies, media and other organizations has an important role in the construction of social capital and development of deliberative democracy in a mass society (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993; Rohrschneider, 2005; Warren, 2020). Thus, understanding the relationship between media communication and institutional trust is valuable to advancing our understanding of these ideas.

Consistent with previous work (Chu & Shen, 2017), we identified government and non-government factors of institutional trust. We then considered the extent to which consumptive, productive, and critical activities online have associations with positive attitudes about those institutions. Strikingly, media literacy confidence appeared to be the strongest contributor across all our models. To put it another way, respondents who were confident in their media literacy skills (i.e., navigate websites, use search tools, critically assess digital information, create online content, and evaluate their own media use) more predictably trusted Indian democratic institutions of government and non-government. We did not find the same associations for those individuals who simply used online media to like, comment, share, or even post. The crucial act of critical assessment of the activities online appeared to be a strong differentiator in the trust in institutions, and this carried through all models, especially for apolitical actors and media institutions.

A few other media use variables showed interesting results. High social media users were less trusting of institutions, with the exception of the technology companies themselves and opposition parties. Likewise, individuals who used streaming services and read online news instead of getting news through television or newspapers, independent of many of the controls, contributed weak negative perceptions. Yet, none of the contributors to the model stood out as prominently as the media literacy skills.

Our study draws on previous work noting the disruptive power of digital technology on community operations and routines (Lumineau et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023; Putnam, 2002; Wells, 2014). Importantly, as digital technology availability and functionality has improved, traditional measures of community engagement have declined over the last several decades (Barber, 2003; Putnam, 1993; Wattenberg, 2015). Specifically, as technological changes bring with them increasing misinformation and disinformation, as well as a dizzying array of ever-expanding destinations to connect with others digitally, media literacy skills have been increasingly credited with addressing these gaps in traditional civic participation (Park et al., 2023; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011; Stamm & Weis, 1986; Wells, 2014). Our work contributes additional evidence to the important relationship between media literacy and institutional trust, showing that Indian people who are more comfortable using media both functionally and critically tend to also identify traditional institutions and community as more trustworthy.

Given that India has identified civic engagement as an institutional priority (Bajaj & Wahl, 2017; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020), and the degree to which civic activity is moving from traditional media to social platforms (Battocchio et al., 2023; Thorson et al., 2020), we find these results valuable and compelling. When individuals know and are comfortable with how to use technology to accomplish the tasks they need to accomplish, they are also more likely to find societal organizations trustworthy. As trust in institutions is high, so too are certain measures of the important shortcuts of deliberative democracy in mass society (Putnam, 1993; Warren, 2020). Equally important, younger participants and heavy social media users showed significant distrust in political, apolitical, and oppositional actors in their community, raising important questions about how these relationships may change as young people become more civically involved.

Notable in our project is the contribution this study makes to the collection of empirical data outside of Western cultures, an important concern in scholarship (Grossmann, 2021;

Mulimani, 2019; Patel & Sumathipala, 2001). However, further work in this area is needed. First, our study is a single snapshot in time. Longitudinal work may contribute further insights and better delineate any causal relationships among these variables. Further, we implore future work to consider the specific impact of pro-democratic online activities such as content sharing, networking, fact finding, or adjusting tone and temperament of responses (Overgaard et al., 2021, 2022). Additionally, we find it important to explore alternative explanations to our findings. This study did not consider additional factors that may be mediating the results. While measuring both political parties in power and out of power, further study could explore the political ideology itself of the respondent. Regional and cultural differences, religious identity, socioeconomic status, or other factors could also moderate the institutional trust of the respondents. These considerations merit further study.

Our work is not without additional limitations. First, the sample in this study is skewed toward English-speaking, highly educated, fully employed, male, and young respondents. Though English is one of the most widely-spoken languages in India, we caution against treating this study with complete generalizability. Additionally, we note that our sampling strategies (i.e., recruitment of social media users for a study on media use) could lead to self-selection bias. Further, we used a combination of generative artificial intelligence (chat.openai.com) and volunteer human translators to create a survey instrument in six languages. Yet, translating across cultural and societal boundaries is a challenging task. Most respondents chose English or Hindi to complete the survey; however, regional dialects and other issues across one of the largest countries in the world could have created challenges to our respondents. The possibility exists that additional respondents who prefer Marathi, Telegu, and Bengali may feel differently about Indian institutions than our respondents.

Our measures of institutional trust demonstrated strong internal validity, yet we recognize that additional institutions exist in democratic societies. We drew no distinction between local and national governance in our instrument and did not include an exhaustive list of government or non-government institutions. We also chose not to include public libraries, nursing homes, small businesses, and community centers as institutions as we sought to create a more universal application of the concept. Finally, we note that the technology institutions variable included a heterogeneous list of examples, which could lead to issues with validity. Future work could extend our model to include additional institutional concepts.

With all of this said, we have shown that being active on social media may be negatively associated in many cases to institutional trust, but knowledgeable navigation of digital technology has the opposite relationship. We are hopeful for the practical implications of these findings in their contribution to rationale for media literacy activities and practices.

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