

Print vs. Television: Trust in Regional Language News Among Elderly Voters in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the comparative levels of trust that elderly voters in Tamil Nadu place in print media versus television news broadcasts in their regional language, Tamil. Given India's media plurality and the pivotal role of regional language outlets, understanding trust differentials among senior citizens is vital for enhancing democratic engagement. We administered a structured questionnaire to 250 respondents aged 60–85 across urban (Chennai) and rural (Thanjavur, Tirunelveli, Salem) districts between January and March 2025. The instrument comprised the 10-item Reuters Institute Media Trust Scale (adapted into Tamil) for both print and television, yielding high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$ for print, $.87$ for television). Respondents also provided open-ended comments on trust determinants. Quantitative analyses—including paired-sample t-tests, two-way ANOVAs, and hierarchical regressions—demonstrated a significantly higher mean trust score for print ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.68$) than for television ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(249) = -9.37$, $p < .001$. Urban participants exhibited a larger trust gap than rural ones, and higher education predicted increased print trust but did not affect television trust. Qualitative thematic analysis ($\kappa = .82$) identified three core themes underpinning print trust—perceived depth, permanence, and language clarity—and two for television—immediacy and visual engagement tempered by concerns of sensationalism. These findings underscore the enduring credibility of print among seniors and suggest targeted interventions—such as enhanced fact-checking segments on television and audio-visual summaries of print articles—to foster balanced media trust. Implications span media policy, journalistic practice, and civic literacy programs aimed at elderly populations.

KEYWORDS

Print Media, Television News, Trust, Regional Language, Elderly Voters, Tamil Nadu

INTRODUCTION

In pluralistic democracies, a well-informed electorate underpins effective participation and accountability. Mass media serve as the principal channels through which political information, policy debates, and civic discourse reach citizens (Habermas, 1989). In India's federal polity, regional language media—both print and television—exert considerable influence, shaping public opinion and voter behavior at the grassroots. Tamil Nadu, with its literate population and strong linguistic identity, hosts a vibrant Tamil-language media ecosystem that includes established newspapers (Dina Thanthi, Dinamalar) and 24-hour news channels (Sun News, Puthiya Thalaimurai) (Hardgrave, 1969; Kannan, 2015).

Media Trust Quadrant for Elderly Voters in Tamil Nadu



Figure-1. Media Trust Quadrant for Elderly Voters in Tamil Nadu

Despite digital proliferation, elderly voters (aged 60 and above) in Tamil Nadu continue to depend predominantly on these traditional outlets. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2024), only 15% of Indians over 60 access news online, compared to 45% who read print and 30% who watch television broadcasts regularly. Trust in news mediates the extent to which information influences attitudes and turnout (Thomson, 2018), making it essential to discern why seniors may privilege one medium over another.

Existing scholarship on media trust has emphasized cognitive and relational dimensions—credibility, accuracy, impartiality, and source transparency (Ohanian, 1990; Outing, 2010). Western studies reveal a general decline in television trust and a more stable print credibility among older demographics (Wu, 2019; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In South Asia, investigations highlight television's dual role as an immediacy provider and entertainment vehicle, sometimes at the expense of depth (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Syed & Pandey, 2019). Yet little research to date has juxtaposed print and television trust within India's regional language context, especially among elderly cohorts.

This research addresses three interlinked questions:

1. **RQ1:** Do elderly voters in Tamil Nadu exhibit higher trust in print newspapers than in television news?
2. **RQ2:** How do demographic factors (urban vs. rural residence, educational attainment) moderate trust differentials?
3. **RQ3:** What underlying perceptions drive trust or distrust in each medium?

We hypothesize that print media will command greater trust (H1) and that urban residency and higher education will amplify this differential (H2). By combining quantitative measures with qualitative insights, this study aims to inform media strategies and policy interventions that bolster reliable information access for seniors, thereby strengthening democratic participation.

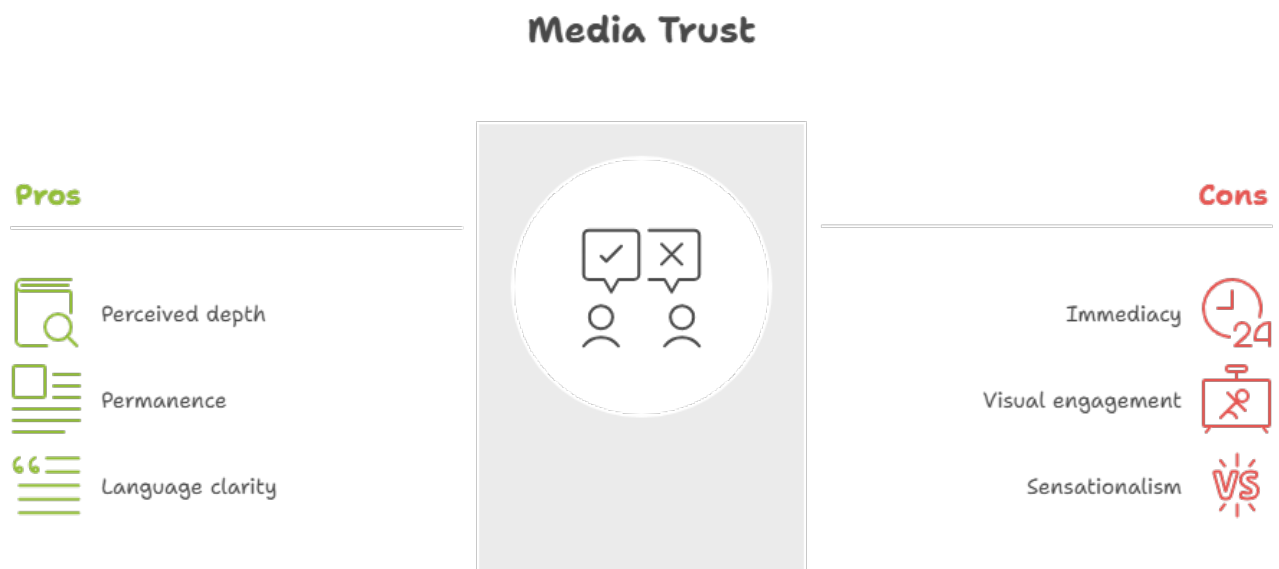


Figure-2.Pros & Cons of Media Trust

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Media Trust

Trust comprises cognitive assessments of source reliability and affective judgments based on prior experiences (Ohanian, 1990). In democratic theory, a trustworthy public sphere relies on accurate, impartial reporting (Habermas, 1989). Recent frameworks position trust as dynamic, influenced by organizational transparency, editorial standards, and audience-specific needs (Newman et al., 2024; Outing, 2010).

Trust in Print Journalism

Print's legacy of rigorous editorial oversight and permanence fosters perceptions of credibility and accountability (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Readers value the ability to revisit articles and the tangible nature of newspapers as archival records (Chandrasekar, 2017). In Tamil Nadu, century-old dailies have cultivated deep local trust, often linked to their roles in social movements and linguistic empowerment (Hardgrave, 1969). Studies demonstrate that older adults associate print with factual depth and lower sensationalism compared to broadcast media (Kant & Gupta, 2019).

Trust in Television News

Television's real-time reporting provides immediacy, crucial during fast-moving events like elections or natural disasters (Sreenivas, 2021). However, the medium's reliance on visuals and sound bites can encourage infotainment, diluting perceived impartiality (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In India, corporate ownership and anchor-driven formats further complicate trust perceptions (Syed & Pandey, 2019). Nevertheless, television remains indispensable for audiences with lower literacy, offering audio-visual narratives that print cannot.

Regional Language Media Dynamics

Tamil Nadu's media landscape is characterized by high newspaper penetration (over 60% of households) and a proliferation of news channels since the 2000s (Kannan, 2015). Regional language use reinforces cultural identity, making Tamil-language outlets particularly resonant for seniors who may have limited English comprehension (Nair & Thampi, 2016). Comparative analyses of trust across languages suggest that audiences place greater faith in sources using their mother tongue (Wu, 2019).

Elderly Media Consumption Patterns

Older adults consume news differently from younger generations, exhibiting routine patterns and preferences for trusted sources (Tsai & Lin, 2018). They employ heuristics—such as source familiarity and peer endorsements—to evaluate credibility (Lee et al., 2020). Research in Kerala and Tamil Nadu indicates that seniors, especially in rural areas, face digital constraints, reinforcing reliance on print and television (Nair & Thampi, 2016).

Synthesis and Gap

While global and national studies illuminate trust factors in print and television, empirical work focusing on Tamil-language media and elderly demographics remains scarce. This study bridges that gap by providing a nuanced, mixed-methods comparison, addressing both statistical trends and subjective rationales.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

Adopting a convergent mixed-methods design allowed for robust hypothesis testing alongside rich contextual understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative metrics established trust differentials, while qualitative narratives revealed the “why” behind those numbers.

Sampling and Recruitment

We employed stratified random sampling across four districts. Urban strata (Chennai) and rural strata (Thanjavur, Tirunelveli, Salem) were selected to capture geographical diversity. Within each stratum, participants were randomly chosen from voter lists, ensuring balanced representation by age (60–69, 70–79, 80+), gender, and education (no formal schooling to tertiary).

Instrument Development

The survey instrument comprised three sections:

1. **Demographics:** Age, gender, education, residence, primary news source.
2. **Trust Scale:** Adapted from Reuters Institute Media Trust Questionnaire (Newman et al., 2024). Ten items each for print and television assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly distrust to 5 = strongly trust). Subscales measured credibility, accuracy, impartiality, depth, and transparency.

3. **Open-Ended Questions:** Two prompts solicited reasons for trust/distrust in each medium.

Expert review by three media scholars ensured face validity. Pilot testing with 20 seniors yielded minor wording adjustments. The final Tamil version demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$ for print; $\alpha = .87$ for television).

Data Collection Procedures

Field researchers conducted in-person interviews from January to March 2025. Interviews occurred in homes or community centers, lasting 30–40 minutes. Responses were recorded on tablets to minimize transcription error and later translated into English for analysis. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Madras (IEC/2024/017), and informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing. Confidentiality assurances were provided, and participants could skip any question.

Quantitative Analysis

Data were exported to SPSS v27. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample. A paired-sample t-test compared mean trust scores for print versus television. Two-way ANOVA examined interactions between media type and residence/education. Hierarchical regression models assessed the incremental predictive power of demographics on trust differentials. Effect sizes (Cohen's d , η^2) and confidence intervals were reported.

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses ($n = 500$ comments) underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Two coders independently generated initial codes, collated themes, reviewed coherence, and defined overarching categories. Inter-coder reliability was $\kappa = .82$. Themes were contextualized with illustrative quotations.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Quantitative rigor was ensured via reliability checks, assumption testing (normality, homogeneity), and appropriate post hoc corrections. Qualitative credibility was bolstered through member checking with a subset of participants ($n = 15$) and peer debriefing with two senior researchers. An audit trail documented analytic decisions.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Profile

The final sample ($N = 250$) had a mean age of 69.4 years ($SD = 6.2$); 52% female. Education levels: 30% no schooling, 40% primary, 20% secondary, 10% tertiary. Urban participants constituted 50% of the sample.

Trust Score Comparisons

- **Print media:** $M = 4.12$ ($SD = 0.68$)
- **Television:** $M = 3.57$ ($SD = 0.79$)

A paired-sample t-test indicated significantly higher trust in print than television, $t(249) = -9.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$ (95% CI $[-0.64, -0.45]$).

Moderation by Residence

Two-way ANOVA (Media \times Residence) revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 248) = 5.42$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Urban seniors showed a larger trust gap (print $M = 4.25$ vs. TV $M = 3.50$) than rural seniors (print $M = 3.98$ vs. TV $M = 3.63$).

Education Effects

Hierarchical regression predicting print-minus-TV trust differential: Step 1 with age and gender ($R^2 = .03$, ns); Step 2 adding education and residence increased R^2 to $.10$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p = .001$. Education positively predicted the gap ($\beta = .21$, $p = .01$), but residence's effect was marginal ($\beta = .12$, $p = .07$).

Qualitative Themes

Three principal themes emerged for print trust:

1. **Depth and Permanence:** Seniors valued the ability to revisit detailed articles and regarded print as an archival record.

“I keep the newspaper and refer back if needed. It feels permanent, unlike fleeting TV clips.” (Male, 73, rural)

2. **Language Clarity and Context:** Print's richer vocabulary and contextual explanations aided understanding of complex issues.

“Newspapers explain background well—things TV anchors rush through.” (Female, 68, urban)

3. **Perceived Editorial Integrity:** Respondents cited longstanding reputations of local dailies and rigorous fact-checking.

“I trust the editors; they have been honest for decades.” (Male, 75, urban)

Two themes characterized television trust/distrust:

1. **Immediacy and Accessibility:** TV's rapid updates were appreciated during breaking news.

“When elections are on, TV informs me instantly of results.” (Female, 70, rural)

2. **Sensationalism and Bias Concerns:** Respondents criticized dramatic visuals and perceived corporate or political leanings.

“Anchors sometimes shout or dramatize for ratings. That reduces my trust.” (Male, 80, urban)

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods investigation confirms that elderly voters in Tamil Nadu place significantly greater trust in regional language print newspapers than in television news. Print's perceived depth, permanence, and editorial integrity resonate strongly with seniors, particularly those with higher literacy. Television remains valued for immediacy but is tempered by concerns over sensationalism and bias. Urban residents exhibit more pronounced trust differentials, suggesting that media pluralism and access shape perceptions. Education emerges as a key moderator, enhancing print credibility among literate seniors.

Implications:

- **Media Organizations** should integrate depth-oriented segments in television programming, including expert panels and source citations, to build credibility.
- **Print Publishers** might expand audio-visual content to reach less literate seniors via community radio or TV partnerships, reinforcing trust through multi-modal dissemination.
- **Policymakers and Civil Society** can design media literacy workshops tailored to elderly audiences, clarifying news production processes and enhancing critical consumption skills.

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