Research Article

# Use of mobile media for learning by youth in rural Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Mobile phones have become accessible in almost all parts of the world and among different sections of the society. The accessibility of mobile phones with internet has become all the more after COVID-19 as many of the day-to-day activities including education has moved online. Hence, mobile media has reached in the hands of rural youngsters as well who are using the same for various purposes including education. The present study intended to understand the use of mobile media for the purpose of education by youngsters living in villages of Punjab. The study conducted in-depth interviews with 18 such youngsters who have completed their graduation and are now trying to clear different exams to get jobs. The study found that youngsters living in rural areas of Punjab are using different applications on mobile phones with a specific aim related to their studies. They have also devised various strategies to face challenges that they are facing in terms of internet connectivity and money.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology globally has made it easier for how people to connect, communicate, and retrieve information. Earlier, the access of mobile phones was limited to developed countries, but mobile phone has reached many in developing countries as well. Mukherjee (2019) observes that features of accessibility, affordability and ease of use of mobile phones as compared to computers have shown the possibility of closing the digital divide. Tenhunen (2018) writes that rapid spread of mobile phones in many parts of developing countries has helped these parts to overcome barriers of time and money for the first time. Arora (2024) says that youth in the Global South are not only mobile-first but also mobile-only as most of them are accessing digital technologies in the form of mobile phone handsets only and do not have the facility of computers or laptops. In India too, the access of mobile phones and smartphones is increasing over the years as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 respectively.

Digital revolution has changed the rural educational landscape too especially after COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 shifted education online to a large extent. This learning included not only formal education in the form of classes from schools and colleges but also youngsters on their own explored the mobile media to learn more and more. Mass media including newspapers and TV channels have covered many stories where the efforts of all stakeholders like teachers, students, parents and even community members were highlighted to make online education a success, at least during the time of COVID-19 so that children do not lose on their studies. Teachers went out of the way to learn and teach students through digital technologies while parents and community members not only bought smartphones for their children but also tried to create enabling environment for them to learn at home. In this process, children showed grit and used smartphones to continue their studies. Children who were enrolled in institutions, of course, learnt a lot through regular classes through their phones but the children and youngsters who were not enrolled in formal institutions also used the situation to their benefit and used mobile phones for their studies. Even before COVID-19, some of the studies

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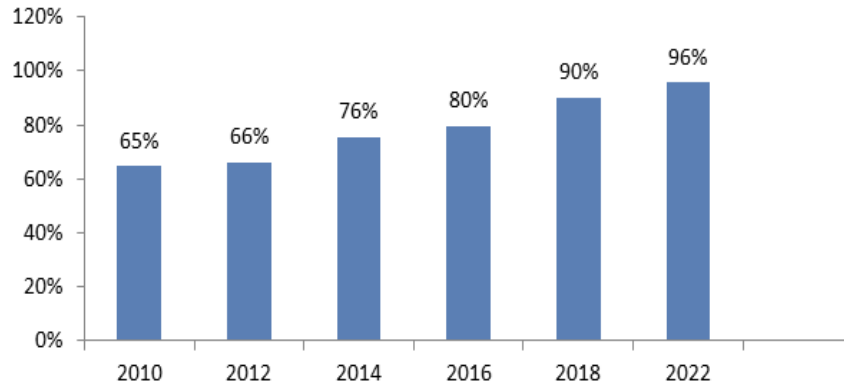
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**Figure 1:** Households which have access to mobile phones in rural India (ASER reports)

had noted the potential of mobile phones in rural areas, particularly in the fields of health and education as Roberts et al. (2014) concludes that giving information about maternal health can be provided through mobile phones to reduce maternal mortality in rural communities. Hence, this study aims to understand how youngsters harnessed mobile media to enhance their knowledge and use mobile phone to prepare for different competitive examinations. Hence, the study would contribute to the literature which would inform that how youngsters are using mobile phones for enhancing their knowledge especially for clearing competitive exams and securing jobs for themselves.

To understand the adoption of mobile media by youngsters in rural areas for developing their knowledge and skills, the theoretical framework of Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) would be most appropriate. Originally given by Davis (1989), who acknowledged that the reaction of users to computers is multifaceted and complex, to understand the acceptance of Information Technology among users, the author gave two factors, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. But later on, it was found that individual characteristics of users as well as the context in which Information Technology is used also affects the acceptance of technologies (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000 ; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008). Though Davis (1989) talked about the quantitative aspect of measuring Technology acceptance through the use of scales, the present study applied the concept in qualitative terms as was done in the study by Sarısakaloğlu (2025) on the use of AI by journalists in Indian newsrooms.

Some of the studies done on the educational aspirations and rural youth mention that rural youth and their families look at education as a way to economic as well as social mobility (Hou, 2024; Zhang, Hu, & Hannum, 2023), though Durrani (2024) mapping the educational research landscape during the COVID-19 found that studies related to it have mostly been conducted in the Global North, with limited representation from the Global South. Further in a study conducted during COVID-19, Graves et al. (2021) found that rural youngsters face more challenges in
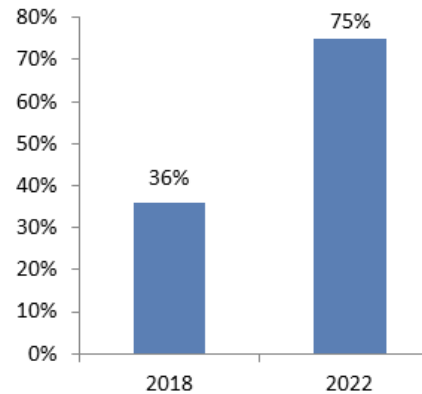


**Figure 2:** Households which have access to smartphones in rural India (ASER reports)

accessing online education and tele-health as compared to urban youngsters. However, Pathak-Shelat and DeShano (2014) concludes that for rural youth in common discourse, digital media is for knowledge, information and upward mobility in terms of employment but in their personal experiences they talk more about playing video games and use of mobile phones. Aker and Mbiti (2010) also lists existing challenges that persist in the rural setting which includes network coverage gaps as for users who come from low-income backgrounds, affordability still remain an issue and digital literacy is major concern while adopting the new technology. Studying rural farmers in the context of COVID-19, Uy et al. (2023) concludes that young and highly educated farmers should be prioritized for digital interventions in farming as they lead the groups in terms of using mobile phones. Hott (2025) too concludes that use of technologies among rural students can open doors to many opportunities for children with special needs.

Stating that digital technologies have introduced both challenges and opportunities for urban and rural education, Larson et al. (2019) underlined that increase in screen-time has reduced outdoor activities to some extent and further, it is reducing the connection to nature

of youngsters. They suggested that online and outdoor activities can be integrated to get best out of digital technologies and suit the requirements of the present generation. Identifying barriers like inequitable access to digital education and mental health services, Livingston et al. (2022) note that tools and services which do not require internet and virtual mental health services were suggested among some of the solutions by students during COVID-19. Analyzing the digital literacy among Ghanaian youth, Ayisi et al. (2024) propose a community-based intervention framework involving peer-to-peer learning networks and partnerships with local businesses to create practical digital upskilling opportunities.

## Objectives of the study

Since COVID-19 introduced mobile phones as a media for online education, the present study aimed to understand how rural youth in India who are not in the formal education system, are using mobile phones to educate themselves and further pursue their interests and preparation for studies. It further attempted to analyze the challenges that the rural youngsters face while using mobile phones for their education.

## Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to research methodology to understand the use and experiences of youngsters of using mobile media for education purpose. Under this qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents who were using mobile media for preparing for competitive exams. The respondents for the study were approached through a University in Bathinda district of Punjab where students were given free coaching classes for preparation of competitive exams. The students get admission in these classes after clearing an entrance exam. A mix of purposive sampling and volunteer sampling was used to choose total of 18 respondents for the study. Only those respondents were interviewed who were living in rural areas and using mobile media for exam preparation and further, volunteered to be part of the study. as the aim of the study was to understand and analyze the use of mobile phone by youngsters living in the rural areas, non-probability sampling (mix of purposive and volunteer sampling) was used. Both the authors conducted the interviews with a specific purpose in mind and used an interview schedule as a research tool to remain specific to the purpose of the study. Later, interviews were transcribed and codes and themes were discussed at least two times to remove any kind of bias and repetitive data. Interviews were conducted in either Hindi or Punjabi, depending on preference of the respondents. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. All the respondents were explained the purpose of the study and verbal informed consent was taken from all of them. Respondents were given a number as and when the interviews were being conducted, to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents. All the respondents were told that the data collected would be used only for academic purpose and that they may leave the study at any point of time.

All the interviews were transcribed in English and then, themes were identified from the data. Four themes were identified and have been discussed in the findings.

## Findings

The average age of respondents was 23 years and an equal number of girls and boys were interviewed for the study. Majority of the respondents were using mobile phones for 4-5 hours daily, with the usage increasing on weekends and also during the time when competitive exams are approaching.

## WhatsApp, Telegram most used apps for preparation

Almost all the students have access to internet through their mobile phones for different purposes. WhatsApp, Telegram and YouTube were found to be most popular apps among respondents for their exam preparation. But all three apps were fulfilling different purposes for respondents.

WhatsApp was mostly for coordination and exchanging notes. Coordination among respondents was playing an important role for examination preparation as they were coordinating the timings for the classes on WhatsApp. This coordination was all the more important as most of the respondents were using public transport, and they were using WhatsApp even to get update of bus movement and timing to avoid missing buses as well as wastage of time in waiting for public transport. WhatsApp was also being used for exchanging notes among respondents. Mostly used apps for sharing big files was Telegram. Telegram was introduced to the respondents by the teachers who were taking their classes in the University. Respondents were using Telegram for joining groups of different coaching centers as well as popular coaches. In these groups, respondents were getting reading material as well as tips for preparation of exams. One of the respondents said, "Telegram is very good for preparing for exams as pdf files of even books are shared on some groups which makes it easier for us to access books, which otherwise are not available."

Good number of peer groups are being used on every app for different purposes: like the Telegram groups are for doubt clearing and sharing study materials, they even share PDFs of books as everyone is not able to afford them in physical form.

YouTube was also being used by respondents mainly for clearing their doubts. One of the respondents said, "Whenever I am not able to understand something by reading the material, I watch it on YouTube for better comprehension. The visual explanation most of the times makes it easier to understand."

Students also have knowledge of chatbots on apps as the student uses them for study purposes, one of them uses chatbot as a dictionary asking for antonyms or synonyms from it, correcting grammatical errors, and checking different facts which are shared online. The respondents shared that they try to earn coins while attempting free mock tests, they use these earned coins then used to avail discounts on the cost of paid courses or mock tests on websites like Textbook. They also wait for festivals to purchase these online mock tests as they get festival discounts on the price on every website. They also take other free options available on websites like Adda24/7 or Unacademy, to prepare for examinations as well as check their progress through mock tests.

### Smart work on Smartphones

Most of the respondents shared that reading full books which are available in library or even on internet is not possible for them. They said that internet has made it easier for them to get the information about current-affairs as well as about other subjects as the same are available in easy-to-understand videos or bullets points on many websites. One of the respondents shared, "the library in the University provides a good environment for study but reading books takes a lot of time and due to lack of reading habit students find it difficult to concentrate for longer hours." Another respondent added, "the same chapter can be studied in an hour with the help of an online tutor, which would take the whole day with a book and still it can leave them confused about what is important and relevant from their exam's perspective. On the other hand, a teacher teaching online provides all important material and other related information which is important with the topic, they also tell the pattern and questions that are asked from that particular topic in previous years and prepare the students accordingly." For instance, one of the respondents shared, "The present era is a competitive one and we cannot rely on reading all the books and even newspapers wholly. We prefer to get it from short videos which give us summary or gist of different topics in short time." Yet another adds, "It not only saves our time but makes it easier for us to memorize things. Additionally, online tutors also provide us little tricks to remember different complex content."

With regard to reading newspapers for knowing current affairs, one of the respondent shared, "I try to read monthly magazines but also take online classes for daily current affairs as reading newspapers is a very time consuming activity and leaves me confused about what is important and what to memorize for exams. Hence, I prefer videos which along with telling the facts, also tell the level of importance of topic for exam." Respondents shared that for them, reading books comes as a burdensome work that takes long, but studying on smartphone doesn't give that extra pressure to them. They shared that books require extra efforts to memorize the content while visual content provided online makes it easy for them to remember as online tutors also provide little tricks to remember different complex content. "For every kind of exam, there is good and free content available online for every subject and the time to search for different books for different subjects is also saved and the money is also saved", said one of the respondents.

### Challenges and Distractions of Mobile-Based Learning

All the respondents shared that they have to put in extra effort to keep the usage of mobile media for exam preparation as they encounter many distractions from different apps that they use on their phones. Almost all of them shared that deleting those apps is not possible as sometimes every app is needed for a different purpose. Most of them shared that the best way to avoid these distractions was using a laptop for reading material and making notes but buying a laptop was not affordable for the respondents as all of them came from families who did not have the means to buy laptop. Hence, respondents had found different ways to counter these distractions. For instance, one of the respondents shared, "I switch off notifications of most of the apps, which helps me in concentrating on finishing my reading and making notes."

While studying on the phone, students tend to get distracted as one of them said that she is in a habit of watching episode of her favourite daily soap on a daily basis. She will leave her work to watch that show on time, some do binge-watch of different series. To avoid distraction during study hours they try to turn off notifications from social media apps especially about new programmes, as the information of new shows or the curiosity to watch a new show is also developed by watching reels and short videos in different apps. Respondents shared that Instagram distracts them the most but they try to use it in breaks only in between studies but end up using it for hours as content on reels engages them. Some of them tried to delete Instagram and Snapchat to avoid distraction, but then they got bored and reinstalled them as mobile phones seemed no fun without them.

Respondents realize that using smartphones to study limits the brain and makes the information exam-oriented only and the in-depth understanding can only be achieved by reading books. But most of the respondents do not want to put that extra effort in this competitive era, and the saved time can be used to watch content online for entertainment as well as studying. Some of them get overwhelmed as well by too much information available on the internet as different tutors can teach different facts about the same topics which results in bigger confusion, therefore, to avoid this confusion, students have to make extra efforts to check the information from the correct source and they are willing to do this instead of studying books. Respondents mostly use phones to study face eye

problems, some use reading mode to avoid stress on the eyes.

### Navigating Challenges

Most of the respondents said that lack of economic resources remains the main challenge for them to prepare for exams as they are not able to take proper coaching classes. This lack of economic resources have lead them to rely on mobile media for preparing for their exams but in access of mobile media too, they face economic challenges. First and foremost, they have to keep on recharging their data packages time and again, which cost them dear. To tackle it, most of them stay late in the University campus to use the Wi-Fi facility of the campus and also download most of the files in the campus only. For instance, one of the respondents shared, "At home, I only read , while in University campus I browse different websites to look for good reading material and download it on my phone so that I can access these files without internet at home." Another challenge that they face was of joining online paid classes, which also is not feasible for them owing to lack of money. But they try to get maximum benefit by joining free classes of various coaching centers or mentors by exploring different online platforms, be it Instagram accounts, Telegram groups or YouTube videos. Though here too in watching YouTube videos, their data packages get over very easily, hence, they rely on University wi-fi for browsing heavy video-platforms while read only downloaded material at homes.

Yet another challenge which female respondents mention was that perception of girls using mobile phone much is not good and many a times, it becomes a hindrance in preparing for exam. For instance one of the girl respondents said, "Still in my village and family, mobile phone is not considered good especially for girls, so whenever I read book or study material on phone, I will keep notebook, books or pen with me so that others feel that I am studying. They even now feel that mobile phones cannot be used for study purpose."

## CONCLUSION

The present study found that the youngsters are able to use mobile phones for study purpose to a large extent as they have identified different applications for different uses. For instance, they use WhatsApp mostly for coordination while Telegram for sharing or searching for large pdf files of books. In the competitive era, they are also very careful about the time and money that they put into their mobile phone use for study purpose. They explore different websites to choose the best study material at reasonable prices (Hou, 2024). Therefore, they were not only learning about their subject from the mobile media but were also honing their soft-skills like management of resources especially time and money. They have, infact, devised strategies to get maximum out of online education through mobile phones as they appear for free mock tests

or avail festival discounts from different websites to prepare for their examinations. They also try to minimize distractions while using mobile phones by switching off notifications but still think that they would be able to prepare better with the use of laptops. Hence, the study suggests that public libraries (Rathod, 2025) with the facility of computers and internet may be opened for youngsters preparing for examinations for getting jobs as these libraries would make it easy for youngsters to access internet and prepare for their examinations. The policies can also be made at national or state level to provide wi-fi in whole of villages to enable not only youngsters to access internet but all other age-groups as mobile media is able to provide opportunities for all age-groups to some extent. But at the same time, digital literacy initiatives would also be needed not only to teach technical skills to the users of mobile media but also to establish the strategies which can be used to harness the potential of digital technologies for the benefit of members of the society rather than becoming a mindless browser of social media.

### Limitations of the study

The present study used only qualitative approach to research methodology but to understand the experiences of youngsters living in rural areas at large, quantitative approach to research methodology may be followed. In quantitative approach, more districts from different states may be included in the sample, rather a mixed-methods approach may be adopted in future studies to provide both, width and depth to the study. Social parameters like gender may also be studied in detail vis-à-vis use of mobile phone and for education purpose as few gender differences were also found in the present study.

### Note

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