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CORD-CUTTING AND EVOLVING MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

Uwem Udo Akpan [1] & **Itoro Anietie Ekpo** [2]

Department of Broadcasting ,Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, University of Uyo [1&2]

Corresponding Email: Akpabioanny1@gmail.com [2]

Abstract

Streaming platforms have changed how audiences find, watch, and engage with media, and cable and satellite television have felt the pressure as a result. A growing number of viewers are cutting back on, or cancelling outright, their pay-television subscriptions. Using Media Substitution Theory as its guiding framework, this paper offers a theoretical account of what is driving that shift and how it fits into the broader transformation of media consumption. The review points to several overlapping factors behind the move toward streaming: improved technology, easier access to content, personalization, convenience, cost, and a growing desire among audiences to control their own viewing experience. Contemporary media use is increasingly defined by on-demand viewing, mobile access, binge-watching, and audiences setting their own terms rather than following a broadcaster's schedule. In this light, cord-cutting is best understood as media substitution manifesting in practice as a sustained movement away from traditional broadcasting and toward digital platforms. Traditional media organizations that want to remain competitive will need to treat digital transformation as central to their strategy rather than an afterthought.

Keywords: Streaming Platforms, Pay-Television, Subscription, Media Substitution, Binge-Watching.

Introduction

Digital technology has reshaped the global media landscape and, with it, the way audiences find, watch, and interact with content. The spread of internet access, mobile devices, and digital platforms has opened up forms of media consumption that traditional broadcasting was never built to offer. As these technologies have matured, audiences have moved

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steadily away from conventional television and toward internet-based streaming, reshaping consumption patterns worldwide (Evens, Henderickx, and Conradie, 2023). For much of the twentieth century, television was one of the primary channels through which people received information, education, and entertainment. Cable and satellite subscriptions gave viewers access to a fixed menu of channels running on fixed schedules. Streaming has upended that arrangement, giving audiences far more flexibility and control: content on demand, viewing experiences tailored to the individual, and access across whatever device happens to be at hand (Lotz, 2022). The clearest sign of this shift is cord-cutting consumers cancelling or scaling back traditional pay-television subscriptions in favour of streaming. It has become a subject of real interest among media scholars, industry professionals, and policymakers alike, given what it signals about audience behaviour, media economics, advertising, and the long-term sustainability of broadcasting (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). Platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ have only accelerated the migration away from conventional television.

Several forces have driven the rise of streaming. Better internet infrastructure and wider ownership of smartphones, tablets, and smart TVs mean audiences can now watch what they want, whenever and wherever suits them. Streaming platforms compound this by offering deep content libraries, algorithm-driven recommendations, flexible pricing, and interactive features that keep users engaged (Simon, 2024). Taken together, these factors have made streaming a default source of entertainment and information for many audiences rather than a supplement to television. This shift is not just technological it reflects a real change in how audiences see their own role in media consumption. Rather than passively receiving whatever a broadcaster schedules, viewers now actively choose, customize, and shape their own media experience. Binge-watching, multi-screen viewing, mobile consumption, and algorithm-driven content discovery all point to this changing relationship between audiences and media (Ameri, Honka, and Xie, 2024), and they challenge older assumptions about what "watching television" even means.

For traditional media organizations, the consequences have been significant. Broadcasters and cable providers are dealing with shrinking subscriber numbers, more fragmented audiences, and stiffer competition from digital platforms, even as streaming companies keep expanding through aggressive content strategies and audience-first services. This has pushed scholars to look more closely at what is driving audience migration and what it means for the media industry as a whole (Lobato, 2019). Much of the existing scholarship on streaming and cord-cutting leans heavily on empirical work subscription numbers, adoption rates, stated audience preferences. That research is valuable, but it leaves a gap: a more theoretical account of why cord-cutting happens and how it fits into the broader logic of media change. This paper takes up that gap through a theoretical review of cord-cutting and shifting media consumption in the digital era. Drawing on Media Substitution Theory, alongside Technological Determinism and Media Dependency perspectives, it examines how technological change, competition among media, and the relationship between audiences and media together explain the rise of streaming and the decline of traditional television. In pulling these theoretical strands together with the existing literature, the paper aims to add to scholarly understanding of digital media transformation and what it means for communication practice going forward.

Review of Concepts

i. **Cord-Cutting:** Cord-cutting describes the practice of cancelling or scaling back subscriptions to traditional pay-television services cable and satellite in favour of

internet-based streaming. The term took hold as digital platforms increasingly offered flexible, on-demand access to content without the constraints that came with a standard television package (Lotz, 2022). The trend picked up real momentum over the past decade as streaming expanded globally and consumers looked for cheaper, more convenient alternatives to bundled television packages. Streaming gives viewers a level of control over what they watch, when, and under what subscription terms that cable television was never designed to offer and that difference has driven both the growth of streaming and the gradual decline of traditional subscriptions in many parts of the world (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). Underlying cord-cutting is a broader shift in what audiences expect from media: control and personalization, rather than a fixed schedule set by someone else. That expectation has made cord-cutting one of the clearer markers of change within contemporary media systems. Researchers have identified a few distinct forms this takes outright cancellation of pay-TV, partial downgrading of a television package, and "cord-shaving," where a household keeps a limited cable subscription alongside one or more streaming services (Lobato, 2019). The variety itself is telling: cord-cutting isn't simply a technology story, but also a story about changing consumer habits and priorities.

ii. **Media Consumption:** Media consumption covers the ways people access, use, interpret, and engage with content across communication platforms the selection, exposure to, and use of information, entertainment, education, and other media, whether through traditional or digital channels (Napoli, 2019). For much of media history, this was a largely passive process. Broadcasters set the schedule, and audiences had limited say in when or how they engaged with content. Digital technology changed that by giving audiences real interactivity, participation, and personalization (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2018). Audience autonomy is now a defining feature of media consumption. People choose what to watch, decide when to watch it, move between multiple platforms at once, and increasingly take part in creating and sharing content themselves a marked departure from the older, one-directional model of mass communication. Consumption patterns have also become more fragmented as digital platforms have multiplied. Rather than depending on one medium, audiences now split their attention across streaming, social media, websites, podcasts, and mobile apps a diversification that has reshaped both engagement patterns and how dependent people are on any single platform (Napoli, 2019). The concept extends beyond what people watch or listen to; it also captures the frequency, duration, timing, location, device, and manner of consumption. Under traditional broadcasting, audiences largely adjusted their viewing habits to programme schedules and channel availability, since television organisations controlled both content and distribution. Digital technology has reorganised this relationship, handing audiences far greater control over when, where, and how they consume media. This shift is most visible in the move from linear broadcasting to on-demand engagement. Where conventional television required viewers to tune in at fixed times, streaming platforms let users select content on their own schedule. Laor and Galily (2022) found notable generational differences in this respect, with younger audiences (Generations Y and Z) showing markedly stronger engagement with on-demand formats than older cohorts. Consumption has consequently become less a matter of what broadcasters choose to air and more a matter of what audiences choose to watch, and when. On-demand access has, in turn, altered the temporal relationship between audiences and content. Rather than organising daily routines around broadcast

schedules, viewers now fit media consumption into their own routines a flexibility that matters particularly for those balancing work, study, or family responsibilities against fixed viewing windows. Streaming platforms have reinforced this expectation by building extensive libraries spanning film, television, documentary, sport, and music, none of which depend on a broadcaster's timetable. A parallel development is the diversification of devices through which media is consumed. Television viewing was once tied to a single set, usually located in the home; digital media now extends across smartphones, tablets, laptops, and smart televisions, allowing audiences to move between devices without losing access to preferred content. In markets where the smartphone functions as the primary gateway to the internet, mobile devices play an especially prominent role in shaping how audiences encounter digital content a pattern Simon (2024) documents in the Nigerian context, where streaming has drawn viewers away from communal, home-based viewing and toward more individualised, mobile engagement. Individualisation reinforces this trend. Traditional television often involved household-level viewing, with family members negotiating a shared choice from a single screen. Streaming platforms instead support separate profiles and personal devices, allowing different members of the same household to watch different content simultaneously. Recommendation systems sharpen this effect further, using prior viewing behaviour to tailor suggestions to individual tastes; Evens, Henderickx, and Conradie (2024) attribute part of viewers' preference for streaming over conventional television precisely to such personalised, easy-to-navigate features. Simon (2024) similarly observes a more individualised viewing culture emerging in Nigeria, though communal viewing practices have not disappeared entirely digital media appear to be shifting the balance between collective and individual engagement rather than eliminating shared viewing outright. The pace and volume of consumption have changed alongside its timing and setting. Streaming platforms release multiple episodes at once, enabling binge-watching in a way scheduled broadcasting with its enforced intervals between episodes never allowed. Audiences now determine not only which content to watch but how much of it to consume in a single sitting, a development that blurs the earlier distinction between occasional viewing and prolonged engagement. Audiences have also fragmented across a wider range of platforms. Where large viewerships once concentrated around a small number of broadcast channels, digitalisation has multiplied the available options: broadcast television, subscription streaming, social media, video-sharing sites, and podcasts now compete for the same attention. Chan-Olmsted and Luo (2024) capture this shift through the idea of consumers' "multiple-service repertoires" the sets of streaming subscriptions individuals maintain and rotate between rather than committing to a single provider. Viewers increasingly choose among platforms based on the type of content sought, cost, convenience, or the social experience each offers, rather than remaining loyal to one service. Content diversity contributes further to this platform-switching behaviour. Streaming catalogues combine local, national, and international programming in a single library, offering audiences a breadth of choice that conventional schedules rarely matched. Chen et al. (2024) find that content diversity, personalisation, and perceived value all shape how users evaluate and continue to use streaming services, suggesting that catalogue breadth is not incidental to platform preference but a meaningful driver of it. Consumption has also become more participatory. Audiences now comment on, share, and discuss content, and in some cases produce and distribute their own

activities that soften the older, one-directional relationship between media producers and consumers. Viewers today can occupy the roles of consumer, participant, and distributor at once, a dynamic largely absent from traditional broadcasting's top-down structure. Taken together, these developments are directly relevant to cord-cutting. As audiences grow accustomed to on-demand access, personalised recommendations, device mobility, and a wider array of platforms, traditional pay-television subscriptions can come to seem comparatively rigid and less appealing. Evens et al. (2024) link this dynamic explicitly to the technological affordances of streaming, arguing that such features actively draw viewers away from conventional television. From the standpoint of this review, then, media consumption patterns are better understood not as a simple measure of time spent with media but as a broader realignment in the relationship between audiences, technologies, platforms, and content. Audiences have moved from a largely fixed, schedule-bound mode of consumption toward one that is mobile, personalised, on-demand, and distributed across multiple platforms a shift that supplies important context for why some viewers reduce or abandon traditional pay-television subscriptions altogether. This connects directly to Media Substitution Theory, which predicts that media compete when they serve similar functions while drawing on the same finite audience resources time, attention, and money. As streaming platforms increasingly perform the entertainment functions once associated with television, while adding on-demand access, personalisation, mobility, and expansive libraries, they intensify competition with traditional broadcasting. Cord-cutting can therefore be read as one outcome of this broader reallocation, as audiences redirect time, attention, and spending away from established television services and toward digital alternatives. This is not to suggest that traditional television is disappearing outright. Many audiences use traditional and digital media side by side, depending on the type of content and the value each platform offers in a given moment retaining conventional television for live news or sport, for instance, while turning to streaming for film and scripted series. Media consumption in the digital era is thus better characterised by substitution, coexistence, and complementarity than by outright replacement. Overall, media consumption patterns in the digital era mark a shift away from scheduled, location-bound, broadcaster-controlled viewing and toward engagement that is flexible, personalised, mobile, and participatory. This transformation sits at the centre of any explanation of cord-cutting, since the decision to scale back or abandon pay-television subscriptions is closely bound up with these changing audience expectations. Media consumption patterns therefore stand as a central conceptual variable for understanding the wider transformation of the media environment and the growing competition between traditional television and digital streaming platforms.

iii. **Digital Media:** Digital media refers to content created, distributed, stored, and accessed through digital technologies and internet platforms distinct from analogue media in that it relies on electronic systems capable of carrying text, audio, video, graphics, and interactive content across digital networks (Flew and Smith, 2021). By removing many of the geographic and time-based limits that shaped traditional media, digital platforms let users access content from virtually anywhere, at any time, provided they have the right infrastructure and connectivity. The category is broad websites, social networks, streaming services, blogs, podcasts, mobile apps, and online news outlets all fall under it and all of them allow for more interactivity and audience participation than traditional media typically did. Audiences are no longer simply on the receiving end of content;

they help create, share, and evaluate it (Flew and Smith, 2021). Personalization is one of digital media's defining traits. Through data analytics and recommendation algorithms, platforms can tailor what they show to an individual's preferences and past behaviour. That capability is a large part of why digital media has become so much more engaging than traditional channels, and why it now sits at the centre of how people communicate and consume content.

iv. **Online Streaming:** Online streaming is the continuous delivery of audio, video, or multimedia content over the internet live or on demand without requiring a full download before viewing. It lets audiences access content instantly on smartphones, tablets, computers, smart TVs, and game consoles (Evens *et al*., 2023). The growth of streaming has given the media industry real alternatives to the traditional broadcasting model, running on subscription, ad-supported, or hybrid arrangements that give audiences access to large content libraries films, TV series, documentaries, sport, educational material, and user-generated content consumed on the audience's own terms. What sets streaming apart most is its on-demand nature. Where traditional television runs on a fixed schedule, streaming lets viewers choose what to watch and when, a shift that has reshaped viewing habits and given rise to behaviours like binge-watching and highly individualized content consumption (Lotz, 2022). Streaming also travels well across devices users can move from a phone to a laptop to a smart TV without losing their place or their personalized recommendations, which adds real convenience and helps explain why streaming continues to gain ground among today's media consumers. As streaming platforms have grown into dominant players in the global media industry, their influence has accelerated cord-cutting and reset audience expectations around accessibility, convenience, and control making online streaming one of the clearest drivers of how media consumption is evolving in the digital era.

Evolution of Media Consumption in the Digital Era

Few shifts in the history of mass communication rival the transformation of media consumption now underway. Advances in digital technology, internet connectivity, and mobile communication have changed not just how content reaches audiences, but how audiences behave, what they expect, and how they engage with what they watch (Lotz, 2022). Traditional mass media newspapers, radio, television operated on a one-to-many model in which producers held most of the control over what audiences could access and when. Television, in particular, was central to household entertainment for decades, with viewers following schedules set entirely by broadcasters, leaving little room for personalization or control (Napoli, 2019). The rise of the internet in the late twentieth century began to loosen that grip, giving audiences alternative sources of information and entertainment and reducing their reliance on traditional channels. Broadband access accelerated the process further by making high-quality multimedia content practical to deliver over digital networks, and as internet access spread, audiences increasingly turned online for communication, information, and entertainment (Flew and Smith, 2021).

Web 2.0 marked another turning point. Where earlier internet content was largely static, Web 2.0 opened the door to participation, interactivity, and user-generated content. Audiences stopped being passive recipients and became active contributors, and platforms like social media, blogs, and online communities reshaped the relationship between audiences and media altogether (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2018). Smartphones pushed this further still. Mobile devices gave audiences continuous access to content regardless of

location, letting people consume media on the move and reinforcing a sense of personal control over their own viewing. As mobile internet spread globally, digital media became woven into daily life shaping how people communicate, find information, and entertain themselves (Westlund and Färdigh, 2022). Streaming platforms represent perhaps the most significant development of all. They introduced true on-demand access, replacing the need to conform to a broadcaster's schedule with the freedom to choose content on one's own terms a shift that has fundamentally reset what audiences expect from media accessibility and control (Evens, Henderickx, and Conradie, 2023). That same shift helped fuel binge-watching the practice of watching several episodes of a series in one sitting. Streaming platforms actively encourage this by releasing full seasons at once and using recommendation algorithms designed to keep viewers watching, a clear illustration of how technology shapes audience behaviour (Pittman and Sheehan, 2015). Multiscreen engagement is another hallmark of contemporary consumption. It's now common for viewers to watch a show on a smart TV while browsing social media on a phone or tablet at the same time a pattern that reflects just how interconnected digital media environments have become, and how complex audience behaviour now is (Jenkins *et al*., 2018).

Personalization has grown alongside all of this. Streaming platforms lean on algorithms and data analytics to recommend content based on a user's history and behaviour, cutting down on search time and surfacing relevant content giving audiences a far more individualized experience than traditional broadcasting ever allowed (Lobato, 2019). None of this has been painless for traditional broadcasters. As audiences shift toward digital and streaming platforms, broadcasters face falling viewership, shrinking subscription revenue, and mounting competition pressure that has pushed many traditional media organizations to launch their own streaming services and rethink their business models (Lotz, 2022). Cord-cutting is the clearest outcome of all these changes. Affordable, flexible, content-rich streaming has given consumers a real reason to scale back or drop pay-television subscriptions altogether, reflecting a broader shift in what audiences prioritize convenience, personalization, mobility, and variety over the rigid structure of linear television (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). Taken as a whole, the evolution of media consumption in the digital era marks a move from passive, schedule-bound viewing toward active, personalized, on-demand engagement. Technological change, digital platforms, and shifting audience expectations have together reshaped the communication landscape and laid the groundwork for cord-cutting to continue defining how people consume media.

In short, today's media consumption is marked by audience empowerment, technological convergence, personalization, and a growing reliance on digital platforms. As streaming continues to expand, these patterns are likely to keep evolving with real implications for audiences, media organizations, advertisers, and researchers alike.

Media Substitution Theory

Media Substitution Theory grew out of research on media choice and competition, aimed at explaining how audiences respond when new communication technologies enter the picture. It is closely associated with the work of John Dimmick and colleagues, whose niche theory of media competition helped establish how media organizations compete for a fixed pool of audience resources time, attention, and money (Dimmick, Kline, and Stafford, 2000). The theory gained traction as digital technologies developed and internet-based platforms emerged, prompting scholars to ask whether new media simply supplemented older forms or actually replaced them. As digital media expanded, the evidence increasingly pointed toward the latter: audiences often cut back on traditional media once a newer alternative

offered clearly greater benefits, which cemented Media Substitution Theory as a key framework for understanding how audience preferences and consumption habits change over time. The rise of platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ has only made the theory more relevant, offering real alternatives to conventional television and sharpening the debate over whether digital platforms are displacing traditional broadcasting altogether (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). The theory itself rests on a handful of core assumptions about audience behaviour and media competition.

First, it assumes different media compete for the same limited resources audience attention, time, money, and psychological commitment so that more use of one medium tends to come at the expense of another (Dimmick *et al*., 2000). Second, it treats audiences as rational actors who choose media based on perceived benefit: people gravitate toward platforms that offer more convenience, accessibility, affordability, and satisfaction, and shift their preferences when a new option clearly outperforms an old one. Third, the theory holds that technological innovation opens the door to displacement. As communication technology advances, new media forms emerge with capabilities the old ones lack, which can reduce audience reliance on older platforms and push migration toward more efficient alternatives. Fourth, substitution is assumed to happen gradually rather than all at once. A new medium rarely wipes out an older one overnight; instead, the two tend to coexist for a transitional period, with the more advantageous medium slowly gaining ground.

Finally, the theory recognizes that substitution depends on audience needs and context. Economic factors, access to technology, content availability, social trends, and individual preference all shape whether and how quickly substitution happens making it as much a social and behavioural process as a technological one. In essence, Media Substitution Theory argues that a new communication medium can reduce reliance on existing media when it performs the same functions more effectively substitution occurs once audiences see the new option as offering more value than the old one. Under this framework, media platforms compete within a shared ecosystem, with audiences weighing their options and putting their time and money toward whichever platform best meets their needs. Media that fail to keep pace with changing expectations risk losing relevance and usage. The theory also holds that substitution is more likely when a new medium offers lower costs, more convenience, better accessibility, stronger interactivity, and greater content variety all of which give audiences reason to change their habits and adopt new platforms.

Media Substitution Theory and Cord-Cutting

Cord-cutting is arguably the clearest real-world example of media substitution at work today. It happens when consumers cancel or scale back cable or satellite subscriptions and replace them with streaming alternatives. Streaming platforms carry several features that make them natural substitutes for traditional television: on-demand access, personalized recommendations, flexible pricing, compatibility across devices, and deep content libraries. These features directly address the shortcomings of conventional broadcasting and raise the perceived value of streaming in the eyes of audiences (Lotz, 2022). As more audiences move toward streaming, traditional television providers see subscriptions and engagement decline exactly the substitution pattern the theory predicts. Rather than sticking to a broadcaster's schedule, viewers increasingly prefer platforms that let them decide what to watch, when, and how.

Recent research backs this up, showing that streaming services increasingly take over entertainment functions that used to belong exclusively to linear television lending further support to the theory's core claims (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). The growing popularity of

streaming is a clear demonstration of how technological change can reshape audience preferences and reset established consumption patterns. Media Substitution Theory is directly relevant to this paper for several reasons. First, it explains why audiences continue to walk away from traditional television in favour of streaming, pointing to the role that convenience, flexibility, affordability, and content variety play in shaping those choices. Second, it helps make sense of how and why cord-cutting has taken hold across different societies audience migration from television to streaming is, in practice, media substitution playing out in the real world. Third, the theory sheds light on how consumption patterns keep evolving, showing how technological innovation continues to reshape audience preferences as streaming platforms expand their reach and capabilities. Fourth, it offers a useful lens for understanding the wider transformation underway in the media industry the decline of traditional subscriptions alongside the growth of digital streaming is, in effect, the competitive dynamic the theory describes. Finally, the theory provides a solid analytical foundation for examining how digital technology is reshaping media consumption more broadly. Its focus on how newer media replace older ones speaks directly to the questions this study is trying to answer about cord-cutting and changing audience behaviour. In short, Media Substitution Theory offers a strong explanation for the shift from television to streaming. Its emphasis on competition, audience choice, and technological change makes it well suited to analysing cord-cutting and the broader evolution of media consumption today.

Drivers of Cord-Cutting in Contemporary Media Environments

Cord-cutting today is driven by a mix of technological, economic, and behavioural factors that together have reshaped audience preferences and sped up the shift away from traditional television. Cost is one of the biggest drivers. Cable and satellite packages tend to come with high monthly fees and bundles of channels that many subscribers never actually watch. Streaming platforms, by contrast, generally let users pay only for what they want, which has made them an attractive, cost-effective option for many households (Lotz, 2022).

Technology plays an equally important role. Better broadband, mobile networks, cloud computing, and smart devices have made streaming both more accessible and higher quality, letting audiences watch high-definition content across devices without relying on traditional television infrastructure at all (Evens, Henderickx, and Conradie, 2023). Content variety and availability matter too. Streaming libraries span films, series, documentaries, sports, and original productions, all available on demand rather than tied to a fixed schedule a flexibility that lines up neatly with what today's audiences want. Personalization adds further appeal. Recommendation algorithms and user data let streaming platforms tailor suggestions to individual taste, which keeps users satisfied and engaged over time (Lobato, 2019). Lifestyle change matters as well. Audiences increasingly prioritize convenience, flexibility, and mobility in how they consume media, and the ability to watch anything, anywhere, has made rigid television schedules feel outdated to a lot of viewers.

Changing Media Consumption Patterns in the Streaming Age

The streaming era has reshaped media consumption worldwide. Where traditional consumption meant scheduled viewing and limited audience control, streaming has flipped that dynamic audiences now decide what they watch, when, and how. One of the biggest shifts is the move from linear viewing to on-demand consumption. Traditional television required audiences to fit their lives around a broadcaster's schedule; streaming reversed that, letting viewers access content on their own terms instead (Lotz, 2022). Binge-watching culture is another major shift. Streaming platforms often release entire seasons at once,

encouraging viewers to watch several episodes in a single sitting now a familiar part of how people engage with media (Pittman and Sheehan, 2015). Consumption has also become far more mobile and personal. Smartphones and tablets let people access content wherever they are, so media is no longer tied to the living room or a dedicated viewing space it fits into daily routines instead. Multi-screen use has become common as well, with people watching streamed content on one device while using a phone or tablet at the same time a habit that captures just how interconnected today's media environment has become (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2018). Overall, streaming has turned audiences from passive viewers into active participants who exercise real control over their own media experience.

Implications of Cord-Cutting for Traditional Media Industries

Cord-cutting has real consequences for traditional media businesses. The most immediate is falling cable and satellite subscriptions as more consumers migrate to streaming, traditional providers see their subscriber base and revenue shrink (Yamatsu and Lee, 2023). Advertising has taken a hit too. Broadcasters have long depended on ad revenue, but audience fragmentation and falling viewership have weakened the effectiveness of traditional advertising, pushing more ad spend toward digital platforms that offer targeted, measurable reach. Competition within the industry has intensified as a result. Traditional broadcasters now compete directly with global streaming platforms for audience attention, subscription dollars, and advertising budgets, which has forced many to pursue their own digital strategies and streaming services (Lotz, 2022). Content production has changed too. Streaming platforms pour money into original programming backed by data-driven decisions about what audiences want, and traditional media organizations have responded by investing more heavily in premium content and audience-focused programming of their own. More broadly, cord-cutting is reshaping media markets and redefining what a broadcasting business even looks like. Traditional media institutions will need to keep innovating just to stay relevant in an increasingly digital environment.

Future Trends in Digital Media Consumption

Where digital media consumption goes next will largely depend on continued technological change and shifting audience preferences. Artificial intelligence is one clear trend recommendation systems are only likely to get more sophisticated, enabling deeper personalization and better user experiences. Hybrid media models are another. Many traditional broadcasters are now blending conventional television with streaming services to create more integrated viewing experiences, helping them adapt to shifting demand while holding on to existing audiences (Lotz, 2022). Mobile consumption is likely to keep growing too, particularly as 5G and future mobile network improvements raise both the quality and accessibility of streaming making mobile devices even more central to how people consume media. Convergence across different forms of digital media is also likely to continue, as streaming, social media, gaming, and virtual communication tools become more interconnected opening new avenues for audience engagement and content distribution. Virtual Reality (VR) is a digital technology that generates a computer-built environment users can experience and interact with, typically through a headset. Applied to media, VR can immerse audiences fully within a media environment letting them experience concerts, sports, films, or games as if they were physically there. Augmented Reality (AR) works differently: it overlays digital elements images, graphics, sound, information onto a user's actual physical surroundings rather than replacing them. Through smartphones, tablets, and smart glasses, users can interact with digital content while staying connected to the real

world around them. As VR and AR continue to develop and spread, they could push digital media consumption toward being more immersive, interactive, and personalized than it already is offering new ways to experience entertainment, news, advertising, education, and sport. Whether they become central to the future media environment will likely depend on how well they meet audiences' growing appetite for engaging, interactive experiences.

Conclusion

This theoretical review examined cord-cutting and the broader evolution of media consumption in the digital era through the lens of Media Substitution Theory. The evidence points clearly to technological change, shifting audience preferences, and the rise of streaming as the main forces reshaping how people consume media today. Cord-cutting, in this light, is media substitution in practice audiences steadily replacing traditional television with internet-based streaming. The flexibility, affordability, convenience, personalization, and variety that streaming platforms offer explain much of why they have grown so popular. The review also shows that media consumption has shifted from a passive, schedule-driven activity to one that is active, personalized, and on-demand, with streaming giving audiences real control over what they watch and how reshaping the relationship between audiences and media in the process. Building on Media Substitution Theory, the paper holds that technological innovation and audience-centred practices will continue to shape the future of media consumption. As streaming technology and digital infrastructure keep improving, cord-cutting is likely to remain a defining feature of how people consume media.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations are made:

i. Traditional media organizations should pursue digital transformation seriously integrating streaming services and digital platforms into their operations rather than treating them as an add-on, if they want to stay relevant in the evolving media environment.
ii. Content producers should put audiences first, investing in high-quality, engaging content that actually reflects what digital audiences want.
iii. Media literacy efforts should be strengthened, equipping audiences with the skills to navigate digital platforms and critically assess the content they encounter.
iv. Traditional media organizations should diversify their revenue streams digital advertising, subscription services, and strategic partnerships all matter more as cord-cutting erodes traditional television revenue and competition from streaming platforms intensifies.

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