

# The Digital Life: Exploring News Consumption Patterns in Gen Z

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## Abstract

**Background:** Modern technologies and media platforms have become deeply embedded into contemporary society. This ever-changing media landscape has implications for how individuals consume content. The first cohort to experience this abundance of information is Generation Z. With the various options available, traditional news content is often side-lined and consumption for entertainment purposes takes precedence. **Aim:** This study intends to shed light on how Gen Z describe their experiences and consumption patterns with regards to political and societal topics. **Methods:** To achieve this, an exploratory and qualitative approach is adopted using semi-structured interviews with members of Gen Z (age 20-27). The in-depth responses of the participants (N = 15) are then analyzed using descriptive phenomenology. This allows for the creation of overarching clusters and themes, that describe the lived experiences. **Results:** The study found that Generation Z recognizes the importance of staying informed on societal topics. However, their experiences with news have been tainted by an increase in media mistrust and COVID-19. The relationship is marked by negativity and associated with sadness, resulting in lower consumption. Gen Z members show a high need for positivity, which traditional news coverage fails to do. Nonetheless, they remain open to trying new formats, that incorporate a more balanced reporting of topics. **Conclusion:** The findings indicate that the way news is currently being presented does not suit the needs of the younger audiences. To enhance news engagement in younger generations, news outlets could integrate more positive content and rebuild their trustworthiness. Overall, this may lead to a more informed and interconnected society.

*Keywords: media landscape, news consumption, phenomenology, society, negativity*

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## Introduction

In contemporary society, modern technologies have become an integral component of people's daily lives. Technologies such as smartphones or laptops have impacted the way in which individuals retrieve information, foster connections, and stay entertained (Arbanas et al., 2023). Additionally, the emergence of these technologies and social media platforms has led to an increase in screen time (Howarth, 2023). Indeed, globally, the average screen time is 6.5 hours, growing steadily (Binns, 2023). This means individuals spend half their waking hours clicking through apps and websites. Through the wide array of devices and platforms, the types of content available have increased as well.

Although the digital media age began in the early 1990s, Web 2.0 was only introduced in 2005 (Osei-Hwere & Osei-Hwere, n.d.) This marked a change in the way individuals had access to and interacted with the internet. Generation Y is the last pre-internet cohort that, in their youth, relied on newspapers and a few television channels for entertainment. This gave them an assortment of news, ranging from gossip to political topics. Thus, Generation Z (Gen Z) is the last to have experienced part of their childhood without modern technologies, concluding the end of pre-internet experiences. Subsequently, today's youth is growing up in a technology-driven world with easy access to a variety of information and entertainment. However, the omnipresence of news content has led to the freedom of choice regarding what and if to consume it. For instance, the study by Edgerly et al. (2018) shows that around 52% of the questioned youth consider themselves news avoiders, ignoring all forms of modality regarding news content. This therefore supports the idea that younger generations are changing the way news is being consumed. Furthermore, this gives way to reconsidering how news used to be seen. Indeed, recent research has shown that young adults make a distinction between the terms 'the news' and 'news' (Eddy, 2022). The main difference being that the former was referring to traditional present affairs, while the latter encompassed

topics such as gossip or leisure. This study will focus on so-called hard news regarding societal and political topics. Research by Geers (2020) shows that young consumers pay the least attention to political news. However, the reasons behind the sinking popularity of current affairs are still unknown (Kim et al., 2021). This also gives way to examining if the behavior is due to active avoidance or simply a result of platform preference.

In light of recent technological advancements, research has started to focus more on news consumption through different news media repertoires (Taneja et al., 2012). More specifically, the accumulation of different platforms, over which news is being consumed (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). However, little attention is being paid to identifying the motivation young adults have for steering towards or away from certain types of news. The topic requires more attention to better understand the reasons for this behavior and the possible implications it might have on civic literacy. In the past, there has been a widespread impression that individuals in a democracy have a civic duty to stay informed about societal news and ongoings (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001). In recent years, the world has become more progressive on this notion. However, many contemporary debates (e.g., about global warming, wars, and agriculture) highlight the importance of staying informed (Gutierrez et al., 2023). They argue that ignoring the issue can hinder societal advancements. This further emphasizes the relevance of investigating Gen Z's engagement in traditional news affairs. Additionally, with rapid advancements in technology, the world today seems to be changing faster than ever (Skare & Soriano, 2021). As a result, it might be necessary to change traditional news practices to keep them relevant for younger generations. Therefore, this study aims to provide more insights into the audience's selection criteria for news consumption. Through this, news creators could tailor their content to the expectations of the audience, increasing engagement. Furthermore, the purpose of this qualitative study is then to explore Gen Z's motivation for engagement with or avoidance of news content. The aim is to

provide insights into Gen Z's consumption habits by examining their lived experiences with news. Therefore, the following research question is being posed:

RQ: How do members of generation Z experience and describe their news consumption?

To explore Gen Z's news consumption, firstly news will be conceptualized, and existing research reviewed. This provides the foundation for the study in terms of what research and society attribute to news. Furthermore, it allows for a clear understanding of where this study positions itself. As little attention has been paid to the motivation of selective news consumption, this study addresses that notion in a qualitative and exploratory manner, using semi-structured interviews. After the interviews are transcribed, the phenomenological approach is adopted for the analysis. This allows for detailed descriptions of the individual's lived experiences and opinions on the news. Lastly, the predominant themes are grouped into overarching clusters and discussed in depth using direct quotations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Conceptualization of News**

As society evolves and new technologies are introduced, the understanding of the term *news* is arguably shifting. Hence, understanding the origin and development of the concept is essential for this study. The early basis for much of the academic writing on news and its values stemmed from Galtung and Ruge (1965). Their work theorized the existence of twelve factors when deciding whether something is newsworthy. Each being able to compensate for the other factors to calculate a base level of acceptance by the public

(Galtung & Ruge, 1965). In concordance with this, a trichotomy of events has been identified that indicate how newsworthy the information is. More specifically, the identified factors would be weighed against each other to determine if it was *prominent*, *ordinary*, or simply an *event*. Overall, their work focuses on creating a matrix of factors used to rank each story. Based on this ranking, the journalists would decide which story would be published (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). However, gossip was also considered possibly newsworthy. It stands to reason that, if (according to the twelve factors) the gossip was to rank higher than a natural disaster, the latter would possibly not be published. Moreover, their work does not factor in the 'human aspects' of news consumption (Brighton & Foy, 2007). Galtung and Ruge's theory (1965) builds on the proximity of the audience. However, larger news channels often broadcast to entire nations, meaning their matrix would not apply. Finally, recent research has identified a vital factor in today's news: shareability (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Hermida et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2011; Phillips, 2012; Vu, 2013; Welbers et al., 2015). This stipulates that in today's world, news has become more than just a piece of information but also a form of interacting with other people by finding a shared meaning. Finally, Eddy's separation of *news* (gossip) and *the news* (traditional affairs) (2022) becomes increasingly relevant. Traditional affairs have received the least attention from Gen Z (Klopfenstein et al., 2024), despite their overarching societal relevance and impact. Therefore, this study will focus on news regarding political and societal topics.

Furthermore, with the advancements in technology and media platforms, the question of reliability comes into play. In the pre-internet phase, news was seen as trustworthy and reliable, as it stemmed from sources (e.g., newspapers and television channels) who fact-checked and conducted large amounts of research (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). In recent years, *fake news* has evolved through the opportunity that anyone can upload any information with a claim of reliability (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Through social media, all individuals are given

the platform and accessibility to an audience to create content for the broad masses, generating clicks, likes, and money. In this, the journalistic integrity of truth, accuracy, and objectivity are said to have become less pronounced (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). In the age of TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, consuming news can be done passively. By scrolling through the feed, news regarding social and political topics appear (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). On the other hand, active consumption would be considered seeking out news content for the purpose of staying informed about these topics or discussions. Therefore, when trying to identify the underlying news consumption patterns of young adults, it is important to include their favored platforms of consumption. By analyzing platform choices and the motivation for content selection, further insight can be gained. The aim is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship that members of Generation Z have with news. Thus, the notion of incidental and active news consumption will be additionally thematized during the interviews.

### **Typology of users**

Previous research has mainly focused on identifying the frequency of consumption and platform choice. Categorizing young adults according to these factors led to the creation of a typology, which currently serves as the basis for much research (Buturoiu et al., 2023). The goal is to create mutually exclusive groups that simplify complex relationships. Despite this, typologies are often static in nature and can lead to oversimplification (Pittenger, 2004). Therefore, understanding previously established clusters only provides the foundation for further exploring Gen Z's relationship with news. The exploratory nature of this study aims to use typology as a starting point to then likely provide a more nuanced understanding. Research has identified four user categories: news minimalists/avoiders, traditionalists, news omnivores, and (online) curated news users (Edgerly et al., 2018; Geers, 2020).



News minimalists are characterized by an overall low-to-avoidant consumption pattern. Other studies refer to this group as “disconnected citizens” (Blekesaune et al., 2012); however, they show the same characteristics as avoiders or minimalists. Previously, this has been the cluster with the most members (Ksiazek et al., 2010). This indicates that individuals are indeed disengaging from news, highlighting the novelty of this study. Traditionalists are the second-largest group, with a preference for TV, radio, news websites, or apps as their source. Research suggests that perhaps they are socialized through their guardians, leading to more ‘traditional’ repertoires (Geers, 2020). Additionally, content-wise, they seem to have a clear inclination for domestic politics (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). This stipulates that when wanting to gather trustworthy and serious news, the traditional platforms are favored, similarly to previous generations.

The group of online curated news users is in third place and consists of individuals who rely on social media algorithms on their feed as a source of news. They can be further characterized by a preference for the entertainment media (Edgerly et al., 2018). This is arguably fostered by the increase in media platforms, allowing for more passive consumption of news. Finally, the omnivores, the smallest group, choose to obtain their news from a mix of traditional and curated repertoires. They also show interest in a wide array of topics, ranging from regional news to showbiz and sports (Geers, 2020). Overall, it becomes apparent that the typology of news users can provide insights into the repertoires and types of content consumed. Therefore, this will be the starting point that this study departs from and is likely to add onto.

### **Influences on news consumption patterns**

In the past, research has explored the possible impact of external influences on news consumption patterns. These factors include parental influence, schooling, and the natural transition to adulthood (Althaus et al., 2009; Klopfenstein et al., 2024; Shehata & Strömbäck,

2011). To examine the relationship Gen Z has with news, it is vital to consider possible outside influences as so-called antecedents. However, every individual has different experiences, meaning one must remain critical and refrain from overgeneralizing.

Research suggests that news consumption is influenced by individual-level characteristics such as demographics (age, education, and socioeconomic background), political interest, and media involvement (Althaus et al., 2009). Despite this, critics say that these particular factors fail to encompass the complexity of individuals. They do not merely decide whether to consume news independent of the media environment they are fostered in (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011). Therefore, in addition to the research done on individual factors, contextual factors are being increasingly investigated. Shehata and Strömbäck (2011) found that the media environment of individuals had an additional effect on news consumption when controlling for individual factors. Accordingly, newspaper-centric individuals tend to be more interested in political topics, regardless of their education, for example. This indicates that the types of content and platforms used can foster consumption habits. This is corroborated by Klopfenstein et al. (2024), who suggest structural factors (access, routines, and regulations) and normative transitions (aging) as predictors of news consumption patterns in adolescents. As young adolescents transition towards adulthood, their goal is to create a relatively stable identity and gain autonomy (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). These transitions are frequently accompanied by changes in the individual's home and school life as the parents and teachers are adapting to the growing adolescent (Klopfenstein et al., 2024). Therefore, the structural factors such as access, routines, and regulations further impact news consumption patterns as the pubescent individuals begin to seek autonomy. This also indicates that as individuals get older, their awareness of larger societal issues increases. Overall, there have been different approaches to identifying possible antecedents for news consumption. Despite this, there is a consensus on the discussion of external factors. It

appears that a combination of parental influence and fostering habits can in some way influence adolescents' news habits. Therefore, regardless of the focus on either structural or socioeconomic factors, young adults indicated that their inclination for particular content and repertoires was, at least in part, due to what they were taught and had observed in the news consumption habits of their parents.

In conclusion, previous research supports the idea that the changing media landscape may have caused a shift in younger generations. Although this has led to the identification of new user typologies, the underlying motivations remain largely unknown. Additionally, Gen Z is the last cohort to experience parts of their childhood without modern technologies. This makes them the bridging generation for traditional and contemporary news. Multiple sources show that the group of news avoiders has been the largest. This further emphasizes the relevance of investigating Gen Z's news engagement. Employing an exploratory approach, this study will use the existing typology as a foundation. The aim is to obtain an overview of the participant's habits and allow for more targeted questions regarding their experiences with news. Furthermore, parental involvement and natural aging have been identified as potentially influential. To obtain a holistic overview of the participants' experiences, these topics will also be thematized. Various approaches have been used in prior research on news and media repertoires. However, phenomenology provides a unique opportunity to capture the lived experiences of individuals, offering a different perspective.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This research aims to investigate the relationship generation Z members have with news, and particularly the socially and politically relevant topics around the world. The intention is to provide insights into why individuals steer towards or away from specific

topics and content of societal interest. For this, a qualitative and exploratory method was adopted, as individuals have the freedom of choice and motivation regarding the types of news they consume. The qualitative approach, through means of in-depth interviews, allows for more meaningful and individualistic answers. Indeed, qualitative research encourages participants to provide richer descriptions into their thought processes regarding personal choices or phenomena (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, standardized instruments in such research may lack depth and be less purposeful in providing insights into an individual's frame of reference (Coe et al., 2021). The research and design have received approval by the ethics committee of the Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences Faculty at the University of Twente (request number: 240860).

### **Participants**

To conduct the interviews and gain insights into the relationship individuals have with news, participants were selected through the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method through which participants are selectively chosen based on their characteristics and likelihood of providing rich responses (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants were recruited through personal invitations and oral communication. Although non-probability methods have a higher risk of sampling bias (Etikan et al., 2015; Vehovar et al., 2016), the depth of insights from the chosen participants is vital for examining the relationship.

There are multiple required characteristics that the participants needed to possess. First and foremost, the interviewees were required to be between and including the ages of 20 and 27. Although the age in generational concepts varies depending on the research, generation Z typically consists of members between the ages of 12 and 27 (*Age Range by Generation*, 2024). However, participants were asked to reflect on their behavior and interest in conventional news topics, which is why young adolescents had been excluded from the

population. Research shows that young adolescents are only beginning to start the process of self-reflection as they move towards independence (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). Accordingly, the participants were between the ages of 20 and 27 ( $M = 24.13$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ). Determined by data saturation, the interviews concluded with an overall sample size of 15 participants.

Additionally, the sense of awareness for political and societal topics is less pronounced at this age (Shehata & Amnå, 2017). Generation Z provides a unique set of individuals who are in part separated by the digital life. On the one hand, older members of this generation are the last who lived part of their childhood without the omnipresence of technologies and easy access to the internet. Alternately, younger members are the first of many generations to follow, growing up with the ubiquitous accessibility to daily technologies. This provides an exceptional opportunity to investigate how young adults have shaped their news consumption patterns in light of the changing possibilities and platforms that the digital society provides. Finally, although the debate on which external factors influence the media repertoires and content is inconclusive, the participants required a university background. This ensured that all recruited participants had similar access to varying news content platforms. Furthermore, although this research is qualitative and exploratory, there was a relatively equal gender balance among participants (see Table 1). Of the 15 participants, 8 identify as male and 7 as female.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	Degree
1	Male	26	Postgraduate Master's Degree
2	Female	22	Bachelor's Degree
3	Female	27	Master's Degree
4	Female	25	Master's Degree

5	Male	26	Bachelor's Degree
6	Male	25	Master's Degree
7	Female	21	Bachelor's Degree
8	Male	25	Master's Degree
9	Female	27	Graduate Bachelor's Degree
10	Male	21	Bachelor's Degree
11	Male	21	Bachelor's Degree
12	Female	26	Bachelor's Degree
13	Male	20	Bachelor's Degree
14	Female	25	Graduate Bachelor's Degree
15	Male	25	Bachelor's Degree

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## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow for an interview guide as preparation; however, they also require flexibility depending on the responses of the participants. Additionally, in order to gain deeper insights, probing questions were used to encourage the participants to share further details on their habits and experiences. Therefore, not all questions from this guide were always suitable and needed to be adapted on the spot. A complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews were structured into blocks, each containing multiple questions regarding one theme of interest. Firstly, after the briefing and consent have taken place, the interview started with demographical questions regarding their age, gender, and university background. This was followed by Block B with the theme of news consumption patterns. The second block contained questions regarding frequency, platforms of choice, and devices used. This provides information on the typology and media repertoires of participants, as

done in prior research by Edgerly et al. (2018), to have a tangible starting point off which this research builds on. Then, participants were asked to reflect on parental involvement in news consumption during their teenage years, as well as compare these lived experiences to their current habits. This built on recent research by Klopfenstein et al. (2024) and provided a more wholesome understanding of the individual's journey and awareness of news.

Block C went into more detail regarding active and passive consumption as well as the types of content. Inquiries regarding this were partially adapted from Oeldorf-Hirsch (2018). Furthermore, questions regarding the perceived reliability of the preferred news sources were included. This allowed for more insight into the participants experiences and understanding of digital news.

Depending on the responses, Block D went deeper into which topics the participants prioritized and why this was the case. To round off the interview, participants were then asked to reflect on the notion of staying informed in relation to the idea of civic duty. This provided a vital insight into how participants position themselves in society.

## **Procedure**

Firstly, suitable participants were recruited and asked to participate in the interview, giving them a short summary of the topic. Upon agreeing, a fitting time and location were determined by the interviewee and researcher to allow for a comfortable atmosphere and adequate preparation time. During this appointment, the participants were then briefed on the procedure and study. They were made aware of their rights to discontinue the study at any given time without having to provide an explanation. Additionally, participants were asked to sign a consent form regarding their participation and being recorded (Appendix C). They were informed that the recording was for the purpose of later analysis and educated on the data management of said recording. Furthermore, they received the contact details of the researcher in case of questions, requests, or withdrawal at a later stage. The participants were

then asked if they had any questions and if they wanted to continue on to the interview, which would last around 30-45 minutes. At the start of the interview, participants were reassured that there are no right or wrong answers and to respond as truthfully as possible. Prior to each of the blocks that followed, there was a short introduction to the overall theme of the questions. Overall, the timespan of the interviews with 15 participants was around 2 weeks.

### **Strategy and Analysis**

All the interviews are recorded on a mobile device, anonymized, and then safely stored in compliance with GDPR regulations for data management. The interviews were transcribed non-verbatim, removing stutters and verbal pauses to enhance readability (Brooks, 2021). Furthermore, as some of the interviews were conducted in German, they were transcribed in English to allow for direct quotation later. Using the software Atlas.ti (version 24), the transcripts were read multiple times, highlighting and extracting significant quotes related to the participants experience. Phenomenology is a contemporary approach rooted in uncovering and understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Jang et al., 2022). In descriptive phenomenology, the researcher is required to ‘bracket’ any presuppositions to describe the lived experiences of individuals. The coding of the transcripts is done through phenomenological reduction, where the individual’s rich descriptions of how they experience news allows for clustering their meanings into overarching themes. These will later be illustrated through direct quotations and descriptions. The essence of these themes and patterns highlights the motivations and experiences participants have with regards to news consumption and selectivity. Firstly, however, a summary of the participants’ typology and media repertoires is provided, to allow for a more comprehensive understanding.



## Results

### Typology of news consumers and media repertoires

Overall, none of the participants described or saw themselves as news avoiders. In fact, the majority of individuals (N = 12) would be more accurately placed in the (online) curated news consumer category. The participants rely on news content that shows up on their social media feeds. However, they have also subscribed to large media outlets on Instagram, which is their way of staying informed.

When I actually look into news myself, I go to the Instagram account and then I look for information there. But if I happen to come across news, I'll also look at it.

Participant M (personal communication, May 30, 2024)

Furthermore, while there are always certain topics that are more captivating than others, none of the participants would categorically exclude any. The notion of selectivity was often mentioned when the participants discussed the 'abundance of news coverage' and negativity aspect. Additionally, all participants are content with the amount of news they consume and most identified their consumption as passive (N = 11). Finally, all individuals felt it was important to be generally informed on current ongoings, however, the extent varied largely.

### Clustering and Themes

Based on the experiences of these generation Z members, the essential structure that describe the news consumption phenomenon is a negative affiliation. The essence of this is

presented in three main clusters (media mistrust, mental health, and COVID) and seven emergent themes (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Clusters and Themes*

Negative Affiliation	
Clusters	Themes
1.0 Media Mistrust	1.1 Opinionated reporting 1.2 Public vs. Private sector
2.0 Mental Health	2.1 Safeguarding Happiness 2.2 Bubble lifestyle 2.3 Doomscrolling
3.0 COVID	3.1 Abundance of coverage 3.2 Scaremongering

### **1.0 Media Mistrust**

The participants are generally mistrustful of news content they consume. They believe that all the information they see needs to be handled with a large amount of skepticism.

I guess it's all this scepticism that has been building up within me. When I look at news and even even if it's 100% true or unbiased, I would still be prompted not to trust it just because I've been kind of, grown like that. I've been kind of indoctrinated like that to not believe it just because that's how it's been so far. And I have no reason to believe it'll change soon.

Participant J (personal communication, May 27, 2024)

The spreading of fake news in particular, was something that they recalled only having encountered in more recent years. As social media platforms began to grow in popularity, they began to notice this shift in reliability.

### **1.1 Opinionated reporting**

Even when referring to larger media outlets, the participants share the viewpoint that they can oftentimes identify an opinionated undertone in the news they consume. According to them, this fuels their mistrust, as they are hoping for a more neutral reporting.

Unless it's like 100% guaranteed facts. ... I can kind of smell the undertone. ... It's not gratifying if that makes sense. I'm exerting my mental effort to look for it and to read it, to then try to think of what's the undertone is. Who wrote it? Why are they writing it in such a way that makes it seem like X&Y? But then I stopped reading it. And I'm like, what did I get out of that? I got nothing. I could have spent those 10 minutes doing anything else.

Participant J (personal communication, May 27, 2024)

This also led some participants to steer away from conventional news sources. They resort to subscribing to individuals on Instagram and reading their more opinionated coverage on topics, rather than worrying about the motives of sources that are supposed to be neutral.

So I don't trust 100% what they're saying. It's not that I also trust all the information that I get from my Instagram news either, but I feel like it's more reliable than the big news channels.

Participant O (personal communication, June 1, 2024)

Furthermore, participants feel that it has changed their perception and attitude towards news. Instead of being able to merely read the article, they have to invest more time and thoughts into trying to identify the undertone of each piece. Overall, this also led to many participants consuming news in a passive manner to reduce time and effort spent on staying informed.

## 1.2 Public vs. Private Channels

The descriptions of the participants made it clear, that many of them make a distinction between news coming from public and private broadcasters. The main belief is, that public outlets convey a more trustworthy reporting of events. On the other hand, private channels are more known for clickbait titles and less reliability. Furthermore, user generated content makes it difficult for participants to believe what they see. Particularly on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok the amount of unreliable information would require them to actively fact-check the content. This often causes frustration and results in less engagement.

I'm always very careful with TikTok. With Instagram, of course, even if it's random content. But if I see that the Tagesschau posted it or the NDR posted it. Then I trust it.

Participant N (personal communication, May 30, 2024)

However, there were also noticeable differences depending on the nationality of the participants. Interviewees from Germany have more trust in conventional news sources. The largest one is the public *Tagesschau*, which all German participants mentioned as a trustworthy and balanced outlet. Additionally, many mention that they watch the *Tagesschau* because of their parents. In Germany, this news outlet is part of a routine that many parents have passed on. This links back to the study by Klopfenstein et al. (2024),

who propose structural factors (access, routines, and regulations) as predictors of consumption patterns.

I think I mostly found my own way. There are things that many German children take with them from home. I watch Tagesschau in the evening for example, like my parents did. But otherwise, I think I went my own way.

Participant N (personal communication, May 30, 2024)

Conversely, participants from other European or international countries showed higher mistrust in general towards news outlets. According to them, this is due to the political situation in their home country.

My dad watches the news, but then he's very critical of it. It's mostly just, you know, making fun of our own country Romania. It's still bad here. And he just like saying, they're only saying this because they want more money. They're only saying this because of that. So I guess it's critical thinking in a sense. But it's the same arguments over and over. And I can kind of see that. Honestly, if I think about it. They're only saying this because they want stuff to go their own way. Not because they want to inform the population...

Participant J (personal communication, May 27, 2024)

I don't know who buys it, but I don't know. I just feel like I cannot trust it. If you go to CNN in America, it's not that I am for Trump, but in itself they do influence the news so that they make the left look better than the right. So I think every news channel really has its politic influence to it.

Participant O (personal communication, June 1, 2024)

## 2.0 Mental Health

All participants stated that they feel negatively impacted when they consume news. For some participants the extent of this is greater than for others, however for all the mood afterwards is bad and gloomy. This causes participants to change their schedule for consuming news, as well as reduce the frequency of consumption.

I did however change my habit, to make sure the negativity of it doesn't impact me. Usually I listen podcasts, after the gym on the ride home. So, I don't listen to it the first thing in the morning.

Participant L (personal communication, May 29, 2024)

Furthermore, some participants actively take day-long breaks from consuming news if they are not in the right mindset. The impact that news coverage has on the participants mental health is a largely voiced concern for them.

## 2.1 Safeguarding Happiness

The most frequent explanation participants offered for their relationship to news is reduced consumption for self-protection. According to them, they are unsure how to cope with the negativity of the news on a daily basis. This was particularly seen in relation to humanitarian crises globally.

I think news is a thing that I used to consume more and that I then at some point I left it behind, simply because of the fact that I noticed that it was burdening me. And news for me is very quickly associated with world pain. You look at it and think, 'yes crap, somehow I can't do anything, I can't change anything'. Then you look at these issues,

which are so big and so global and so political and social, that you have the feeling, okay, they are too big for me and I can't do anything.

Participant C (personal communication, May 16, 2024)

Some individuals explain the conundrum they find themselves in because choosing not to look at news does not make the actual 'problem' go away. Further, many stated that although they grew up in a protected household, news has made them realize that the prior idealization of the world has resulted in cognitive dissonance. As a consequence, they have entered a mode where self-protection is a priority.

In the evening you want a little distraction instead of having to deal with serious topics again. So the topic of distraction is a big thing, I think. Positive distraction. So not topics with a negative touch to it, where you feel worse afterwards than you felt before. And then you also have your own problems that you carry with you every day that you have to solve. And then you don't want to hear about the problems of others.

Participant D (personal communication, May 20, 2024)

... if I read too much of it in one day, then I'll pull it down at some point. As I said before, I don't want it to be too close to me. Because I think it's important. And we shouldn't be forced to do so. But this self-protection is just as important. And I think you have to keep in mind that there are beautiful things in life. And that in the news, often negative topics are very present. And that is something you have to be aware of. And you have to distance yourself from it. Without closing yourself to the topic. Otherwise, you can forget it. It's a balancing act.

Participant H (personal communication, May 25, 2024)

## 2.2 Bubble Lifestyle

As a result of the perceived constant negativity, participants often referred to adopting a 'bubble lifestyle'. The interviewees mention that they prefer to live their lives as carefree as possible, knowing that there are critical topics in the news. Participants find it difficult to identify with topics that are not in their immediate surroundings, and they cannot directly impact.

I have a very strong notion that if things are out of my control or out of my active control that I as a person right now can influence, I'd rather not worry about it either. And if I'm not going to worry about it, then why would I interest myself in it?

Participant A (direct communication May 15, 2024)

I cannot control what happens in any of them. I'm not gonna go on Twitter and, you know, advocate for a better human rights or, you know, food rights, or whatever. So either way, I cannot control what's going on, but I can get something out of one of them, which is entertainment from the Minecraft or the YouTube industry. Whereas I can read about the genocides happening everywhere and I'm just gonna be like, 'oh, that kind of sucks'. What am I gonna do about it? Be sad? Cry about it? I guess not. No, just move on.

Participant J (personal communication, May 27, 2024)

Overall, the participants exerted strong emotional responses with regard to the negativity in the news. Many tried to substantiate their choice to live in a bubble, whilst others used black humor to indicate how distanced they've become.



### **2.3 Doomscrolling**

Despite the need for distancing themselves from negativity, participants admitted that sometimes ‘flashy’ news spiked their morbid curiosity. Although the interviewees deemed it contradictory to their normal news habits, some violent stories catch their attention. They say that they cannot seem to look away from it, although they think it would be better. Most participants regret it afterwards but tend to find themselves in the same situation later.

Excuse the metaphor, but sometimes it's a bit of like a train wreck. It's something you don't want to be looking at, but you keep looking anyway. And you never learn not to the next time.

Participant A (personal communication, May 15, 2024)

### **3.0 COVID-19**

While reflecting on their news consumption patterns, many individuals marked the pandemic as a key event that changed their perceptions and attitudes towards news. According to them, COVID-19 was motivating the reduction of consumption and the beginning of affiliating news with negative emotions. The constantly felt uncertainty and large amounts of inconsistent information left a deep residual impression they reportedly cannot see past.

#### **3.1 Abundance of coverage**

Through the perceived abundance of coverage, participants felt constantly strained and exhausted from the repetitive nature of the news updates. At the beginning of the pandemic, the interviewees remembered constantly hoping for an update from news outlets. However, as time passed, they found themselves actively avoiding the news.

It had been going on for so long and has become almost normal. It's not so sensitive or feels so bad anymore, to see these topics. It just became so normal even though at the beginning it was a bigger shock. And there it was probably more interesting to see what was happening in detail. Later, I didn't want to get the current updates on that anymore.

Participant D (personal communication May 20, 2024)

The interviewees state that hearing the same news continuously desensitized them to this and other topics that followed. It came surprisingly to many, because despite their generally high empathy, they began to feel numb to the ongoing. This links back to the bubble lifestyle many have adopted over time.

### **3.2 Scaremongering**

The interviewees further mentioned that the new coverage during COVID-19 adopted an approach that led to the world-wide spreading of panic. Many emphasized that the news was supposed to be a neutral report on the ongoing situation, but felt let down by the media outlets. The back and forth of information and presented statistics gave the participants a doomsday feeling, which they interpreted as unnecessary given the circumstances.

Then at some point I personally reduced my news consumption. I think just out of an escapism of thoughts. Especially during Corona, where there was just this disgusting news culture at some point. Every day different things, today hot, tomorrow not, and somehow everything didn't fit together anymore. Not necessarily only because they gave out false information because they wanted to, but because no one knew exactly what the deal was. And in the end, I think I turned my back on the news a bit, out of self-protection and disappointment.

Participant C (personal communication, May 16, 2023)

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand the essence of Generation Z's news experience. Through the descriptive phenomenological approach, three main clusters were identified that shaped and continue to shape their interaction with and opinion of news. The nature of this approach allows for uncovering thoughts and conscious experiences, without trying to derive theories or overgeneralise the individual encounters. Overall, it becomes apparent that the experience Gen Z has with news is tainted with negativity. Although this leads to disengagement, the participants are generally interested in current affairs. Furthermore, the notion of civic duty was criticized by many for being too strict. Despite this, they do believe that staying informed is important as a member of this society.

The participants exhibit a high level of concern for their mental health with regards to news. This was the most accentuated and influential cluster in their experiences. A feeling of negativity and dissonance to their taught world view has influenced their openness to consumption in multiple ways. As new reports generally cover matters of societal impact, they tend to overshadow even 'small wins'. Therefore, out of self-protection, interviewees are inclined to distance themselves from the news content to maintain a positive attitude in their daily lives. In prior generations, there had been a stigma attached to mental health (Sartorius, 2007). This often caused individuals to have low regard for their psychological wellbeing and not seek out help. However, in recent years, mental health has been thematized more. Especially with the rising popularity of social media, individuals felt more comfortable to talking openly about this (Council, 2023). This is a possible explanation for the profoundness of this cluster. It further indicates that although previous generations had their own 'negative news' to cope with, Gen Z is more actively listening to what they think is good for them. Some have even changed their attitude towards news completely, deciding to live in their 'bubble' and avoid most news coverage. After listening to participants' experiences with

negativity, they were asked if adding more positive news to the content would change the frequency or general habits of consumption. All interviewees were surprised and stated they would welcome the idea and try it. This indicates that although their prior experience with news has been shaped negatively, the participants are open to new formats that tailor to their needs for positivity.

Secondly, the media mistrust cluster shows an ongoing conundrum that the participants have with the reliability of content. Stemmed in part from a media environment that has undergone changes, mistrust seemingly influences the way that the interviewees interact with news and perceive it. Instead of being able to focus on the content of news, participants moreover question the undertones and motives of the author. This results in frustration, as they fear that their time is being used inefficiently. At this stage, many participants abandon the news content because it would require them to invest further time to check for reliability.

In its essence, news was previously not considered as something questionable, however modern platforms and channels have changed this perception for members of generation Z. These findings are supported by the ever-changing media landscape. The previously mentioned study by Harjule et al. (2020) also implicated reduced reliability over time. However, in their study, the results were attributed to the introduction of social media platforms. Hence, it seems to be a matter of interpretation. Whilst the introduction of social media platforms has changed the reliability of news, the participants seem more 'disappointed' by big traditional news channels. The interviewees are aware, that social media channels also provide opinionated coverage. However, this does not seem to bother them, even though they still proceed with caution. It seems as though they 'expect' the coverage to be opinionated from platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Despite this, there are indeed noteworthy differences based on nationality and the media environment that

individuals are fostered in. More accurately, the German participants seem to build their news repertoire partly based on what they had observed in their parents. Therefore, demographics do seem to play a role in news consumption, as Althaus et al. (2009) suggested. However, these findings are more in line with prior research by Shehata & Strömbäck (2011). They suggest that, in addition to demographics, the media environment is an important indicator of consumption. This was observed during the interviews as well. Overall, even with their concern for trustworthiness, participants have found methods and platforms for consuming news that suit them.

Finally, many participants rooted part of their negative relationship with news in the pandemic. It was the first time that they had noticed their views on news shifting. Most prominent for this was the abundance of coverage and the fatalistic narrative that outlets conveyed. During the interviews, it became apparent that many participants are still angry at news channels and politicians for this. Although they felt it was important to stay informed on current safety measures, interviewees noted that the pandemic was intimidating enough. They believe it did not require hourly updates on how many people were actively infected or had passed. The participants admitted that they turned away from news as it became too much for them. This also links back to the aspect of perceived negativity. In general, COVID-19 has left a deep mark on society, and research is only beginning to explore various aspects and consequences of this (Liu et al., 2021). Despite the interviewees' statements, it remains questionable if the pandemic was the actual root of this relationship. At the time of COVID-19, many of the participants had just reached adulthood. Looking back at the study by (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), adolescents are in search of a stable identity and autonomy. This also means that as they move closer to adulthood, they begin to form a higher sense of self-awareness. During the interviews, many participants mentioned their increased interest in conventional news as they grew up. Furthermore, the interviewees also believe that part of

being an adult meant, staying informed on societal topics. This indicates that, as the pandemic was occurring, many participants had just begun to consume news more frequently. Therefore, the first, arguably mature, experience they had with news was during COVID-19. Although not intentional, this caused news channels to leave a negative impression on the individuals. It is not unlikely that many participants identify the pandemic as the starting point of the negativity, merely due to the circumstances society was in. This, however, does not change the lived experiences of the individuals.

To summarize, the aspect of perceived negativity surrounding the news media environment has resulted in a reduction in consumption. Generation Z generally exhibits interest in conventional news; however, this does not take precedence over their wellbeing. It also appears that the initially thought selectivity towards particular topics was not present. Moreso, Gen Z decide to consume news based on availability and interest. However, they would not categorically skip certain topics. Furthermore, these Gen Z members tend to consume news passively, based on their social media algorithms. Their decision for this type of news consumption is a result of prior experiences. For one, COVID-19 left a negative impression on how news channels report current affairs. This resulted in an overall negative association with the concept of news. It further continues to be fueled by the media mistrust that they experience.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

First and foremost, this study aimed to gain insights into the experiences of news consumption among members of Gen Z. To achieve this, the interviewees were invited to participate using the purposive sampling approach. The responses were then analyzed using descriptive phenomenology. This means that their responses are individualistic and cannot be generalized to the entire population. Furthermore, the nature of descriptive phenomenology

allows for deep insights into an individual's lived experiences; however, bracketing limits the interpretations that can be drawn from this. To gain insights into the entire population, future researchers are encouraged to utilize other sampling and analysis methods that allow for a more diversified and representative examination.

Secondly, although the gender split in the group of participants was relatively balanced, the nationality of the interviewees was not considered. In this study, most of the participants were German. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that there were differences in their experiences based on their nationalities. Therefore, future research could explore the impact that the cultural environment has on how news is perceived. This could add to prior research on the media environment that individuals were fostered in.

Lastly, the lived experiences of individuals were captured using semi-structured interviews. This provides in-depth insights into the phenomenon of selective news consumption and avoidance. However, the depth of the responses and, therefore, the results can vary depending on the interviewee and interviewer. More specifically, participants who are more cognitively and emotionally detached from their experience with news provide more candid responses despite the probing questions. Alternatively, the diversity of the responses means that the interviewer must add questions intuitively. This, for one, makes it difficult to replicate the study, and on the other hand, makes it challenging to identify common themes and clusters. Therefore, future research could use a mixed-measures approach or triangulation.

Overall, there are many topics to explore around news consumption. Apart from the current studies on consumer typologies and media repertoires, there are few explanations for Gen Z's behavior. This study aimed to take the first step in understanding the phenomenon of selectivity and news avoidance by analyzing the lived experiences of individuals. Future research should continue to study this area, exploring how the perception of news is

changing. This trend has practical implications for media literacy in younger generations and provides insightful learnings for news broadcasters. Therefore, a generational comparison of news habits could shed some light on the topic further. By analyzing the motivations and interactions that young consumers have with news, further strategies for media engagement can be formulated.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to understand the described and lived experiences that Gen Z members have with news. The results illustrate the complex and conflicting relationship built on media mistrust and negativity. Although the majority of Gen Z had previously been classified as news avoiders, this study in part demonstrates the limitations of typological research. The findings suggest that while Gen Z is interested in traditional news, they prioritize their mental health and happiness. Furthermore, there seems to be a change in media repertoires for consuming news. This indicates that the younger generations may start to play an active role in reshaping the way news is presented and consumed. For news channels or broadcasters to stay relevant for younger audiences, they may need to rethink the platforms and formats of their content.

The relationship Gen Z has with news is currently tainted by negative prior experiences. However, they still see the value and importance of consuming news. Hence, Gen Z has not closed themselves off to traditional or societal topics, meaning they are open to trying new ways. This in turn requires news channels to tailor their reporting to the needs of the audience.

In closing, this study highlights the currently changing demographics and evolving news media environment. Generation Z is only the first cohort that is questioning the existing news landscape. The incongruence they are experiencing is causing lower engagement with news



content, despite the understood importance of staying informed. The interviews show that by adapting the delivery of information and building trust, news outlets could possibly re-engage younger audiences.

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## **Appendix A – Use of AI**

During the preparation of this work, I used Microsoft Copilot to gain a base-level understanding of certain concepts and connections between them. Furthermore, I also used ChatGPT for translating German terminology into English. After using these tools, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the outcome.



## Appendix B - Interview Questions and derivatives

Interview Blocks & Questions	Inspired by
<b>Block A: Demographics</b>	
What is your age?	-
What is your highest degree and what are you currently doing?	-
If you find yourself in a situation, where you had some time to spend on your phone, laptop or some other device, what would be your go-to content or platform?	-
<b>Block B: News Consumption Patterns</b>	
How often would you say you consume news?	Geers (2020) & Edgerly et al. (2018) – news repertoires
Do you wish you spent more time doing so, or are you currently happy with it?	-
Which device would you say you primarily use?	Edgerly et al. (2018)
How do you consume news in terms of platforms. Is there something you absolutely wouldn't turn to?	Geers (2020) & Edgerly et al. (2018) – news repertoires

<p>If you reflect on how you consume news now, vs. when you were a teenager, would you say something has changed?</p>	Klopfenstein et al. (2024)
<p>How was your experience with COVID in regard to news?</p>	(Added after 3 <sup>rd</sup> interview)
<p>Would you say there are any habits regarding news consumption that you have taken/learned from your parents? Or did you find your own way?</p>	Findings of Geers (2020)
<p>Block C: Active/passive consumption and content</p>	
<p>Do you consider yourself more an active or passive news consumer?</p>	Oeldorf-Hirsch (2018)
<p>What type of news content do you consume most frequently?</p>	Geers (2020) & Edgerly et al. (2018) – news repertoires
<p>If you find something interesting in what you are consuming, do you like forward it to someone else?</p>	Harcup & O’Neill (2017) – identified that “shareability” is important nowadays
<p>Are you an auditory, visual, textual news consumer? What helps you retain the information more?</p>	-
<p>Do you believe in or trust the conventional news channels?</p>	-

Do you believe in or trust news from social media? -

Block D:

Is there content you steer away from? -

If I say the word news, what feeling, or thought do you automatically attach to it? -

In society there is this debate regarding the idea of staying informed being a 'civic duty'. What do you think about this? -

Would you be interested in news formats that also incorporate 'positive' news into their channels? -

If you compare yourself to your family and friends, would you say you are more, or less informed than them on news topics? -

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## Appendix C – Informed Consent

### Consent form

This interview is part of a research study investigating personal news consumption patterns.

Note that there are no wrong answers, so please respond as truthfully as you can.

For the sake of this research, the interview will be recorded. Afterwards the researcher will transcribe and analyze your responses. All personal or identifiable information that is gained during the interview will be anonymized to ensure your privacy. Furthermore, your personal data will not be disclosed or available to any third parties. Deletion of your data will take place on the 01.10.2024. You have the freedom to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any point you wish to, without any explanation necessary.

*Please tick the appropriate boxes*

**Yes**   **No**

#### **Taking part in the study**

I have understood the study. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.  Yes  No

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.  Yes  No

I understand that taking part in the study involves answering the researcher's questions as truthfully as I can.  Yes  No

#### **Use of the information in the study**

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, will not be shared beyond the researcher.  Yes  No

*I agree to be audio recorded.*  Yes  No

#### **Signatures**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Consent form

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Study contact details for further information:**

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## Appendix D – Search Log

**Table 1D**

*Literature Search Overview*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Search String</b>	<b>Total Hits</b>	<b>Relevant</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
08-03-2024	Google Scholar	“news” AND “generation”	5.6 million	3	Quick search for the topic orientation. This gave me the main articles I needed. I also browsed through their references and related journal articles.
09-03-2024	Google Scholar	(youth OR Gen Z OR adolescents) "news" and "consumption"	934,000	1	Less helpful, but made me realize that research was focused more on typology than understanding behavior
14.03.24	ScienceDirect	(media repertoire OR platform) AND (youth OR gen Z OR adolescents) AND news consumption	2,491	0	Did not use anything directly, however skimming the articles helped broaden my knowledge on consumption habits and consequences