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Evaluating the factors that influence news preferences on digital platforms

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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31 March 2022

DECLARATION

I, Zama Khumalo declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university

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ABSTRACT

The ‘always connected’ nature of digital media means that reaching and connecting with consumers is more difficult than ever. Evaluating the factors that South African consumers use for news preferences is important, as these will provide new media organisations with insights on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content that is aggressively vying for their attention on digital platforms. The Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory is a powerful media-use framework to decipher consumer motivation for media preference. Recent adaptations of U&G theory describe three critical dimensions namely, content, social and process. A confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine whether the measures of the three constructs are consistent in the South African news mediated context. The study found content and process factors as the most significant when making news preferences. Whilst social gratifications factors as least influential to consumers.

1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In the digital era, “we produce far more information than we can possibly manage, let alone absorb” (Norderson, 2008, p. 1). This implies that “power no longer resides in having access to information but in managing it”(Pulido, Villarejo-Carballido, Redondo-Sama, & Gómez, 2020, p. 2). In a global environment rich with plentiful information and news media - understanding how ordinary consumers access, choose and manage news content on digital platforms, during an infodemic context, becomes very important (Ahmed, 2020).

Rapid technological developments have accelerated and destabilized the degree to which consumers are experiencing the volume and velocity of information and news. Growth in information and communication technology, which were initially thought to provide convenient access to news content are now strongly responsible for the news overload and increasing the obstacles that consumers must overcome when engaging news content on digital platforms (Bawden & Robinson, 2020).

The objective of this research was to identify and evaluate the factors that influence news preferences on digital platforms. How do consumers navigate this turbulent and ambiguous digital news landscape? The results of the research may provide fundamental implications for the role, responsibility and contribution of news in the digital media era (Norderson, 2008). And it will help to develop appropriate and impactful news content strategies. It will also aid to uncover how consumers seek value on digital platforms during an infodemic (Kissane & Halvorson, 2011).

This report employed the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory to identify and evaluate the factors for the news preferences on digital platforms. The U&G scholars believe that consumers have unique reasons for selecting media and message source, or platform that best fits their own personal needs, and it attempts to offer explanations for consumer’s media motivations and associated behaviors (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). The consumers ‘taste’ suggests that consumers choose media based on their personal preferences, and thus media is a means to achieve a goal. It is based on that presumption that consumers have many media options to navigate and choose from, thus motivations for preferring and ultimately selecting a specific media will vary significantly from consumer to consumer. With the emergence of

computer-mediated communications, i.e., digital platforms have brought about greater significance and relevance to the U&G theory (Kaye & Johnson, 2002).

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

INFODEMIC

The World Health Organisation has labelled the current information overload environment that consumers must increasingly negotiate, an infodemic (WHO, 2021). Although in recent times the term is more commonly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not limited to the parameters of COVID-19 information and news. Instead, it is a term that attempts to describe an increasingly rich information environment accelerated by increased use of digital platforms as channels of engagement. (Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, Brennen, & Howard, 2020). Infodemic is a blend of two words (information and epidemic) and describes the inundation of unclear new information, mixed with fear, falsehood, speculation and rumor which is amplified by modern information technologies at a scale that effects national and international economics and politics (Nielsen et al., 2020). It is characterised by an influx of exaggerated, misleading, unsettling, and often confusing messages to a largely uninformed public. The consequence is a lack of trust which inhibits and delays appropriate action and may lead to suboptimal decision making (Baines & Elliott, 2020).

The primary factors of infodemic refers to the (1) volume of information; with an avalanche of information overload, even dedicated and reputable new producers find it hard to assess and rank quality of what is emerging (2), the velocity, rapids speeds and influx which it appears. The result of velocity of information and news is that there are delays in suppressing falsehood and correcting information. However, velocity and volume are not sufficient conditions that characterize infodemic. Thus, the final characteristic of an infodemic is the increased forms of (3) false information – which is categorized as either misinformation, disinformation, or mal-information. This overload (volume) of news content being distributed in high speeds (velocity) on digital platforms has had an impact on how audiences make content decisions (Shahsavari, Holur, Wang, Tangherlini, & Roychowdhury, 2020)

This paper is not limited to the COVID-19 infodemic, it is interested in the generic definition of the term infodemic, which encapsulates the overabundance of information and news in general - that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NEWS INCREASE DUE TO COVID-19

In the early stages of the outbreak, news was mainly dedicated to cover COVID-19 exclusively, however, naturally news would quickly transition to cover other general news topics. Therefore, it is not surprising that news content increased drastically - as consumer's looked for updates and information through a mixture of digital platforms (Nielsen et al., 2020). Due the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, seeking for information and updates became a necessity for consumers worldwide, hence a 36% increase in news content consumption in the US immediately after announcement of the first case (Bento et al., 2020). Consequently, news organisations have increased their news content production, fueling an era of "constant, fast-paced, breaking, exclusive, 24/7 news" culture (Ahmed, 2020). According to the Reuters Institute report (2019), out of the various types of information overload, news content is arguably the one that affects a significant amount of the general population (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2020). Therefore, with increased amounts of news content, headlines, and updates, determining the factors that consumers use to select news on digital platforms is the purpose of this paper.

INCREASED USED OF DIGITAL PLATFOMS TO CONSUME NEWS

News consumption across the globe is occurring increasingly on digital platforms. (Barthel, Mitchell, Asare-Marfo, Kennedy, & Worden, 2020). The ever increasing digital platforms to consume news is becoming more available due to the proliferation of technological advancements (Earnshaw, 2018). And, the pervasive, uncontrollable and dynamic nature of these technological advancements accelerates the abundance of false information at speeds that raise concern about the accuracy and quality of news that consumers must navigate with heightened awareness (Ahmed, 2020).

In the context of this paper, a digital platform defined as a commercial medium, vehicle or channel that facilitates interactions between at least two different entities – which one being the supplier (new creator) and the other being the consumer (news audience).

SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In line with global trends, the proliferation of technology and increase in internet access speed supported the increase in the number of devices capable of supporting digital news

content in South Africa (DataReportal, 2021). The IAB Digital Landscape Survey Report (2021) reveals that despite the state of the South African economy at large, the digital industry experienced an 18% year on year increase, a considerable increase from 2019 (IAB, 2021). This demonstrates the increased reliance on digital platforms as means to communicate, connect, obtain and share information and news content in South Africa (Lacsa, 2021).

Therefore, it is important to identify and understand the factors that South African consumers use to process these finite amounts of news available on digital platforms.

DEMOGRAPHIC FOCUS

South Africa has one of the largest young populations in the world and an internet penetration of 54%, it is these factors which arguably drive digital media news content consumption (Newman et al., 2021). Therefore, the study will focus on GenZ (born between 1997 – 2012) and Millennials (born between 1981 – 1996) as these groups account for almost 30% of the total population and also represent the largest generation to enter the country's workforce (StatsSA, 2021).

These are the key groups in the context of the pandemic, as they are the most active online, interacting simultaneously with an average of five digital platforms to consume news content, share and obtain information (WHO, 2021).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The always connected nature of digital media means that news content is able to find consumers from a variety of direct and indirect digital media sources (Ahmed, 2020). In an infodemic context, reaching and connecting with consumers is more difficult than ever. Consumers face increased potential to be exposed to complex information volume, velocity, and falsehood. The psychological processing of news content is considered 'challenging as it involves "active and deliberate processing of complex, conflicting, differing, sometimes unverified and/or sensational news content.

Therefore, identifying and evaluating the factors that South African consumers use to select news on digital platforms during an infodemic context is important. The identified factors will provide insights on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content that is aggressively vying for their attention on digital platforms.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper was to determine and evaluate the factors that consumers use to select news on digital platforms, using the Uses and Gratification framework revised by (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004).

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study will be useful for media organisations, media owners & media investors; advertisers, marketers; researchers and scholars; government and policy makers, editorial policy; newsrooms and content producers will receive insights, and research that may affect their digital news content strategy and content acquisition plans.

There is limited research in the South African context that looks into the factors that South African consumers use to make news selections on digital platforms during an infodemic context of increased news volume, velocity, and falsehood. This report seeks to investigate how consumers engage, manage and navigate news content in a climate characterised with an overabundance of information and falsehood - that is facilitated through internet distribution platforms – which typically allow rapid and large-scale sharing and lack the traditional mechanisms of quality control and gate keeping (Pulido et al., 2020).

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the factors that influence consumer news preferences on digital platforms?

1.7 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following section will outline the boundaries of this research report. It will define what will not be included. Due to time and logistical constraints, the following are delimitations and confinements of the report.

It is likely that the sampling of this research paper will be skewed. This implies that the spread of the sample will be smaller than the spread of the population. Furthermore, this paper will not be able to represent the population of South African population and/ or South African digital media users. The focus will be on the general population. A general population is suitable for this research because it covers a large collection of individuals that are of interest in the study.

Furthermore, this study is limited to responded that are currently using digital platforms to consume content. And respondents that consume news content on digital platforms.

1.8 ASSUMPTIONS

It is assumed that the respondents of the study are motivated to provide truthful and accurate information based on their personal perspectives, experiences, and reality. The respondents of the study will not intentionally provide misinformation to skew and distort the data & ultimate findings of the research. The number of respondents that participate will be sufficient to obtain sufficient and acceptable data on the topic. And the respondents will have some an understanding of the terms that have been defined.

1.9 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

TERM	**DEFINITION**
News	News is that which is 'new' (Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018). Defined as being informative content about matters of import. This definition does not include social media posts about personal matters and opinions (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).
Misinformation	Characterised by unintentional false information. Here, the dissemination of false information or news is an accident (Baines & Elliott, 2020).
Disinformation	Refers to deliberate and intentional dissemination of false information (Baines & Elliott, 2020).
Fake news	A type of disinformation and/or mal information, as it is intentionally crafting sensational, misleading, and emotionally charged information that mimics the form of mainstream news (Zimdars & McLeod, 2020).
Mal-information	Refers to altered true information (Baines & Elliott, 2020), produced maliciously to hurt people and/or inflict harm to an individual, group, company, or country (Zielinski, 2021). Here, the information is true, but it is produced in to cause grief.

2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the plight of an infodemic, where consumers are forced to navigate a heavily mediated environment, news content practitioners need to understand the factors that influence consumer news content preferences on digital platforms. The uses and gratifications (U&G) theoretical framework will be used to explain how and why consumers select news content to gratify their needs and desires on digital platforms.

The foundations of the theory that is now known now as U&G was paved by scholars in the 1940's who were interested in content selection choices, this transitioned from mostly focusing on gratifications sought by consumers to social and psychological needs that content gratified. In the 1950's the theory was extended on the foundations of Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs in 1954, which argued that consumers actively satisfy their needs from a hierarchy, from the bottom up the pyramid consists of physical, safety, social belonging, ego and self-actualization at the top (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). From these foundations, the work of scholars Blumler and McQuail between 1969 -1974 coined the uses and gratifications theory - which initially identified that the selection of content can be categorized into four factors; diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance (West, Turner, & Zhao, 2010).

However, in the digital age, technological and internet advancements have not only used, but deepened and extended the field for U&G theory (Stafford et al., 2004). With many theorists proposing that the theory is eminently suited and exceedingly appropriate for internet focused studies, due to the internet's media content-like characteristics (Stafford et al., 2004). The usefulness of digital mediums powered by the internet as powerful telecommunications vehicle is compelling

KEY THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Uses and gratifications is grounded on five key premises; the selection of (1) content is goal-directed. Consumers engage in content with a purpose, a goal, or a motive. Consumers intentionally choose content to deliberately satisfy their needs or desires. Thus, even in a digital media environment, consumers are 'active', rather than 'passive' recipients of news content (Rubin, 2009). Content does not use consumers, instead, (2) consumers select and

use content to satisfy their needs or desires. In other words, content is selected based on the expectation that it will satisfy specific needs and desires. (3) Social and psychological factors guide consumer behaviour. In other words, social and psychological factors drive the ways in which content can influence consumers. Therefore, factors such as personality and social context impact the content choice and the interpretation of the content by the consumer. Media influence on behavior is filtered through social and psychological factors. Thus, personality and social context impact the media choices one makes and one's interpretation of media messages (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). (4) Content competes with other forms and types of alternative communication that consumers may choose to gratify their needs or wants (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). (5) People are more powerful and influential than the content itself. In other words, consumers are in control of the content and are not necessarily influenced by it (Markus & Benjamin, 1997).

FACTORS OF THE THEORY

The selection of content by consumers can be understood in two ways; **(i)** Content gratifications (e.g. entertainment or information, i.e. the messages carried by the platform) and the **(ii)** Experience of selecting the content (Katz et al., 1974) (e.g.. functionality, browsing, perusing/playing with the technology, i.e. the actual use of platform (Stafford et al., 2004). These overarching dimensions are distinguished as content gratifications and process gratifications. In other words consumers using digital platforms may be influenced by the enjoyment of the process (i.e. functionality) or by the informational content (Stafford et al., 2004).

Within these two overarching factors (i.e., content and process), there are several needs and gratifications for consumer content selection. These can be organized into five categories. (1) Cognitive needs; consumers select news content to acquire information, facts, knowledge, and intellectual counsel. (2) Affective needs; includes all kinds of pleasures, mood enhancing emotions to satisfy their aesthetic experience. (3) Personal integrative needs; consumers use content for their self-esteem, reassure their status, gain credibility, and stabilize. (4) Social integrative needs; states that consumers engage with content to socialize. (5) Escape or tension needs; says that consumers use media to escape the real word and release tension release needs.

Research by scholars Stafford and Schkade (2004) set out to determine the factors of U&G for the internet found that consumers have three main categories of gratifications on internet platforms. According to their research, these three factors, i.e.; (1) content, (2) process and (3) social gratifications are relevant to managing the internet as a commercial platforms (Stafford et al., 2004).

Content gratifications states that consumers use the internet to search for information, this is aligned with the cognitive, affective and escape needs of the U&G theory; process gratifications on the internet platforms are sought from the navigational experience of the platform in its functional process. Process gratifications are attained when consumers select the usage of a certain medium or digital platform because they appreciate the process of using the platform. Social gratifications are achieved when consumers are able to form deep social ties and connections on internet platforms (Stafford et al., 2004), this is linked to the social integrative need of the U&G theory that suggests consumers select content to network and connect with others.

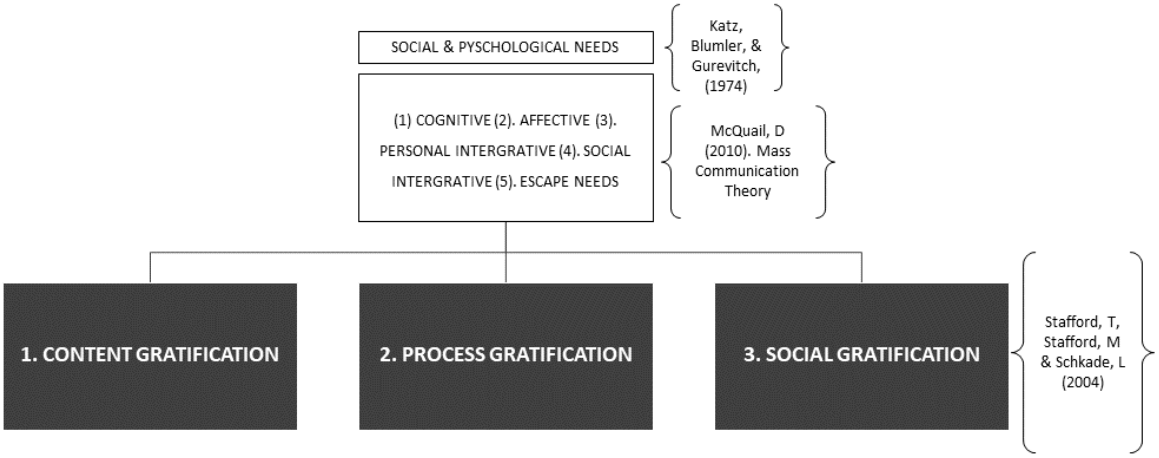

Figure: Theoretical Conceptual Framework

2.2 CONTENT GRATIFICATIONS

News values describes several content-based characteristics that increase the chances of news content being selected by consumers. It explains the content features and attributes that influence consumer selection of news content. News values posits that news content has certain characteristics, qualities or selection guidelines that make it newsworthy that serve as selection criteria (Eilders, 1996).

Research by Galtung and Ruge (1965) put forward a list of news content characteristics that are used by consumer's to select news media; the criteria is as follows: negative news, elite people, elite nations, compositional balance, continuity, unexpectedness, meaningfulness, frequency, threshold, unambiguity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Further research by Harcup and O'Neil (2017) expand on these news values by providing extended characteristics that are used by consumers to select news content. These include: Exclusivity (stories available first) , bad news (stories with negative overtones), good news (stories with positive overtones), conflict (stories with controversies), surprise (stories that are unusual), audio-visuals (stories accompanied with video, photography or audio), share-ability (stories likely to be shared on social media), entertainment, drama (soft stories concerning human interest – sex, sieges, rescues, court cases), follow-up (stories already on the news), the power elite, and celebrities, relevance (stories perceived to be influential), magnitude (stories perceived to impact large numbers of people) and news organization's agenda (stories that fit the news organisations agenda, ideological or commercial campaign) (Harcup & O'neill, 2017). The varied above-mentioned characteristics encapsulates all the five factors of the U&G theory i.e., cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and escape needs

To fulfil the consumer cognitive needs for factual knowledge and information of the U&G theoretical framework, audiences rely on trusted news sources when it comes to news selection on digital platforms. The most trusted news source, provider or person is a key factor to whether a consumer selects news media. Research indicates that trustworthiness and credibility of the news are critical indicators on consumer content selection behaviour. On internet platforms a number of characteristics are used to assess the consumer's trust in a particular source (MediaInsightProject, 2016). The following are characteristics that reside in a trustworthy and credible digital source; accuracy (expert sources), completeness (content covers all aspects), fairness (content has diverse views), transparency, presentation & design (MediaInsightProject, 2016).

Consumers often seek information from those that they trust or expect to have alike worldviews. Research has shown the role of 'opinion leaders', as a factor that often shapes consumers attitudes towards a news source; there is more trust to a news source if it is shared by an opinion leader or a friend (Sterrett et al., 2019). People who are considered knowledgeable on a news topic adds to the overall credibility of the news source. The caliber,

expertise, reputation and merit of the opinion leader, influencer and/or source is important (MediaInsightProject, 2016). Therefore, the literature strongly suggests that content gratification from credible sources is a significant factor that influences consumer content selection on internet platforms.

2.3 PROCESS GRATIFICATIONS

However, in a digital landscape news content is no longer exclusively selected according to the above-mentioned traditional content based criteria, as indefinite and nebulous computer algorithms on digital platforms, create an excessive and high-choice news media environment for consumers. (Engelmann, Luebke, & Kessler, 2021). In an algorithmically driven and digital environment, it is unclear whether these news content characteristics are still relevant, as the theory only focuses on the content characteristics and neglects other factors that consumers may use to select content on digital platforms (Engelmann et al., 2021). Engelmann (2021) argues that there is empirical evidence that consumers do not rely solely on content-based news factors to select news media. In a digital platform landscape, it is observed that the selection of news is not a neutral process or purely routine (Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018). With the advent of digital platforms, news media provide popularity indicators such as news teasers, the number of shares, clicks, comments, trending status, article rankings, search engines and news aggregators are some of the new digital factors that may influence consumer's news selection on digital platforms (Engelmann et al., 2021), these can serve as alternative criteria for users to select news.

DIGITAL FUNCTIONALITY

Research by the Media Insight Project (2016) highlight three specific factors as critical to whether consumers select a news source on digital platforms. Although these factors may not be typical elements of trust and reliability of news source, they offer important insights to consumer behaviour in the increasingly digital news media landscape (MediaInsightProject, 2016). The three factors are (1) behaviour and placement of digital advertisements; here it is important that adverts or marketing presentation do not interfere with the news or interrupts the consumer; furthermore, insights from the research suggests that consumers expect to see adverts that are aligned or of similar tone and topic to the news content that they are consuming. In the digital age, the intrusiveness of ads remains largely unexamined. (2) The velocity or speed of loading web pages or Applications (apps) is another poorly examined

factor in the digital news landscape; research indicates that the web site or app must load fast. Finally, (3) compatibility with mobile devices; here the research suggests that consumers expect a mobile version of the news content. Further, other factors explored in the research, but were less important to news selection on digital platforms is (4), interactive features; effective and strategic use of visuals, videos, photographs, charts, use of hyperlinks, ability to comment, share and overall design, are important factors of news source trust and consequent selection on digital platforms. Poor strategic use of the above-mentioned interactive features makes consumers doubtful and suspicious of the news source on digital platforms. Further, Research suggests that effective, accurate and strategic use (5) hyperlinks on news content on digital platforms can generate trust, especially among younger digital new consumers (MediaInsightProject, 2016).

POPULARITY INDICATORS

Consumers on digital platforms are confronted with metric information about the popularity of content, which are used to influence the consumers perceptions of the content and may affect their subsequent selection decision (Kümpel & Haim, 2016). Research into the influence of popularity indicators on consumer news selection is limited. Popularity indicators refer to prompts, signals and cues i.e. teasers (Engelmann et al., 2021), to persuade or aid consumers navigate, manage and select news content from an overabundance of choices on digital platforms (Engelmann & Wendelin, 2017).

Research by Xu (2013), suggests that popularity indicators have a positive influence to news source credibility, news source trust and perceived newsworthiness, which will influence selection (Xu, 2013). Aligned with the 'bandwagon effect', which presumes that if others viewed or believe this is a good story, then I should think so too – found that consumers selected news if it features; explicit recommendations, click rates, comment counts, number of likes, and duration of exposure to the article (Engelmann & Wendelin, 2017). We can ascertain that these characteristics speak to the social integrative need, as per the U&G theory that consumers use to select content on digital platforms.

Research by Messing and Westwood (2014), showed that consumers would likely select news media with these 'cues' than news without this information on digital platforms (Engelmann & Wendelin, 2017). However, a study by Winter, Brückner and Krämer (2015) showed that these features was associated with low news media quality. Against expectations of

bandwagon perceptions, the outcome of the research demonstrated that likes and comments did not lead to conformity affects (Winter, Brückner, & Krämer, 2015).

A study by Stafford et al (2004), found that consumers desire user-experience speed on applications, ease of access, ease of navigation and convenience as the main process gratifications.

Therefore, in a digital context, the literature strongly suggests that there is a strong relationship between process gratifications sought by consumers and content preference on internet platforms.

2.4 SOCIAL GRATIFICATIONS

According to a study by Strafford (2004) which set out to determine the gratifications of using internet platforms (2004), social gratification is a unique factor that consumers use in the digital age (Stafford et al., 2004). Social gratifications of using of the internet as a "social environment" is important when attempting to determine the factors that influence consumer preferences on digital platforms. Social gratification is recognized as the gratification, fulfillment and attainment of social requirements, such as social recognition, social approval and affiliation. (Stafford et al., 2004). Consumer social motivations consists of gratifications obtained from online interactions, networking, chatting, and forming bonds online. Research by Korgaonkar and Wolin (2002) found several social gratifications from using internet platforms, such as relationship maintenance, interactivity and status recognition (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 2002). Peer identity, virtual group interactions, interpersonal utility i.e., relationship benefits, group interactions, community engagement are some of the social gratifications that consumers seek on internet platforms (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). Consumers of digital platforms, specifically social media, find gratification from recommending, debating and commenting on content – noting that it is these social engagements that influence the selection of content on internet platforms (Yee, 2006). Therefore, it can be inferred that selecting and consuming news content on digital platforms is influenced by social gratifications.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The objective of this report will be to evaluate the factors that influence news preferences on internet platforms. How do consumers navigate this turbulent and ambiguous digital news

landscape, characterized by increased velocity, volume, and falsehood (i.e., infodemic)? Therefore, the U&G theory was selected as the most appropriate framework to understanding why and how consumers actively seek out news content on digital platforms to satisfy their unique needs.

Using the developed model of the U&G theory, scholars Stafford et al (2004) found that on internet platforms, consumers have three main categories i.e., (1) content, (2) process and (3) social gratifications. And goals of the content are directly related to one or more of the social and psychological needs identified by McQuail (2010), i.e., cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escapism needs.

Content gratifications

The literature suggests that news values describe several content-based characteristics that increase the chances of news content being selected by consumers. Certain 'newsworthy' content features, qualities, selection guidelines and attributes influence consumer selection. Furthermore, still aligned with the cognitive needs, a trusted and credible news source, provider, or person is a key factor to whether a consumer selects news media.

Process gratifications

In a digital landscape news content is no longer exclusively selected merely on content criteria. Factors such as placement of digital advertisements; speed of loading web pages or Applications (apps); compatibility with mobile devices; effective use of interactive and visual features; popularity indicators i.e., digital prompts, signals, cues, and teasers - are important process gratifications that are sought by consumers on internet platforms.

Social gratifications:

In an internet environment a relatively 'new' gratification has been identified. Social gratification is recognized as fulfillment and motivation obtained from internet-based interactions, online affiliations networking, chatting, and forming bonds online.

There isn't a clear and definite indication which is the most important gratification to consumers on digital platforms. Furthermore, with the prevalence of an infodemic, which is characterized as an overabundance of information, volume, velocity, and falsehood, it is important to understand the factors that consumers use to make news content selections.

These findings will be useful to understand consumer motivations for news content on digital platforms. As the use of digital platforms as means of human interaction and commercial medium is gaining exponential momentum in South Africa – understanding how consumers use this dynamic platform will help content creators and business managers strategies content and offerings that are aligned and responsive to consumer needs. Understanding these factors will lead to significant consumer value for digital platforms

3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In an infodemic context, which is defined as being characterized as having increased volume, velocity, and falsehood of complex information; reaching and connecting with consumers is more difficult than ever. Therefore, identifying and evaluating the factors that South African consumers use to select news on digital platforms during an infodemic context is important. The identified factors will provide insights on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content that is aggressively vying for consumer attention on digital platforms.

Therefore, the objectives of the methodology used is to (1) determine the factors that consumers use to select news on digital platforms; and (2) determine the most and least preferred digital platform for news content consumption on digital platforms.

Therefore, in a quest to gain insights on the proposed subject matter, the following chapter will discuss the methodology and design approach that was implemented. This section will deal with the research hypothesis, reliability, validity, and the questionnaire design techniques that were used to collect data. Furthermore, it will discuss the data processing, analysis approach, and the statistical technique that was used in detail.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper adopted a quantitative and descriptive approach because this approach places a strong emphasis on objective measurements and numerical analysis of data collected through survey methods. This approach aided to find patterns, averages, and generalizations. A qualitative approach is most suitable because the research is more concerned with *what, how, when, and where* – it is not too focused on the *why* - which is more of a qualitative trait.

Furthermore, this approach enabled the possibility of collecting data from a larger sample size, as there was a three- month period limitation. This approach was also selected because the data can be processed more consistently, making it possible for this research to be replicated in other geographic settings with different groups of participants. Moreover, this approach aided to numerically test and measure statistically the factors gained from the proposed predictions (hypotheses) that came from the literature and theories (Cooper, Schindler, & Sun, 2006).

The key objective of the paper was to outline the situation as it exists, by only mainly reporting on what is happening or what has happened. Therefore, a survey methodology was most appropriate and used to collect data in this research (Cooper et al., 2006).

This report employed a cross-sectional approach. The data was collected from many different individuals and analyzed from one specific point of time. In other words, this research was confined to a single period. This approach was suitable due to the limited time constraint (three months) that the research period permitted(Cooper et al., 2006). Therefore, this paper was able to evaluate people of varying ethnicities, ages, and geographical locations in South Africa.

3.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

3.3.1 SAMPLE DESIGN

This research employed a convenience sampling approach. This approach is appropriate due to the time constraints of when the report was due. Furthermore, this sampling approach was cost effective, efficient, and manageable to implement. It also helped provide useful data and leads regarding the population (Cooper et al., 2006). Therefore, all the participants of this research were convenient and drawn from that part of the population that were close to hand.

This report obtained a total number of 176 participants who completed the questionnaire, which compromised of a variety of demographics, including gender, income, education, and age. The participants were presented with a questionnaire that was distributed through several social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. The survey questionnaire consisted of questions relating to the motivations, intentions and rationality for the choices and preferences that participants use when consuming news content on digital platforms.

3.3.2 TARGET POPULATION

The research was interested on participants who have access to; various forms of internet platforms; and are active consumers of news content on digital platforms. The research was targeted to a general population of individuals with a particular interest in consuming digital

news content. A general population refers to all individuals without reference to specific characteristics.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

The quantitative data was analyzed using a statistical software tool IBM SPSS ® Software tool to commute and assess all the data; also using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean and standard deviations.

3.4.1 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The research questionnaire that was employed was the five-point Likert Scale. The participants were asked to indicate their degree of importance or unimportance with each statement in the Likert Scale questionnaire. On a scale from 1-5, 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important.

This research report used the Uses and Gratifications measurement model developed by Stafford et al (2004) to assess the variables that consumers use to select content. Stafford et al (2004) used an open-ended questionnaire drawn from psychology literature (Szalay & Deese, 1978; Friedmann & Fox, 1989) to obtain the variables which assess the depth of the identified U&G constructs (Stafford et al., 2004).

3.4.2 SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This research employed a survey methodology to collect data from the participants. There were several notable benefits to using a questionnaire to collect data. There was a minimal cost to creating and distributing the questionnaire to the participants; it was easy of distribute and collect data online; participants made use of mobile devices to respond, a quicker response time was expected; and this survey methodology provides a wider reach and variety of participants.

3.4.3 SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

To gain maximum responses, the survey questionnaire will be distributed on the following platforms: social media platforms notably to LinkedIn networks, WhatsApp contacts, Facebook friends and Twitter connections. Moreover, email distribution databases will be used, such as the Wits email student database, and private organizations email database.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

statistical tool SPSS was used to clean, systematically code, and analyse the data. Variables and constructs have been compared to each other via descriptive and inferential statistics. Two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), regressions, correlations and factor analysis were the main analysis methods used. These statistical analysis methods tested the strength between the various variables and the predictive power of the variables under study.

3.6 VIABILITY AND RELIABILITY

To ensure reliability and accuracy of the questionnaires and data received, internal consistency tests such as Cronbach Alpha have been employed.

3.7 RESEARCH ETHICS

The proposal of this research was approved by the ethics committee from Wits Business School. All respondent responses were not identifiable, nor were they disclosed to other participants during the collection process or as part of the final findings. Private or personal data was not required. All participants of this survey consented to participating to the research.

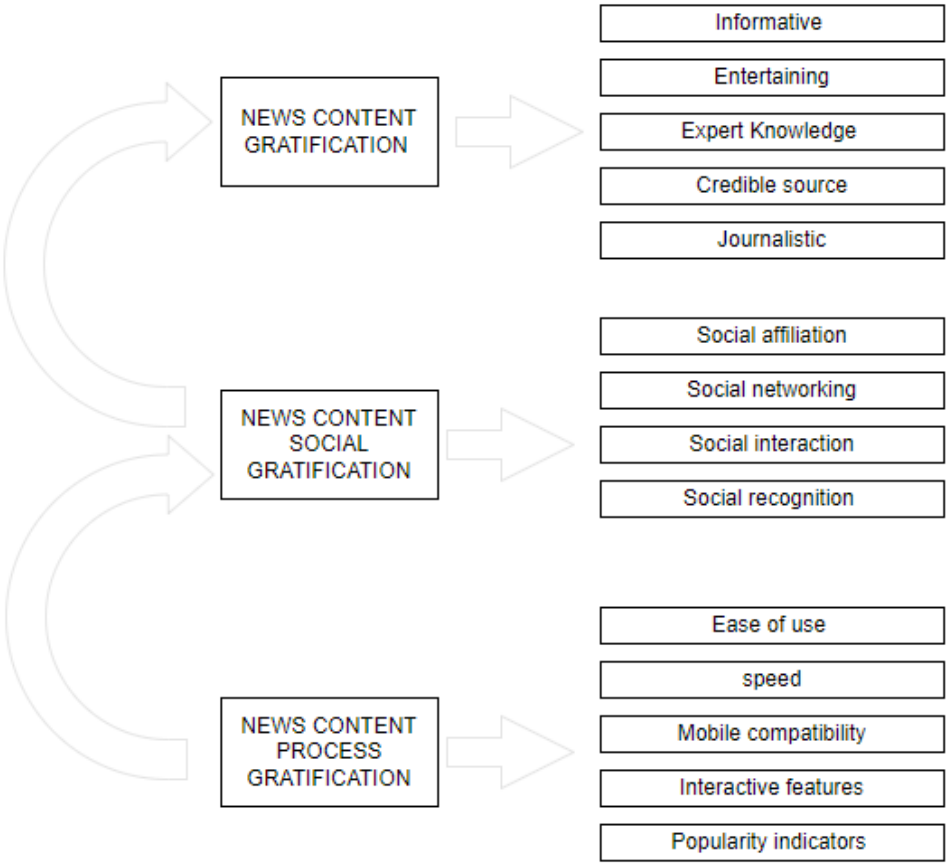

Figure 3: Measurement Tool adopted from Constructs from Stafford et al (2004)

4. CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected through the survey. The survey was sent to an unlimited number of participants online, through the following social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, for a period of three months. More data was collected through email distribution databases, such as the Wits student email database and the email databases of the researchers' organizations.

A total of 176 respondents completed the questionnaire exceeding the minimum sample size of 135 targeted by this study. The survey was distributed using Qualtrics; a web-based tool to create distribute and analyse responses online. The study seeks to identify and evaluate the factors that influence and affect how consumers make news content preferences on digital platforms. A data was analysed using IBM® SPSS® statistical software.

4.2 RELIABILITY & INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

The Cronbach alpha coefficient is used to measure the reliability or internal consistency of the research questionnaire. The coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, and the closer is the coefficient value to 1, the greater is the internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha of 0.7 or higher is considered acceptable in most studies. However, Cronbach alpha depends on both the number of items in the scale and the mean inter-item correlations. Fewer items on a scale may lead to a lower reliability coefficient (Cooper et al., 2006).

Constructs	**Internal Consistency (Cronbach Alpha)**
1. Content Gratification	0.545
2. Social Gratification	0,854
3. Process Gratification	0.682

Figure: Construct reliability

The Cronbach coefficients for this study's questionnaire are shown in the table above. Based on the results, social and process gratification items had acceptable internal consistency. Although the content gratification reliability coefficient is lower that of the other constructs,

it is still acceptable considering the few numbers of items in the scale. As a result, the data can be considered reliable.

4.3 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

4.3.1 GENDER

Gender as a perspective implies that biological and social gender is reflected in the research study. Balance and diversity, including gender helps to enhance the scientific quality and social relevance of research (Ref). The survey indicates that majority of respondents were female at 61.71% and 37.71% were males. A small percentage of respondents, 0.57%, chose not to indicate their gender.

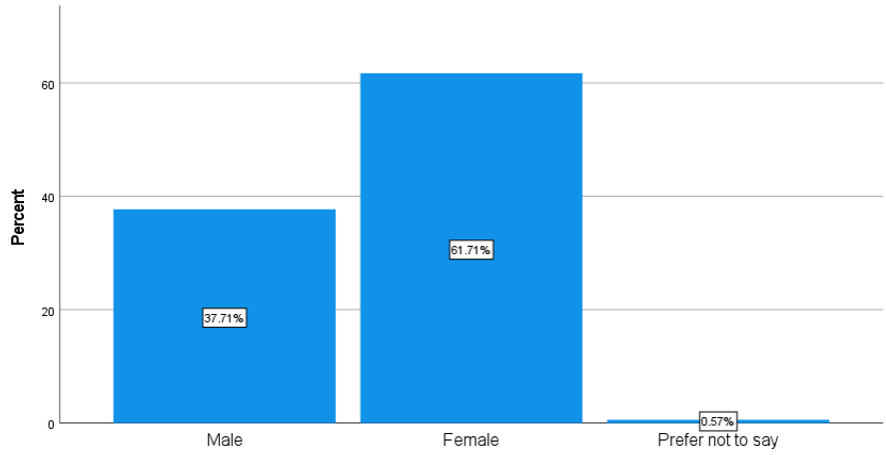

Figure: Gender ratio

4.3.2 AGE GROUPS

Persons between the ages of 15 and 34 are considered youth in South Africa (Stats SA, 2021). The majority of the respondents were 'youth' and 'millennials', accounting for 61.4% of respondents between the ages of 25 and34. This is aligned with literature that indicates that millennials are a key group in the context of being active online (WHO, 2021). This is followed by 25.14% of respondents between the ages 35 and44; 7.43% between the ages of 45 and54; 4.57% between the ages of 18 and24 and 1.71% of respondents over 55.

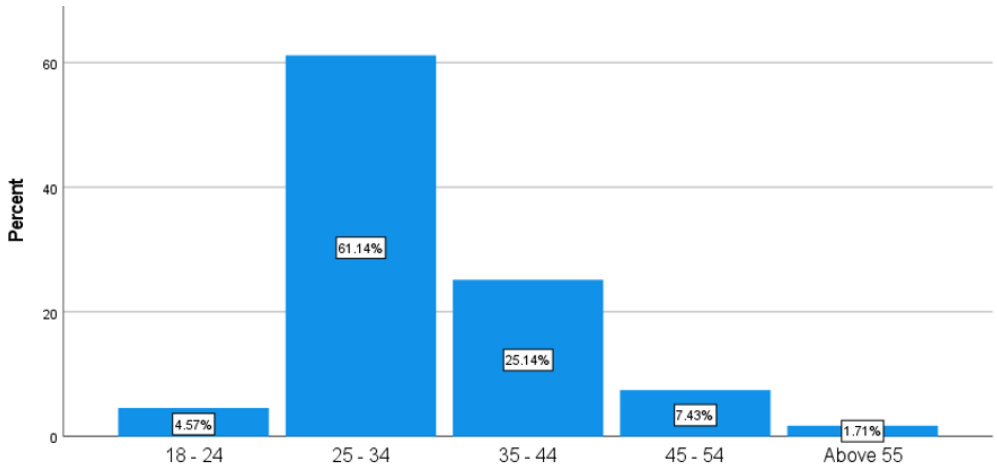

Figure 1: Age Group

4.3.3 HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION

The majority of respondents are highly literate and educated, with 57.71% having obtained a postgraduate qualification. Followed by 20% with certificate/diploma qualification; 16.57% with undergraduate qualification; 5.14% with Grade 12 only, and 0.57% indicated no qualification

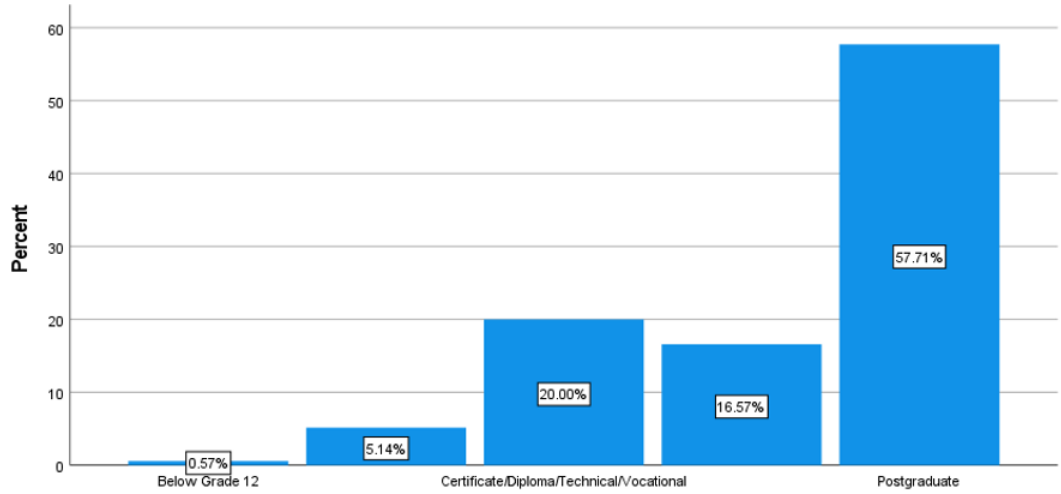

Figure: Highest level of education

4.3.4 EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A substantial proportion of the respondents were employed, accounting for 85.71%. Followed by 5.71% who were unemployed but looking, 5.14% were self-employed or homemakers, 1.71%were students, 1.14%wereretired, and the smallest percentage, 0.57%, were unemployed but not actively looking for employment.

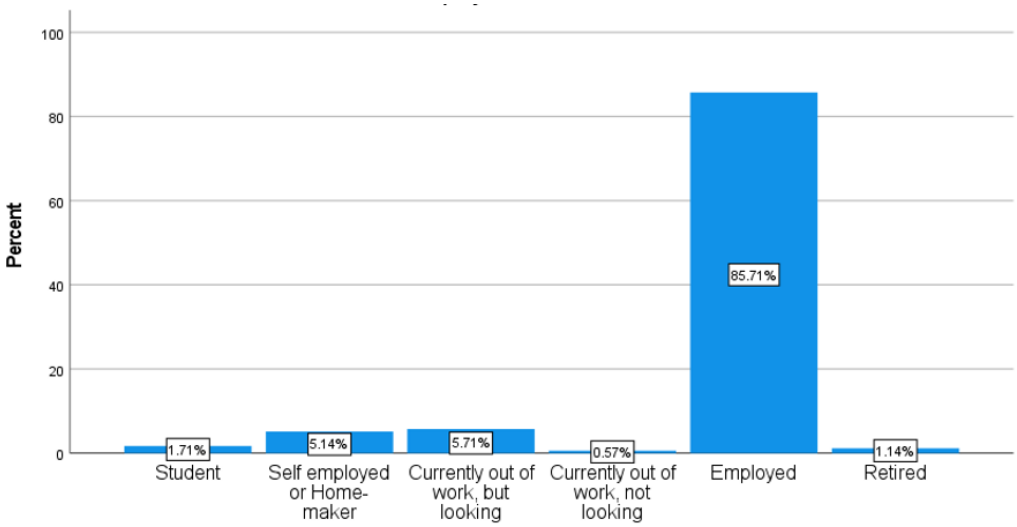

Figure: Employment Status

RATE OF NEWS CONTENT CONSUMPTION

Determining the rate of news content consumption by respondents on digital platforms reveals the propensity and/or inclination of the respondents toward news content on digital platforms. The figure below shows that the majority of the respondents always (42.29%) and often (35.57%) consume news content on digital platforms. Only 0.57% of the respondents indicated no consumption of news content on digital platforms. And 24,57% only consume news content from digital platforms less frequently.

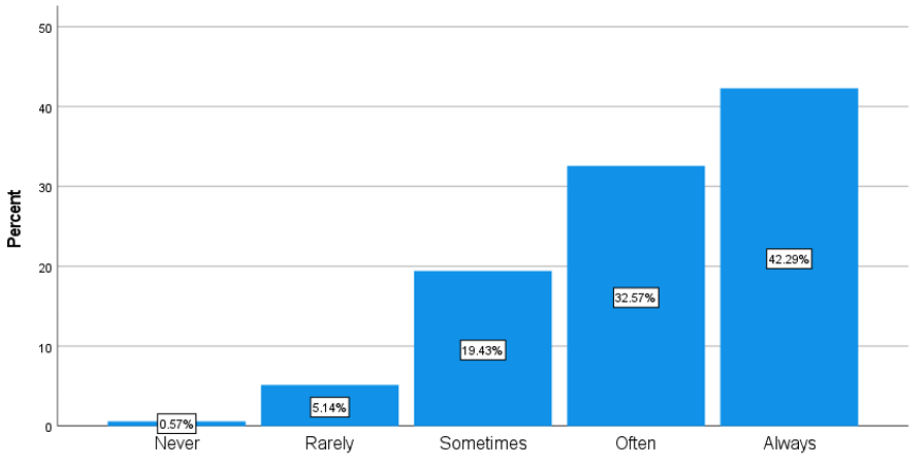

Figure: Rate of news content consumption on digital platforms

4.4 DIGITAL PLATFORM PREFERENCES

Literature suggests that there are serval and varying reasons for how and why consumers make news content preferences. Digital platforms as a medium of consumption is a critical factor and component that influences consumer preferences. The participants were requested to indicate which digital platform satisfies their content related motivations, socials motivations and process related motivations the most.

CONTENT GRATIFICATION PLATFORM

Based on the figure below, Twitter (26%) and LinkedIn (23%) satisfy the most of the respondents' cognitive needs, followed by Facebook (14%), and Instagram as the least satisfying digital platform in terms of cognitive needs.

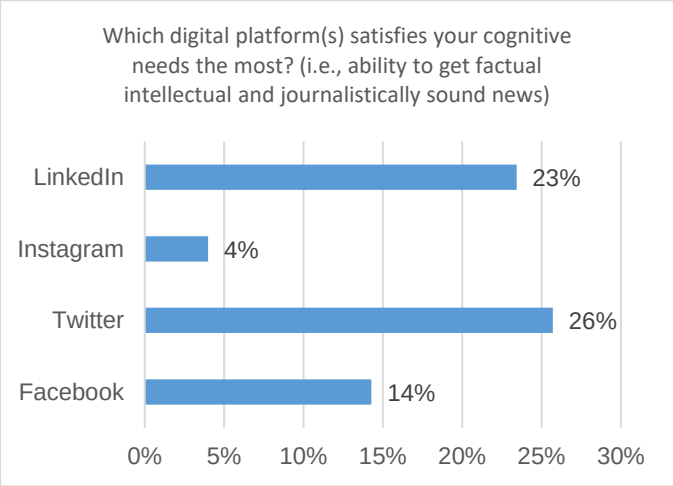

Figure: Digital platform based on content gratification

SOCIAL GRATIFICATION PLATFORM

The data collected indicated that 41% of respondents chose social media platform Facebook as they preferred platform for social gratifications. This followed by Twitter at 30%, with the least preferred being Instagram at 25%. The majority, 41%, of the respondents identified Facebook as their digital platform of choice for social interactions, followed by Twitter (30%), LinkedIn (27%), and Instagram (25%).

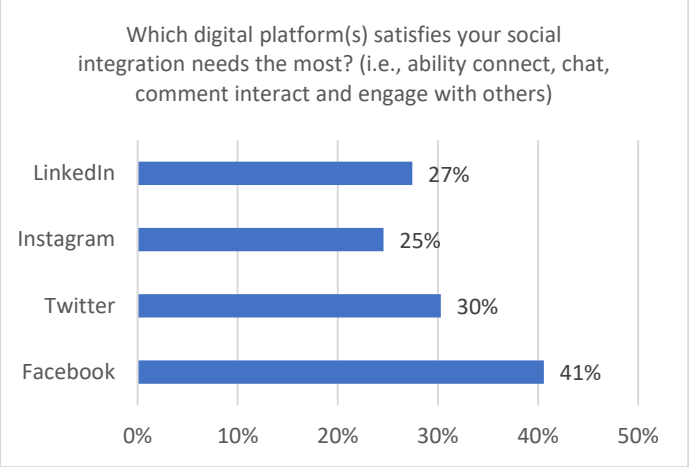

Figure: Digital platform based on social gratification

PROCESS GRATIFICATION PLATFORM

The data indicated that 36% of the respondents choose social platform twitter as their preferred digital platform that satisfies their process gratification needs the most, followed by Facebook at 31%, then LinkedIn at 23% and Instagram at 22% as the lowest.

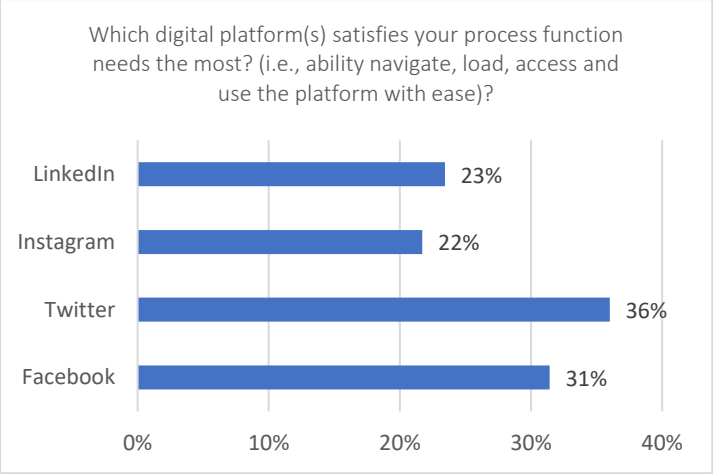

Figure: Digital platform based on process gratification

4.5 ANOVA ANALYSIS

The following section will discuss the analysis of variance (ANOVA) from the data collected. The ANOVA is a statistical technique that will check if the averages of the constructs (content, social and process are significantly different from each other).

4.5.1 GENDER

The participants in the survey were asked to indicate their gender; with the option of selecting either female, male or prefer not to say. Responses to the gender indication could provide valuable insights into patterns amongst the different categories. The ANOVA results indicate that males and females do not view social gratification the same at 5% level of significance. This implies that there is a significant difference between females and males in their impressions of social gratification. However, there is no statistically significant difference in content and process gratification preferences between gender groups.

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Content Gratification	Between Groups	.347	1	.347	1.191	.277
	Within Groups	50.171	172	.292		
	Total	50.518	173			
Social Gratification	Between Groups	4.915	1	4.915	4.007	.047
	Within Groups	210.959	172	1.227		
	Total	215.874	173			
Process Gratification	Between Groups	.902	1	.902	1.548	.215
	Within Groups	98.408	169	.582		
	Total	99.309	170			

Figure: ANOVA. Dependent Variable: Gender

4.5.2 LEVEL OF EDUCATION

The participants were asked to indicate their highest level of education; with the following options to select from; below grade 12, grade 12, certificate/diploma/technical, undergraduate, or postgraduate.

According to the findings, respondents' perceptions of content, social, and process gratification differ depending on their level of education. The p-values for all the constructs are statically significant at 5% level of significance.

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Content Gratification	Between Groups	4.448	4	1.112	4.079	.003
	Within Groups	46.070	169	.273		
	Total	50.518	173			
Social Gratification	Between Groups	19.608	4	4.902	4.221	.003
	Within Groups	196.266	169	1.161		
	Total	215.874	173			
Process Gratification	Between Groups	6.193	4	1.548	2.760	.029
	Within Groups	93.116	166	.561		
	Total	99.309	170			

Figure: ANOVA Level of Education

4.5.3 EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The participants were asked to indicate their employment status, and could choose from either student, self-employed, unable to work, currently out of work but looking, currently out of work not looking, employed, or retired. However, for the ANOVA test below, the responses were grouped into employed and not employed.

The findings show that employed consumers perceive social gratification differently than unemployed consumers.

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Content Gratification	Between Groups	.996	5	.199	.676	.642
	Within Groups	49.522	168	.295		
	Total	50.518	173			
Social Gratification	Between Groups	22.460	4	5.615	4.906	.001
	Within Groups	193.414	169	1.144		
	Total	215.874	173			
Process Gratification	Between Groups	3.076	5	.615	1.055	.388
	Within Groups	96.234	165	.583		
	Total	99.309	170			

Figure: ANOVA. Dependent Variable: Employment Status

4.1 FACTOR ANALYSIS

A factor analysis was used to find hidden patterns and shrink the data into smaller, more manageable, and understandable data sets (Cooper et al., 2006). It is a technique used to define the fundamental structure among the various variables in the analysis and show characteristics. The diagram below illustrates three factors, showing the observed variables

that have similar response patterns. An initial exploratory list of terms that characterised typical audience uses and sought gratifications/motivations was taken from literature. Uses and gratifications required an initial inventory of descriptors or variables that will serve as sampling of possible uses and gratifications for audiences' preferences when selecting news content.

4.1.1 INITIAL FACTORS

Below is the initial factor representation. These are the variables that strongly represent the Uses and Gratification for content, social and process.

Descriptive terms identified for gratifications

1. Informative
2. Entertaining
3. Expert knowledge
4. Credible sources
5. Journalistic
6. Social affiliation
7. Social networking
8. Social interaction
9. Recognition
10. Ease of use
11. Speed
12. Mobile compatibility
13. Interactive features
14. Popularity indicators

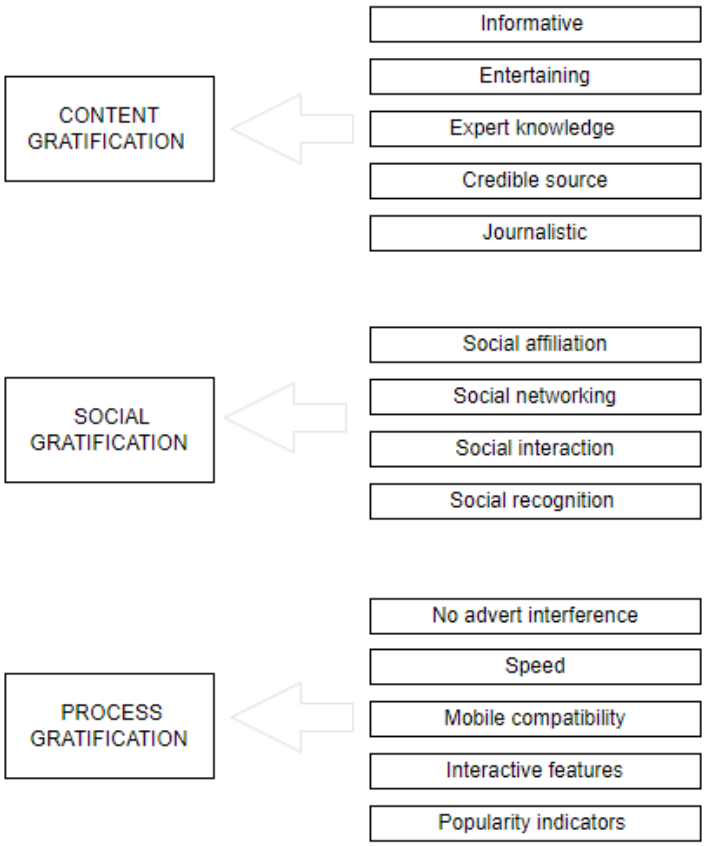

Figure: Initial factor representation

4.1.2 CONFIRMATORY ANALYSIS

A confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine whether the measures of constructs, as presented by (Stafford et al., 2004) and literature from Chapter 2 are consistent with the findings of the research conducted. The confirmatory factor analysis will ascertain if the above initial relationship between the presented variables and the constructs exists (Cooper et al., 2006). In this report, the three factors that were specified were (1) content gratifications, (2) social gratifications, and (3) process gratifications. Below are the results from the confirmatory factor analysis.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis			
	Factor		
	Social	Content	Process
I prefer news content that is fair, transparent with diverse views? (i.e., journalistically sound)	.060	.772	-.171
I prefer news content that is accurate and factual. (i.e., Informative)	-.116	.736	-.251
I prefer news content that is fun and leisurely. (i.e., Entertaining)	.444	.134	.283
I prefer news content that is presented by knowledgeable experts or influencers (i.e., Opinion leaders)	.075	.302	-.054
I prefer news content from credible & trusted news providers.	.017	.373	-.273
I prefer digital platform(s) that do not allow adverts to interfere with my news consumption experience.	.437	.122	.452
I prefer digital platform(s) that load fast.	.467	.329	.597
I prefer digital platform(s) that make use of interactive features (i.e., visuals, videos, hyperlink & overall design)	.524	.165	.239
I prefer digital platform(s) that are compatible with my mobile devices.	.304	.089	.011
I prefer news content that is popular (i.e., trending topics, high likes, clicks comments)	.473	-.069	.276
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be part of or associated with a certain network or community?	.811	-.037	-.283
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to create or maintain relationships.	.785	-.179	-.158
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to debate, engage & comment.	.641	-.006	.006
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be socially recognized by others.	.739	-.079	-.280

Figure: Following confirmatory factor analysis

However, following the confirmatory factor analysis, the figure below illustrates how the variables had changed, by moving from one construct to another. Notably, the variables 'entertaining' moved from content gratification to social gratification. Use of interactive features, mobile compatibility and popularity indicators were initially part of the process gratifications, but

now moved social gratification. Furthermore, the data also identifies which variable from each construct is most strong and influential to how consumers

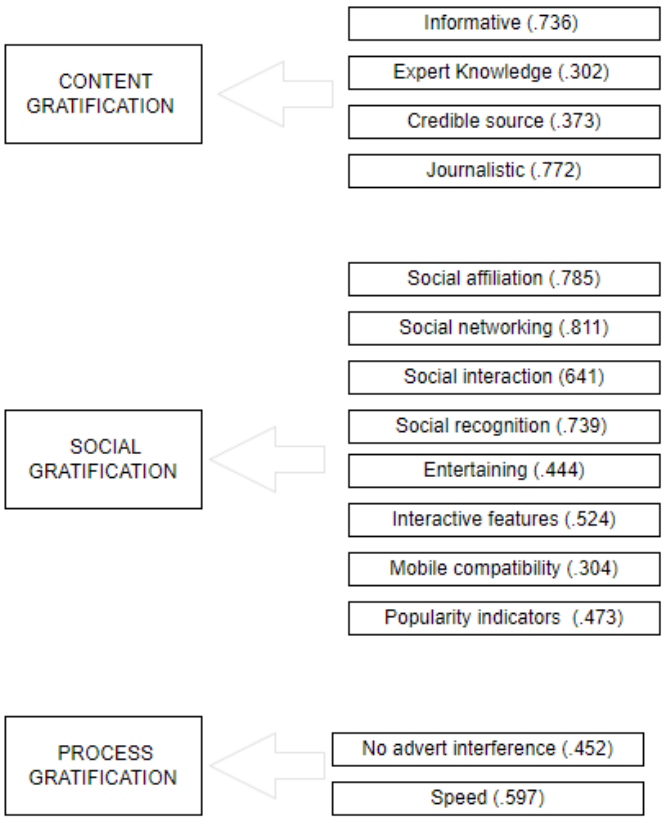

Figure: Following confirmatory factor analysis

4.2 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

This research aimed to identify and evaluate the factors that influence how consumers make news preferences on digital platforms. This section illustrates the results from a five-point Likert scale which was used to measure the degree of importance of various factors that influence news content preferences on digital platforms on a scale from 1-5, with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important. This research used the uses and gratifications measurement model developed by Stafford et al (2004) to assess the factors that consumers use to select content, which consists of three key constructs: content, social and process gratification.

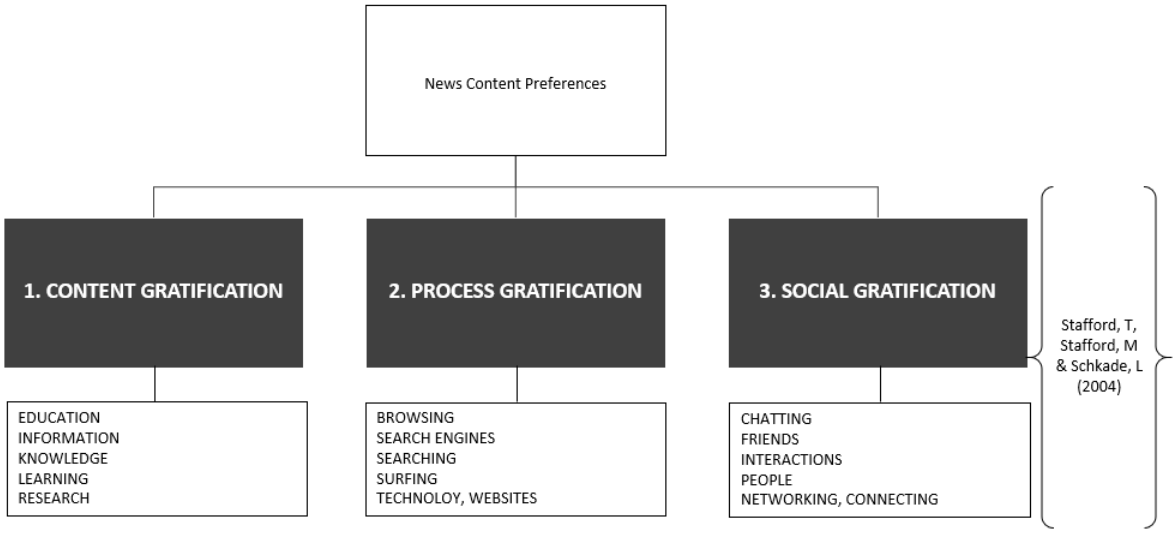

Figure: Theoretical Conceptual Framework

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Content Gratification	4.0034	.54038	174
Social Gratification	2.3305	1.11706	174
Process Gratification	3.8351	.76431	171

Figure: Correlation between the Contructs

4.2.1 EVALUATING CONTENT GRATIFICATION RESULTS

The data demonstrates that content gratification is rated high, averaging a mean of 4.0034 overall. This suggests that factors related to content motivation play a key role in how consumers make their news preferences on digital platforms. However, it is also clear that some of these variables were stronger than others. Respondents preferred informative news from credible and trusted providers, with the highest average of 4.57. Furthermore, news content that is fair, transparent with diverse views was also rated highly, average 4.39, when deciding on the news choice on digital platforms. Content curated by influencers (i.e., opinion leaders) also has a positive impact on respondents' digital platform news choices, with a average of 3.76. However, in general the content variables are high.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Content Gratification	4.3233	.59443	174

I prefer news content that is fair, transparent with diverse views? (i.e., journalistically sound)	4.39	.837	174
I prefer news content that is accurate and factual? (i.e., Informative)	4.57	.792	174
I prefer news content that is presented by knowledgeable experts or influencers (i.e., Opinion leaders)	3.76	1.110	174
I prefer news content from credible & trusted news providers?	4.57	.639	174

Figure: Content gratifications survey questions

4.2.1.1 REGRESSION: CONTENT GRATIFICATIONS

a. Dependent Variable: Factor2_Content_Gratification – There were no statistics on the Sig. and T statistics it maybe because the sample is small.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-1.776E-15	.000		.	.
I prefer news content that is fair, transparent with diverse views? (i.e., journalistically sound)	.250	.000	.352	.	.
I prefer news content that is accurate and factual? (i.e., Informative)	.250	.000	.333	.	.
I prefer news content that is presented by knowledgeable experts or influencers (i.e., Opinion leaders)	.250	.000	.467	.	.
I prefer news content from credible & trusted news providers?	.250	.000	.269	.	.

4.2.2 EVALUATING SOCIAL GRATIFICATION RESULTS

Social gratification is recognized as the gratification, fulfillment and attainment of social requirements, such as social recognition, social approval and affiliation. (Stafford et al., 2004). Therefore, it has been inferred that selecting and consuming news content on digital platforms is influenced by social gratifications. The distributed survey consisted of 5 questions that strongly relate to elements and factors that drive social gratification. Overall, the average level of importance for social gratification was lower than that of content gratification, averaging 2.33. Social gratification had the least influence on consumer news preference on digital platforms with all the factors rated below three. The highest mean is for the variable related to consumers preferring digital platforms that are compatible with mobile devices, with an average 4.33. This is followed by the use of interactive features, such as videos, hyperlinks and effective user experience are important gratifications that consumers seek, averaging 3.62; then content that is characterised by being popular at 3.03. However, the participants rated variables such as

preferring to network, engage, debate, comment and/or maintain relationships, all averaging around a mean of 2.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Factor1_Social_Gratification	2.8699	.81732	172
I prefer news content that is fun and leisurely? (i.e., Entertaining)	2.73	1.066	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be part of or associated with a certain network or community?	2.28	1.383	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to create or maintain relationships.	2.33	1.307	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to debate, engage & comment.	2.71	1.392	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be socially recognized by others.	1.92	1.249	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that make use of interactive features (i.e., visuals, videos, hyperlink & overall design)	3.62	1.215	172
I prefer digital platform(s) that are compatible with my mobile devices.	4.33	1.081	172
I prefer news content that is popular (i.e., trending topics, high likes, clicks comments)	3.04	1.216	172

Figure: Social gratifications survey questions

4.2.2.1 REGRESSION – SOCIAL GRATIFICATION

a. Dependent Variable: Factor1_Social_Gratification

Sig. are all less than 0.05 which shows that the questions are significant under social gratifications

COEFFICIENTS

M	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-1.110E-16	.000		.000	1.000
I prefer news content that is fun and leisurely. (i.e., Entertaining)	.125	.000	.163	57638466.121	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be part of or associated with a certain network or community?	.125	.000	.212	53562550.821	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to create or maintain relationships.	.125	.000	.200	53483156.241	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to debate, engage & comment.	.125	.000	.213	66529500.637	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that allow me to be socially recognized by others.	.125	.000	.191	52749562.833	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that make use of interactive features (i.e., visuals, videos, hyperlink & overall design)	.125	.000	.186	63439242.990	.000
I prefer digital platform(s) that are compatible with my mobile devices.	.125	.000	.165	61594556.801	.000

I prefer news content that is popular (i.e., trending topics, high likes, clicks comments)	.125	.000	.186	67704717.217	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Factor1_Social_Gratification

4.2.3 EVALUATING PROCESS GRATIFICATION RESULTS

In a digital landscape, news content is no longer exclusively selected merely on content criteria. Factors such as placement of digital advertisement; and app speed - are important process gratifications that are sought by consumers on internet platforms. Literature suggests that there is a strong relationship between process gratifications sought by consumers and content preference on internet platforms.

The results validate that 'process' related motivations are important in how consumers make news preferences on digital platforms, with the average rating of 3.8 for process gratification. According to the table below, respondents prefer digital platforms that load fast (4.42). Respondents also value digital platforms that do not allow advertisements to disrupt content consumption, here the mean is 3.8. The use of interactive features, visuals, videos, hyperlinks, and effective user experience (UX) design also motivates the consumer's preference for news content (3.61). Trending topics, despite being rated lower than the other factors, do stimulate the interest of news consumers (3.03). Overall, process gratifications are important motivators for news content preferences on digital platforms.

SURVEY QUESTIONS: PROCESS GRATIFICATION	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Factor: Process Gratification	4.1098	.96573	173
I prefer digital platform(s) that do not allow adverts to interfere with my news consumption experience.	3.80	1.283	173
I prefer digital platform(s) that load fast.	4.42	.915	173

Figure: Process gratification survey questions

4.3 INFERENTIAL STATISTCS

The following section will use the data to infer & make assumptions about a wider group, but only using the sample data collected. Inferential statistics seek to deduce from a small, but representative and bigger population (Cooper et al., 2006).

4.3.1 CORRELATION BETWEEN CONSTRUCSTS

The following section will discuss the correlations between the variables from the research. Correlation measures the association between variables and seeks to reflect the strength of the relationship between two or more variables; this intensity can be described as either positive or negative(Cooper et al., 2006).

The Pearson correlation measures the strength of the linear relationship between two variables. It has a value from -1 (total negative correlation), 0 (no correlation) to +1 (total positive correlation). A Pearson correlation coefficient between 0 and 0.5indicates a weak positive association, 0.6 – 0.7 a moderate positive association, and 0.7 and above signifies a strong positive association between variables. The converse it true for negative values.

The correlation between construsts is shown in the table above shows the correlation between contrusts and there is no strong correlation among these constructs. However, there is a positive association between process gratification and social gratification, although the association is weak. This suggests that respondents who consume news on digital platforms for process gratification also consume it for social gratification.

		Content Gratification	Social Gratification	Process Gratification
Content Gratification	Pearson Correlation	1	.143	**.180**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.060	**.019**
	N	174	173	170
Social Gratification	Pearson Correlation	.143	1	.469
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.060		**.000**
	N	173	174	170
Process Gratification	Pearson Correlation	.180*	.469	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.019**	**.000**	
	N	170	170	171

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Figure: Corelation Analysis

4.4 CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The purpose of the data was to evaluate the factors that influence how consumers make news preferences on digital platforms. This chapter presented data that was collected from 176 respondents; through a survey that was distributed via social media platforms using Qualtrics; a web-based instrument. A statistical software tool, IBM® SPSS® was used to analyse the data collected. The following items were covered in this chapter:

Internal consistency (Cronbach) was measured, validating the questionnaire. Demographics of the participants was demonstrated. Descriptive statistics was used to describe and summarise the characteristics of the data collected. Inferential statistics including:

- Correlation between the constructs was used to find relationships between the constructs.
- ANOVA (analysis of variance was used to check if the constructs are significantly different from one another.
- Factor analysis/ confirmatory analysis was used to uncover factors from the data.
- Descriptive of new factors
-

The key constructs of this study have a Cronbach Alpha of more than 0.5. This illustrates that the questionnaire had high internal consistency, thus the data can be considered reliable and valid. The data collected shows demographic variances of the gender; age groups; employment status and highest level of education of the participants. Majority of the respondents indicated to be active and frequent consumers of news content on digital platforms.

Content gratification is most notable, with a mean of 4, followed by process gratification at 3.83 and at last place is social gratification. The Pearson correlation measured the strength of the linear relationship between the three constructs. The data indicated that there is a relationship between content and process gratification. there is significance and a relationship between social and process gratification.

The data demonstrates that content gratification is rated high, averaging a mean of 4.002 overall. This suggests that variables related to content motivation form strong factors for how consumers make their news preferences on digital platforms. Overall, in comparison to content gratification, the average level of importance for social gratification is low, with a total average of 2.3. The data collected from the surveys validates that 'process' related motivations are important to how consumers make news preferences on digital platforms, with the average of 3.8.

The data indicated that the most preferred digital platform for content gratification is twitter. the most preferred digital platform for social gratification is Facebook. The most preferred digital platform for process gratification is X.

The scree plot line of factors shows four factors.

The data from the ANOVA assessment indicate that males and females do not view social gratification the same. The data collected shows that social gratification is the only statistically significant. This implies there is a statistically significant difference in the level of education regarding the impression of content, social and process gratification. Due to small data sets, it does reveal which groups are different. This implies there is a significant difference regarding employment in their impression of social gratification.

An initial exploratory list of terms that characterised typical audience uses and sought gratifications/motivations was taken from literature. A confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine whether the measures of constructs, as presented by (Stafford et al., 2004) and literature from Chapter 2 are consistent with the findings of the research conducted.

5. CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The 'always connected' nature of digital media means that reaching and connecting with consumers is more difficult than ever (Ahmed, 2020). Consumers face increased potential to be exposed to complex information volume, velocity, and falsehood (York, 2013). The purpose of this research was to unpack, identify and evaluate the factors that influence news content preferences on digital platforms using the constructs of the Uses and Gratifications framework. Identifying and evaluating the factors that South African consumers use to select news on digital platforms is important. The identified factors will provide insights on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content that is aggressively vying for their attention on digital platforms. This research explored the recent adaptations of the U&G model which derived three key dimensions of consumer gratification; namely content, social and process gratifications (Stafford et al., 2004).

5.1 EVALUATING CONTENT GRATIFICATION FACTORS

Content gratification is concerned with the *actual* message carried by the digital platform (Stafford et al., 2004). The Likert scale was used to measure the participants' attitudes on various statements related to content gratification, from 1 being the least important to 5 being the most important. The findings revealed that the overall mean score for the measured construct was 4.0034, which reflects a strong and positive acceptance of content being an important factor and motivator for selecting a piece of news content on digital platforms. The score is aligned with U&G theory, which offers understanding consumer motivations for media use.

The survey questions were made up of variables related to 'content motivation/gratification'. Such as news values which describe several content-based characteristics that increase the chances of news content being selected by consumers (Eilders, 1996). Research by Galtung and Ruge (1965) put forward a number of news content characteristics that are used by consumer's when selecting news on digital platforms. These news values were used as variables that could

be measured in the survey questions, namely transparency, accuracy, entertaining, credible experts, and trusted news providers. News values embody the characteristics of the U&G theory cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and escape needs (Harcup & O'neill, 2017).

The data collected demonstrated that journalistically coherent content is a key factor when consumers make news content choices. The data indicated that accuracy, factuality, and overall credibility are important selection factors for news content. This is aligned with research that indicates that trustworthiness and credibility of the news are critical indicators on consumer content selection behaviour (MediaInsightProject, 2016).

Research by Harcup and O'Neil (2017) included both the hard characteristics as well as the soft characteristics, such as entertainment as important variables for consumer news preferences on digital platforms. However, the data collected showed fun and leisurely content as of lower importance to consumer preferences. This demonstrates that although there are a number of news values that consumers use when making preferences on digital platforms; not all of them are esteemed in the same level of importance to consumers.

The data was also aligned with research that strongly suggested that consumers often seek information from those that they trust or expect to have alike worldviews. Research has shown the role of 'opinion leaders', as a factor that often shapes consumers attitudes towards a news source; there is more trust to a news source if it is shared by an opinion leader or a friend (Sterrett et al., 2019). However, the data agrees moderately that that opinion leaders and knowledgeable influencers are factors that consumer use when making news preferences on digital platforms.

5.2 EVALUATING SOCIAL GRATIFICATION FACTORS

Research by Strafford (2004) identified social gratification as a unique factor that consumers use in the digital age. Understanding social gratification and motivation is important when attempting to determine the factors that influence consumer preferences on digital platforms. Social satisfaction is recognized as the gratification, fulfillment and attainment of social requirements, such as social recognition, social approval and affiliation. (Stafford et al., 2004).

However, the data collected demonstrates moderate and fairly weak level of importance for social gratification when consumers select news content on digital platforms. The data collected is not aligned with research by Korgaonkar and Wolin (2002) who found several social gratifications from using internet platforms, such as relationship maintenance, interactivity and status recognition (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 2002); including the satisfaction of networking, chatting, and forming bonds online.

Furthermore, participants rated social recognition poorly on the scale of importance. Therefore, this is not in agreement with research by Balakrishnan & Griffiths (2017) who suggested that consumers select content on digital platforms based on a need to be socially recognized by others through the ability to post comment and engage on the digital platform. The data is not positively aligned with literature that highlights that being socially recognized is an important consideration when making news content preferences on digital platforms. Although the average mean of the questions remains low to moderate, question four which highlights the consumers attitudes of debating, engaging, and commenting to be slightly above average, with a mean of 2.72.

5.3 EVALUATING PROCESS GRATIFICATION FACTORS

In an increasingly digital landscape, news content is no longer exclusively selected according to traditional factors, due to the digital environment that consumers use to consume content. Research by Engelman (2001) argues that there is empirical evidence that consumers do not rely solely on content-based news factors to select news media. In a digital platform landscape, it is observed that the selection of news is not a neutral process or purely routine (Engelmann et al., 2021). Several 'process' related factors now influence consumer's news preferences on digital platforms and serve as strong influencers of consumer decision making.

The data collected from the research is strongly aligned with existing uses and gratifications literature which suggests that consumers also select content for the simple experience of the digital platform usage process. This refers to the browsing and actual use of the digital platform itself. Therefore, consumers may be motivated by enjoyment of the browsing and site navigation (Stafford et al., 2004).

The survey questions were made up of variables related to 'process motivation' – which seek to offer motives that consumers use for selecting a piece of news content on a digital platform. These various variables are considered to increase and/or influence consumer content preferences on digital platforms.

The strongest variable that relates to process gratification was question two, where consumers rated the need for speed as a highly important motive. The strong positive response on this question is aligned with research by the Media Insight Project (2016), which suggests that velocity or the speed of loading web pages or Applications (apps) is a critical motivator for consumer preference on digital platforms.

Question four attempted to uncover how consumers rated the importance of compatibility with mobile devices when navigating content on digital platforms. The data agrees with existing research that compatibility with mobile devices is a factor and/or influencer for news selection on digital platforms. Other factors explored by the Media Project Insight (2016), relate to the significance of interactive features; effective and strategic use of visuals, videos, photographs, charts, use of hyperlinks, ability to comment, share and overall design, as important selection criteria strategies employed by consumers, which is also revealed by the data collected. Poor strategic use of the above-mentioned interactive features makes consumers doubtful and suspicious of the news source on digital platforms (MediaInsightProject, 2016). The data collected also agrees with research that indicates that the use of hyperlinks and interactive features on news content on digital platforms can generate trust with consumers (MediaInsightProject, 2016).

Popularity indicators refer to prompts, signals and cues i.e. teasers (Engelmann et al., 2021), - these persuade, influence and/or aid consumers to navigate, manage and select news content from an overabundance of choices on digital platforms (Engelmann & Wendelin, 2017).

Question one wanted to understand the attitudes of consumers when it relates to advertisement interference on digital platforms; with a mean of 3.79, there is alignment where it relates to literature that strongly proposes that consumers consider adverts or marketing presentation when they consume news content on digital platforms.

5.4 ANOVA VARIANCES

GENDER

The data from the ANOVA assessment indicated that males and females do not view social gratification the same. The data collected showed that of the three constructs, social gratification is the only statistically significant variable with sig. 0.047, which is less than 0.05. This implies that there is a significant difference between females and males in their impressions of social gratification (Cooper et al., 2006).

It is not surprising that there was a difference or variance in the test mean scores between males and females. As noted by (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) the use of digital technologies has a long history of being shaped and influenced by gender. Research has found that men and women experience social media and/or digital platform motivations differently and with different frequencies (Hargittai, 2007).

Although the data was too small to reveal what these differences were, there is some research that offers a rationale for the difference in male and female impressions of social motivation on digital platforms. Pew research center found that women were more engaged users of social media/digital platforms and seek social motives; such as commenting, chatting, and surveilling others (Anderson, 2015). Participants in a study to discover the motivations of Facebook; females scored higher than males on scales for social connection (Hargittai, 2007), as females value forming and deepening social ties on digital platforms. A study focused on the effects and influence of gender on use of online social networking websites found that males use digital platforms to form new relationships, whilst women use for relationship maintenance (Hargittai, 2007).These are both considered social related gratifications, and is in contrary to research that suggests that it is only females that value social motivation on digital platforms.

The data collected in this research is small. Thus, there are strong limitations to analyse in detail. It is proposed that there is an opportunity for further research into understanding and unpacking the reasons for male and female variance where it relates to their impressions of social gratifications.

EMPLOYEMENT STATUS

Understanding the participant employment status can provide insights to the participants' impressions of the three constructs: content, social and process motivations. The data collected revealed that 85.71% of respondents were employed. The data collected illustrates that all three constructs are statistically significant. This implies that there is a significant difference between impressions of the unemployed and employed where it relates to their impressions of content, social and process gratification.

Research by (Urbinati et al., 2020) agrees that in general there are significant differences between unemployed and employed participants; highlighting that often unemployed consumers use digital platforms mostly as for leisure and as a medium to obtain news – making this group susceptible to misinformation, according to their research findings (Urbinati et al., 2020). However, the data collected in this research is small to understand what the differences were in employment status with regards to their impressions of content, social, and process gratification. There is an opportunity for further research.

5.5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to discuss the key findings of the research study based on the data that was collected. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the factors that influence news content preferences on digital platforms. The uses and gratifications (U&G) theory was selected as an appropriate framework to understanding the factors that influence news preference on digital platforms. Recent adaptations of the U&G model derive three key dimensions of consumer gratification/motivations; namely content, social and process gratifications for content selection on digital platforms (Stafford et al., 2004).

CONTENT

The data revealed that content was an important factor and motivator for consumers when selecting a piece of news content on digital platforms. Therefore, content that is characterised

as fair, transparent, factual, accurate is highly important. Credible news sources and providers are important. However, less important was content that was entertaining.

SOCIAL

Research by Strafford (2004) identified social gratification as a unique factor that consumers use in the digital age. However, the data collected revealed that, interestingly social recognition (i.e., the social satisfaction of engaging, commenting and chatting) was poorly on the scale of importance. This response is not strongly aligned with research that suggested consumers select content on digital platforms based on a need to be socially recognized by others through the ability to post comment and engage on the digital platforms.

The data from the ANOVA assessment indicated that males and females do not view social gratification the same. Research by Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) does concur that digital technologies have a long history of being shaped and influenced by gender. Research has found that men and women experience social media and/or digital platform motivations differently and with different frequencies (Hargittai, 2007). However, the data set of his research is not large enough to provide detailed analysis, thus there is an opportunity for further research.

PROCESS

The data collected from the research is strongly aligned with existing uses and gratifications literature which suggests that consumers also select content for the simple experience of the digital platform usage process. Therefore, factors such as velocity or speed of loading web or app is critical; compatibility with mobile devices is a factor; effective usage of hyperlinks and interactive features is important, and noninterference of advertisements is important.

6. CHATER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 SUMMARY OF RESULSTS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will review, summarize, offer recommendations, and conclude the overall findings that were found from chapter 5 and this research. This paper attempted to identify and evaluate the factors that influence news preferences on digital platforms. The identified factors will provide insights on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content on digital platforms. The uses and gratifications (U&G) theoretical framework were used to explain how and why consumers select news content to gratify their needs and desires on digital platforms. Recent adaptations of the U&G model derive three key dimensions of consumer gratification namely (1) content, (2) social and (3) process gratifications (Stafford et al., 2004). This chapter is structured as follows, summary of the overall study, recommendations, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

There is limited research in the South African context that looks into the factors that consumers use to make news selections on digital platforms during an infodemic context of increased news volume, velocity, and falsehood. The findings of the study will be useful for media organisations and newsrooms alike and may influence digital news content strategy and content acquisition plans of these stakeholders.

6.1.1 CONTENT GRATIFICATION FACTORS

Content gratification was rated the strongest incentive and motivation for consumers. The identified variables related to content demonstrate important factors for how consumers make their preferences on digital platform. The study overall confirms that there is a strong positive relationship between attributes of content gratification and news preference on digital platforms. News on digital platforms must be informative. It must impart knowledge, be educational, useful, interesting, helpful or transmitting/conveying relevant information or details to consumers. This is a significant news value characteristic which heighten, increase and/or

incentivize news preferences. This is a significant U&G cognitive need that needs to be fulfilled (Katz et al., 1974). Credibility (i.e., a judgement of believability) is important. The perceived level of trust and believability showed to be significant factor for consumer choice. Fulfilling consumer cognitive needs, audiences rely on journalistically qualified news content on digital platforms. Consumers seek information from those that they trust or expect to have alike worldviews. The role of 'opinion leaders', shape consumers attitudes towards a news source.

It is recommended that while there is major concern relating to fake news and disinformation on digital platforms, there is an opportunity for media organisations to make greater effort in the development of journalistic strategies to tackle fake-news and disinformation.

Therefore, a model proposed by Ireton and Posetti (2018) that contributes to journalistic trust around news content outlines principles that media organisations can use when developing news strategies.

1. Accuracy
2. Independence
3. Fairness
4. Confidentiality
5. Humanity
6. Accountability
7. Transparency

   (Ireton & Posetti, 2018)

6.1.2 SOCIAL GRATIFICATION FACTORS

The study overall confirms that there are numerous social incentives and gratifications sought by consumers when selecting news on digital platforms. Although not as strong as content gratifications, the research does indicate a presence for social motivation. There is a fairly & medium incentive for consumers to prefer news on digital platforms based on social gratification. Interestingly, in contrast to content gratifications - audiences moderately select news on the incentive of social engagement, satisfaction of networking, chatting, forming bonds/relationships

and networking online or being socially recognized by other on digital platform social communities. Although the U&G theory identifies social integrative needs as one of the key psychological incentives for audiences preferences ((Katz et al., 1974), audiences rate this moderately low and fairly unimportant.

6.1.3 PROCESS GRATIFICATION FACTORS

The study overall confirms that there is a strong positive process gratification on digital platforms. A number of attributes were measured to understand the motives for news preferences on digital platforms. Audiences prefer digital platforms that value speed. Compatibility with mobile devices is critical. The effective and strategic use of interactive features, such as visuals, videos, hyperlinks, and overall design is valuable to consumer preferences on digital platforms. Furthermore, audiences prefer content with limited or no advertisement interference.

In a digital and infodemic environment that has been contextualized in this research paper, reaching, and connecting with consumers is more difficult than ever. The identified factors will provide insights to media organisations on how consumers navigate, manage, and process the infinite news content that is aggressively vying for their attention on digital platforms.

6.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results reported and discussed in this study should be considered in the light of some limitations. All studies have limitations which may impact the findings of the study. Highlighting limitations demonstrates that the authors are aware of the limitations and how these affect the final conclusions and recommendations (Cooper et al., 2006).

SAMPLE SIZE

It is acknowledged that the sample size of the research was limited, but acceptable. However, there is an opportunity to pursue this research at a larger scale in order to identify stronger

significant relationships in the data. A larger sample size will also ensure that the sample size is representative of a population; and can be generalized to a larger population.

TIME CONSTRAINTS

The overall time available to complete this study had an effect on the number of respondents that could be collected during the survey period of the study. There is an opportunity for a larger scale future study

6.3 CONCLUSION

This paper illustrated the usefulness of the uses and gratifications theory to understanding news preferences on internet platforms and it offers reasons and explanations for how consumers navigate a highly mediated digital content environment. The findings from the qualitative research provide rich and interesting understandings. The findings of the study will be useful for media organisations and may offer strategic insight to their digital media news content strategy and/or news content acquisition or production plans.

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