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The news consumption habits of Generation Z in Johannesburg

by

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A Research Report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters by Coursework and Research Report in Journalism and Media Studies

Supervisor: Pheladi Sethusa

Johannesburg, February 2025

Abstract

Understanding Generation Z's news consumption habits is pivotal in comprehending the evolving media landscape and its implications for news dissemination and engagement. This generation's unique habits, preferences, and behaviours are reshaping the media industry, influencing public discourse, and impacting how news is produced and consumed.

This study set out to explore the news consumption habits of South African Generation Z audiences, focusing on their preferred news formats and platforms, the influence of societal events, and their perceptions of news credibility and trustworthiness. Using a focus group, the research uncovered clear preferences for digital-first news, particularly via social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Respondents also cited News24 as a trusted and frequently accessed source.

Findings show that Generation Z gravitates toward short-form, visual content and appreciates concise, engaging news formats. However, while social media is a dominant source, credibility remains critical. Participants expressed the need for verified sources and transparent reporting, with concerns about misinformation and bias often shaping their engagement with the news.

Societal events such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, gender-based violence, and COVID-19 were shown to significantly impact how Generation Z engages with news, often leading to emotional fatigue or news avoidance. Overall, the study highlights the importance of accessible, trustworthy, and empathetic journalism in engaging younger audiences, offering valuable insights for news organisations seeking to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Students

I __Siyathemba Ben_ (Student number: _1478280_) am a student registered for Master's: Journalism and Media Studies___ in the year __2023____. I hereby declare the following:

 I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.

 I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

 I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.

 I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this in not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature: ___S.Z Ben_____ Date: ___13 January 2025_____

Table of Contents

Dedication 4
Declaration 5
Chapter 1: Introduction 6
Rationale and Aims **8**
Research Questions **9**
Chapter 2: Literature Review 10
What is News? **11**
Evolving Business Models **14**
Paying for News **16**
Data Sources **19**
Data Collection **21**
Data Analysis **22**
Ethical Considerations **23**
Limitations of the Study **23**
Chapter 4: Research findings 25
What is News? **25**
Engaging with News **26**
Reasons for Consumption **27**
Digital vs Traditional Consumption **28**
Topics of Interest **30**
Stories of Significance **31**
News Sharing and Staying Informed **32**
News Perceptions and Engagement **33**
Chapter 5: Discussion 37
Recommendations **40**
Chapter 7: References 48
Appendix 55

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my late grandfather, Qiyongo Mfazwe, who never got the opportunity to go to school. He remains my greatest inspiration, and I hope my academic achievements have made him proud of me, even in his absence. I am also thankful to my loved ones for the support they have given me throughout this process.

To my supervisor, Pheladi Sethusa, thank you for being patient with me during this time. I am grateful for your guidance – from the very first draft to the final version of this paper, your suggestions have helped shape this project.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength to push through, especially when I felt like giving up.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (MA) by Coursework and Research Report, in the School of Literature, Language and Media Studies, Wits Centre for Journalism, Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Siyathemba Zimkhitha Ben
13 January 2025

Chapter 1: Introduction

When it comes to news preference, younger audiences are different from older groups (Flamingo, 2019). Younger audiences' interest in progress and enjoyment influences what they look for in news (Flamingo, 2019). While there's still a need for the news they consume to connect them to their world, according to Flamingo (2019) young people don't look to traditional media as the best or only source.

Bengtsson and Johansson (2020) suggest that younger audiences are turning away from traditional news formats and practices such as watching the evening news on TV or reading a daily newspaper. Loader (2007) believes that the last three decades have seen younger audiences progressively disconnected from traditional news media. The decline, however, doesn't mean that there's a lack of interest, but rather signifies a change in young people's news consumption habits (Himma-Kadakas & Ferrer-Conill, 2022).

Bengtsson and Johansson (2020) add that the media has seen a transformation in news behaviour, and Flamingo (2019) observes that there's now a disconnect, with traditional news media no longer appearing to have relevance or dominance when it comes to news content. "News media is now competing for attention with myriad other distractions, and there is a high level of 'background' or 'indirect' exposure to news (through social media, other conversations, documentaries and TV shows, etc.)" (Flamingo, 2019, p.4).

The media business in South Africa is evolving, and that has presented news organisations with a challenge when it comes to the production, consumption, and dissemination of news among young audiences (Dlamini & Daniels, 2023). As Schrøder (2015) points out, there has been a significant shift in young people's news consumption habits. This, according to the scholar, is because of the role technology has played in influencing journalism in today's media landscape.

Schrøder (2014) highlights the importance of continuously monitoring the ever-changing news landscape. Schrøder (2014, p.61) emphasises points such as observing: "what technological platforms and formats are receding and emerging, and which are dominant as well as how people are accessing, navigating in and making sense of the landscape of news."

While the area of social media research is still a growing one, there hasn't yet been much academic work done on the subject in South Africa (Bosch, 2021). Napoli (2011) notes that the various

changes the media landscape has undergone in recent years, such as the rise of the internet, the proliferation of TV channels, and the advent of new content-delivery platforms, have contributed to the exponential growth in media fragmentation of the media environment. Napoli (2011) adds that today, the rise in media and audience fragmentation is challenging traditional audience measurement models.

Younger audiences, according to Galan, Osserman, Parker, and Taylor (2019) still take a keen interest in news to connect them to their world and the broader society. While there is interest in keeping up with what is happening in the news, traditional media is not the go-to or most effective method for news consumption.

This research study will explore the news consumption habits of Generation Z students at the University of the Witwatersrand using qualitative research. It will be conducted through a survey involving 100 students to gain a deeper understanding of their preferences, behaviours, and attitudes towards news, with particular attention focussed on the role of social media in shaping these habits.

This research matters because while international studies have examined Generation Z's shifting relationship with news, there is a notable gap in the South African academic landscape, particularly concerning university students' media habits. Understanding this group's news engagement patterns can provide valuable insights for local news organisations, media educators, and policymakers navigating the evolving media ecosystem.

Rationale and Aims

Several studies have shown that younger audiences have a different relationship with traditional news. They don't rely on traditional news platforms such as daily TV broadcasts, radio bulletins, newspapers, and/or magazines as their source, and instead are drawn to other platforms such as social media sites like TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, etc.

The 2022 Reuters Digital Report found that in terms of consumption, younger audiences have unique classifications and understandings of what the news is. They tend to have 'news', which is generally 'the news', which they could identify as being produced by professional agencies and is more serious. "Younger audiences often distinguish between 'the news' as the narrow, traditional agenda of politics and current affairs and 'news' as a much wider umbrella encompassing topics like sports, entertainment, celebrity gossip, culture and science" (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, and Nielsen, 2022, p.44). Focusing on South Africa's Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2012), this study will explore young people's news consumption habits, with a focus on their understanding of what news is, and how and why they consume it in the way that they do.

This generation, also known as post-millennials, Zoomers, or IGen-ers, is the first generation that has never experienced the world without the internet (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, & Woodhead, 2022). Chang and Chang (2023) note that Generations are influenced by the context in which they emerge. In the case of Generation Z, this group has been exposed to the internet, social media networks, and mobile phones from a very young age.

The study will also look at the kind of news they want and don't want to consume, which is invaluable for the newsmen and newswomen of tomorrow. Research in this area is limited in South Africa, and this study will begin to fill that gap, and to assist practitioners in better understanding their current and future audiences.

Research Questions

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- What are the preferred news sources and formats among Generation Z?
- In what ways do societal events shape Generation Z's attitudes towards news consumption and their engagement in social and political conversations?
- How do Generation Z audiences make sense of credibility and trust in news, and how does this affect their news consumption habits?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the 2022 Reuters Digital Report, news organisations are battling to reach audiences younger than 30, as their consumption habits are changing (Newman et al, 2022). McQuail's (2010) definition of an audience is that it is a set of listeners or spectators gathered in one space, who are attentive and receptive but relatively passive. At the centre of audiences lie similarities of individual needs, interests, and tastes. "Typical of such needs are those of information, relaxation, companionship, diversion or escape" (Diddi & LaRose, 2006, p. 193).

In today's digital media ecosystem, however, audiences, especially younger ones, have evolved from just passive spectators to active participants who curate, share, and engage with content across platforms. The passive audience described by McQuail (2010) has been replaced, particularly among Generation Z, by an audience that co-creates and redefines the meaning of news in participatory and socially networked spaces.

The group comprising those aged 18 to 24 – a crucial audience for media organisations and journalists – grew up in the digital era, and they prefer to access news through side doors (platforms outside of traditional media) such as social media and search aggregators (Newman et al, 2022).

Newman et al. (2022) reveal that while most people use Facebook as a source for news, younger audiences have moved to video-first sites such as TikTok, which has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in modern history. According to Doyle (2022), the platform has over one billion active users per month. TikTok allows users to both consume and create short-format videos of up to 10 minutes in length (Zannettou et al., 2024). This shift demonstrates how younger audiences are drawn to formats that reflect everyday digital behaviours – short, visual, personalised, and algorithmically tailored.

Subramanian (2017, p.85) observes that "shrinking attention span" is one of the challenges that have been brought on by the digital age, as consumers are constantly bombarded with messages and don't know what to pay attention to and what to discard.

To highlight the change in attention spans, Subramanian (2017) mentions how the duration of commercial breaks have moved from a full minute decades ago, to 30 and 15 seconds in recent years. (Subramanian, 2017) further states that advertisers have noticed that shorter commercials get viewers' attention more quickly, and they turn their attention off when exposed to longer duration content. According to Bird, Durham, Holcomb, and Thakar (2019) consumers have become accustomed to bite-sized content on social media platforms and, in turn, have influenced the production of short-form content. These consumer habits have resulted in media organisations capitalising on short-form content to capture consumer engagement (Bird et al., 2019).

About 33% of users in the United States of America get their news on the TikTok app (Pew Research Center, 2022). The 2022 Reuters Digital Report further states that 40% of 18–24-year-olds around the world use the video-sharing platform for news (Newman et al., 2022). The report adds that there is higher usage of TikTok in parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa compared to the United States or Northern Europe. One of the most important findings from the Reuters Digital Report, according to Newman et al. (2022), is that 39% of young people get their news on social media, while 34% prefer going directly to news sites or apps.

Some of Generation Z's other main news sources include social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (Hölig and Hasebrink 2020). Social media, according to Blandi et al. (2022) is replacing traditional media and changing how people access information. Galan, Osserman, Parker, and Taylor (2019) point out that younger audiences perceive news as something that is useful, interesting, and fun to know.

What is News?

Dijk (2013, p.3) states that "the notion of news is ambiguous", but the general understanding is that news means 'new information', which is related to how people communicate daily. Dijk (2013, p.3) uses phrases such as "I have news for you" and "what is the latest news on your son" as examples of the first understanding of news, while the second meaning or understanding of news relates to media and mass communication, such as published reports or a "TV program in which news is presented".

Chen and Thorson (2019) also highlight the duality of news, mentioning that it is both a private commodity and a public good that plays an important role in society. While the news gratifies consumers' needs, it also informs the public, benefiting a democratic society (Doyle, 2013).

Additionally, Dijk (2016, p.4) observes: "News may refer to a news item or news article in the physical sense – news one can see, read, or clip from the paper. It may also refer to the content or meaning of such an article or item, as when we speak about the latest news about Lebanon." Citing Peters (2012), Schrøder (2014) refers to news consumption as something more than what people do , but as something they do in a particular place. Bengtsson and Johansson (2020) argue that while news has previously been defined as "a commodity produced and packaged within journalistic institutions", that meaning needs to be redefined, as they are of the view that news has changed.

Audiences aged 18 to 24 have their own definition of news, and they prefer to consume content that is informal, entertaining, and visual (Newman et al., 2022). Younger audiences also tend to avoid the news because it can be complex for them to engage with (Newman et al., 2022). A respondent told Reuters' Kirsten Eddy: "On TV we always see the same things, but on YouTube, Spotify, TikTok, we have a range of diversity… We can get all this and see that there is diversity, a society far beyond just what we live" (Newman et al., 2022, p.43). Another respondent was quoted in the report as saying, "I find [YouTube] more digestible than mainstream media. I also find YouTube to be more interesting because it is more specifically geared towards me" (Newman et al., 2022, p.43).

In their study, Schwaiger, Vogler, and Eisenegger (2022) surveyed 19 young adults from Switzerland aged between 20 and 25 years old, with different levels of education.
According to the study, participants lean more towards news that is "attractively prepared" with supporting audio-visual formats that are easy to understand and integrate into everyday life, and topics that they and their peers find interesting, and that encourage them to engage with news. The young adults surveyed added that they prefer to use a single platform to access news from different brands.

There are three things that young people look at when evaluating news: actuality, veracity, and the possibility of facilitating sociability (Swart, 2021). Schwaiger et al. (2022) elaborate on this, adding, this includes aspects that are relevant for their everyday lives and social relationships (sociability), and also established criteria of journalism (actuality and veracity) in their quality assessments of news.

Dlamini and Daniels (2023) are aware of the influence that the Generation Z audience exercises over the way in which media publications present the news. However, McQuail (2010) notes that new technologies (the internet and mobile technology) have been created and used as an alternative potential of communication. These new forms of communication, according to McQuail (2010) "differ mainly in being more extensive, less structured, often interactive as well as private and individualised".

According to Ruggiero (2000), whenever a new mass communication medium was introduced, uses and gratifications were used to provide a "cutting-edge" theoretical approach. The communication platforms include newspapers, radio, television, and the internet, which is relatively new (Ruggiero, 2000). To effectively examine the news consumption habits of the Generation Z audience, this study will be guided by the uses and gratifications theoretical framework.

Rubin (2008) explains that uses and gratifications views a medium or message as a source of influence with the context of other possible influences. Here, instead of passively receiving information, media audiences are active communicators (Rubin, 2008). The author adds that that social and psychological dynamics reduce the impact of mechanical processes, framing mediated communication as inherently influenced by these human elements (Rubin, 2008).
Thus, uses and gratifications are seen from a psychological perspective, with emphasis on audiences' use and choice (Rubin, 2008). This theory seeks to know why people use certain media platforms and what they use them for (Rubin, 2008).

This theoretical lens is particularly useful in explaining why Generation Z turns to TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube for news; not only to be informed, but also to feel connected, entertained,

and validated in their identities. Their consumption is driven by immediate relevance, platform familiarity, and how well content integrates into their daily social rhythms. The uses and gratifications theory helps us to understand how this audience navigates a digital space saturated with choices, selecting content that aligns with their interests, values, and lifestyles.

Evolving Business Models

Dlamini and Daniels (2023) note that the way in which Generation Z consumes the news has an impact on the business side of the media, and they advise media publications to adjust their news strategies accordingly. In their study, the scholars focused on three South African media organisations, namely Media24, Independent News and Media, and Arena Holdings. Dlamini and Daniels (2023) found that there was not enough investment in suitable technology or social media engagement from media publications.

Additionally, Dlamini and Daniels (2023) concluded that the three news organisations lack innovation when it comes to attracting younger audiences. Dlamini and Daniels (2023) advised the three organisations to increase the visibility and discoverability of their content specifically tailored to young audiences, by ensuring that it shows up on YouTube or by releasing content on popular non-commercial platforms that will appear in Google searches.

Schrøder (2014) highlights the importance of continuously monitoring the ever-changing news landscape. It is also important to note how the industry changes have disrupted old operational and business models (Mabweazara and Mare, 2021). These developments have also placed the social function of journalism under threat (Mabweazara and Mare, 2021). According to Curran (2019), censorship, elite sourcing, and economic decline are the three factors that have caused the crisis in contemporary journalism. Curran (2019) states that the migration to online platforms such as Facebook, Google, and Craigslist contributed to the closure of some newspapers. This also impacted people's jobs as newsrooms became smaller due to budget constraints (Curran, 2019). In the United States of America, newspaper circulation has been on the decline in recent years (Gao, Lee, and Murphy, 2020). Between 2003 and 2014, circulation numbers went down 27% (Gao, Lee, and Murphy, 2020).

According to The State of the Newsroom Report 2021, South African print titles saw a sharp decline in circulation during 2020, primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the report, Alan Finlay mentions that by the end of that year, the number of magazine titles listed in the Audit Bureau of Circulation had dropped by 47% (104 compared to 197 prior to 2020). Meanwhile, at least 2 600 people employed at some of the country's biggest media houses, including the SABC, were at risk of losing their jobs during 2020.

Finlay (2021) attributes local newspapers' loss in circulation numbers to the reshuffling of the local newspaper sector in 2020, which led to titles being amalgamated or shut down. In the same report, with a focus on community newspapers, Kate Skinner says that when asked what their biggest source of revenue is, 80.8% of publishers mentioned that they make most of their money from advertising revenue earned from their print editions. Other sources of revenue include ad revenue from online editions, donations or sponsorships, and sales generated from printed copies, according to Skinner (Finlay, 2021).

While the print sector has seen a decline in circulation, publishers told Skinner that they would continue to print for as long as they could, and are of the view that print will still be relevant in the future (Finlay, 2021). Skinner notes that while the independent community media print and online industry is small, it also faces the challenges of being overlooked and of scarcity of funding and support.

Franklin (2009) notes that a decline in newspaper circulation doesn't mean that newspapers will disappear. Instead, how they present their content is being transformed to combat the challenges faced by the industry (Franklin, 2009). This isn't the first time newspapers have had to go through a transformation. Franklin (2009) adds that adapting to increased competition, often driven by new technology, is historically what has triggered change in the newspaper industry.

While news organisations have options such as advertising and subscription business models, Punj (2013) mentions that these are largely driven by consumer characteristics. Punj's (2013) findings reveal that female consumers are more willing to pay for online news than male consumers. The author also adds that while consumers who have a higher income and are more educated express

a lower willingness to pay, the estimated amount they are likely to pay is higher in comparison to consumers with lower income and less education" (Punj, 2013).

Evens, Raats and von Rimscha (2017) argue that while digital subscriptions are yet to be seen as viable, news organisations must transform their business models. According to Evens et al. (2017), companies need to understand the demographic changes that are resulting in the declining online advertising revenues and whether the same changes could potentially enhance the revenue streams from subscription-based models. The scholars add that news platforms can introduce a model known as "freemium" which allows the audience to access some content for free, while paying a fee for premium content. South African online news publication News24, offers this model.

Mathiasová, Solík, and Mináriková (2022) mention that there are three dominant revenue streams in the online media space, namely subscription, advertising and crowdfunding. Publishers have decided to put their online content behind a paywall, which means that consumers have to pay to access content through subscriptions (Mathiasová et al., 2022).

Paying for News

Meanwhile, Fild (2022) believes that South African media houses are confident that readers are willing to pay for the news, pointing to News24 as a case study. The news platform launched its digital subscription in August 2020, with readers paying a monthly fee of R75. The service grants the audience access to investigative journalism, business and lifestyle stories, and access to online publications including Drum magazine, City Press and True Love magazine (Fild, 2022).

In an interview, News24's Newsletter and Engagement Editor, Alet Law, told Fild (2022) that while local publications and broadcasters struggled with advertising during the COVID-19 lockdown, News24's revenue remained stable following the outbreak. In fact, some months in 2020 saw an increase in advertising (Fild, 2022). Law, speaking to Fild (2022), said people were more open to paying for credible online news because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the subscription model has contributed positively towards News24's financial situation, Law cautions that "there are costs associated to building a paywall, and creating additional subscriber-only content and maintaining the new website" (Fild, 2022).

Research conducted by the Media Insight Project in 2023 found that 60% of audiences younger than 40 years pay for or donate to the news in some way. The study, conducted in North America, revealed that 51% of Gen Z pay for or donate to content or some type of news source. Among the news sources they pay for or donate to are print or digital magazines; print or digital newspapers; digital news apps; non-profit news sites; email newsletters from independent creators; and influencers through YouTube or podcasts, according to the Media Insight Project.

The study further revealed that Americans aged between 16 – 40 years who donate to or pay for the news spend a large amount of time online. "They are likely to turn to traditional news and social media sources to get news daily than those who do not pay for or donate to news (The Media Insight Project, 2023).

Actively seeking out news is a behaviour attached to 45% of those aged 16-40 who pay for or donate to the news. By contrast, The Media Insight Project report adds that 71% of those who do not pay for or donate to the news most likely access news accidentally, either from the content they consume, or they hear about it from others. When it comes to audiences (millennials and Generation Z) who pay for or donate to the news, on average, at least two social media sources are used daily to consume news and information, according to the report.

While resources such as the Reuters Digital Report provide some insights, Wunderlich, Hölig and Hasebrink (2022) note that there is still limited research on journalism's role within news-related practices and the competencies of young audiences. Additionally, there are no research-based books focused solely on social media in South Africa, with much of the discourse and research emanating from the Global North (Bosch, 2021).

The criticism of researchers in the area of social media across the globe, often relates to the fact that social media users might not be demographically representative of the broader population (Bosch, 2021). Although there has been a rise in internet and mobile phone usage in Sub-Saharan Africa (Tallam, 2020), South Africa is yet to reach 100% internet penetration (Bosch, 2021). At

the beginning of 2023, South Africa had 43.48 million internet users, with internet penetration standing at 72.3 % (Kemp, 2023).

The African Gen Z Report 2018 found that internet accessibility across the African continent remains significantly below global averages, and the cost of data remains relatively high. This, in turn, limits the access of a significant number of Generation Z to the global digital world (Hawkes, 2018). Kemp (2023) states that out of those who have access to the internet, 25.80 million are social media users.

Tracy Aberman, Head of Product at Kwesé Play shared in the report that Generation Z considers data not just as an allowance, but as a valuable commodity. Therefore, fulfilling this demographic's online needs requires high-quality, high-speed internet. This cohort is also critical when it comes to customer experience. Google reports that 53% of mobile users abandon websites that exceed the three-second loading time (Hawkes, 2018).

Meanwhile, Bosch (2021) warns researchers to be aware of the fact that databases can be skewed by highly vocal users who post often and dominate the online conversation.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Paradigms

This research seeks to explore the news consumption habits of the Generation Z audience(s). To achieve this, the study will follow a qualitative research approach. According to Kakulu (2014, p.4.0), this method is concerned with the opinions, experiences, and feelings of individuals and produces subjective data, which is based on their lived experiences.

Data Sources

For this study, a survey was conducted with a subset of South Africa's Generation Z population, based in Johannesburg. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Dudovskiy (2022) writes: "Purposive sampling (also known as judgment, selective, or subjective sampling) is a sampling method in which the researcher relies on their judgment when choosing participants of the population to participate in the study. The method was used because the research intended to gather a deeper understanding of insights from individuals who not only fall under the Generation Z classification but also engage with online news platforms.

According to Dudovskiy (2022), in this type of sampling method, the researcher's judgment leads to the selection of participants. Using the research questions and theoretical framework of the study, the study relied on a survey with 100 students enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand. These students, ranging from their first year to postgraduate level, fell under the Generation Z classification (aged between 18-26 years old), which was the unit of analysis for this research.

The uses and gratifications theory was used to inform both the theoretical framework and the design of the data collection instruments. This theory focuses on how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs such as information, personal identity, social integration, and entertainment. Given the study's aim to explore news consumption habits, survey questions were designed to identify the motivations, preferences, and behaviours of Generation Z with regard to news media, in alignment with the principles of this theory. Open-ended and multiple-choice questions were used in the survey to capture insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of

gratifications sought by participants through news media. The questions were selected to align with the main objectives of the research and gain insights into this demographic's news consumption habits. The survey was designed to understand both the practical behaviours and the emotional experience of news consumption among this cohort, to identify challenges, patterns, and opportunities relevant to media organisations, educators, and other stakeholders who aim to reach this generation.

Being part of an academic institution allows relatively easier access to this demographic for research purposes. Their proximity and availability within the university setting made them a convenient target for this study. The university was also selected because there is diversity, from gender to race and socio-economic status. According to the European Research Council (2024), featuring a diverse range of participants in research leads to research findings that are more representative of the broader population.

Participants represented various races, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, these specific demographic categories were not the primary focus. The defining characteristic for inclusion in the study was their generational classification (Generation Z) and their enrolment at the university. The survey received over 100 responses; however, only the first 100 were selected for analysis, as this was the target sample size set to maintain a manageable yet meaningful data pool. The number 100 was considered sufficient to identify general patterns and trends within the group, while acknowledging that it does not fully represent the entire Generation Z population.

The study aimed to understand the Generation Z population's news consumption habits, and the university was chosen as it attracts students from diverse regions across the country. This diversity in enrolment allows for a broader representation of individuals from various parts of South Africa, enhancing the study's scope and depth. The sample provides a snapshot of the country's racial, linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic background.

The students enrolled in this institution hold a unique position due to their access to higher education and relative exposure to information resources, as they are academically and digitally resourced. According to the University's Biographical Questionnaire Report: Student Background

Information (2020), 75% of first-year students attended high schools with computers, while 68% of the students had access to libraries. These figures are not representative of the broader youth population of South Africa.

In comparison, Statistics South Africa's Social Profile of the Youth, 2014-2024, reveals that most young people aged between 15-34 years deal with significant educational and unemployment challenges. According to the report, a considerable number of them have not completed matric, and only 13.2% were enrolled in higher education in 2023. Although there has been a minor increase in school attendance, there are still challenges around skills, safety, and opportunities. Including students from the University of the Witwatersrand gives insights into a more privileged segment of the population. This cohort is from higher socio-economic backgrounds and has more access and opportunity.

The researcher acknowledges that the study's scope might be limited as it primarily involves young people from Johannesburg due to the university's location. Consequently, this geographical constraint could restrict the representation of individuals from other regions within the country, posing a limitation to the research. Because of this selection process, participants from other parts of South Africa will be excluded.

When selecting respondents, the following will be considered:

- Do they own a smartphone or computer?
- Do they have access to the internet?
- Do they have social media profiles, and do they use social media networks?

In order to reach out to respondents, the researcher applied for the registrar's permission. A letter to conduct research with students was sent to the registrar and upon approval, bulk emails were sent to students.

Data Collection

According to Polkinghorne (2005), data collection in qualitative research is aimed at providing evidence for the experience being investigated. This evidence, Polkinghorne (2005, p.138) writes, "is in the form of accounts people have given of the experience." In this study, a survey with open-ended and multiple-choice questions was used as the main method of data collection. The survey was designed to allow participants to provide detailed, written responses to questions that sought to answer the main research questions posed by the researcher. This method was chosen because it is based on open-ended questions that allow respondents to form their own thoughts and ideas in depth, expressing their views on the subject matter from their perspectives" (Karatsareas, 2022).

Data Analysis

The study followed the inductive approach when analysing data. This approach, as noted by Zalaghi and Khazaei (2016), starts with specific observations and conclusions are generalised. Once observations have been selected, a general conclusion can be drawn for all groups of similar conditions and situations. During this process, data is separated by categories, which assists in identifying similarities or common schools of thought from the interviews conducted.

Interview Questions

Interviewees were asked the following questions:

- How would you define news?
- Which digital or social media platforms do you use to access news content?
- Which news sources or websites do you trust and frequently visit for news?
- How often do you consume news through traditional media sources such as newspapers, TV, or radio?
- How often do you actively seek out news information or stay updated on current events?
- What types of news topics or issues are most relevant or interesting to you, and why do you find them compelling?
- Have there been any significant news stories or events that have impacted your beliefs, values, or actions? Could you elaborate on how these news stories influenced you?
- Do you think news consumption is essential for being an informed citizen or for participating in societal discussions? Why or why not?

- How do you think news consumption among your peers or within your social circle influences discussions and interactions?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed or disengaged from news due to the volume of information available or the nature of news content? If so, what factors contributed to these feelings?
- What could news organisations or media platforms do to make news content more appealing, trustworthy, or accessible to individuals of your age group?

Ethical Considerations

Bos (2020) defines ethics as the study of what is right and wrong, and what researchers are obligated to do. Researchers typically refer to ethical guidelines to ensure they uphold the principles of good research practice (Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991). Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005) emphasise that the well-being of participants should always come first when conducting research involving people. The importance of the research itself is secondary. In situations where a conflict arises between protecting a participant from harm and preserving the integrity of the study, the research must be set aside, according to Mack et al. (2005, p.8).

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained through a formal request submitted to the university registrar. The request outlined the purpose of the research and identified the target participants as University of the Witwatersrand students classified under Generation Z. The submission included the survey questions and informed consent forms. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they were under no obligation to participate. Those who chose to take part provided their consent. Anonymity was guaranteed, and all personal information was to be used solely for the research. Ethical clearance was granted on 02 July 2024. Because the research was conducted through a survey, the study was considered low risk as participants would not be physically harmed in the process.

Limitations of the Study

The research only focused on Generation Z individuals who were based in Johannesburg and were enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand. Only 100 participants contributed to the survey.

Therefore, the data does not represent the news consumption habits of a substantial part of this cohort, but it remains representative enough to offer insight into the behaviours and motivations of Generation Z within a university context.

Chapter 4: Research findings

The main objective of this research paper was to analyse the news consumption habits of people who fall under the Generation Z classification, residing in Johannesburg. This was achieved by looking at several factors, including how they define news, which social media platforms they use to access the news, what types of news topics or issues they find relevant, etc.

For this study, 100 students enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand were surveyed, and they shared different experiences. Ninety-nine percent of the students surveyed have access to the internet outside school premises.

What is News?

The concept of "news" is not fixed; it is fluid, contextual, and shaped by institutional definitions and audience interpretations. As Dijk (2016, p.3) points out, the notion of news is ambiguous, shifting between everyday personal communication ("I have news for you") and structured mass communication (e.g., news articles or TV bulletins). This duality was reflected in the responses from respondents, who overwhelmingly associated news with information, relevance, and topicality.

Chen and Thorson (2019) also emphasise this dual nature, suggesting that news is both a private commodity and a public good, gratifying individual needs while contributing to informed citizenship. This aligns closely with how many participants in this study described news: as something that serves both personal and societal purposes.

For example, respondent 89 defined news as "information about topics that are notably worthy or interesting… for various reasons such as entertainment, education, etc." This reflects Doyle's (2013) point that while news serves public interests, it also fulfils individual needs. Respondent 42 similarly noted that "news is a form of communication used to keep people up to date… and may impact their well-being," bridging both the personal utility and civic function of news.

Respondent eight's mention of news as "life-changing or affecting the livelihood of people" echoes Bengtsson and Johansson's (2020) call to move beyond traditional definitions that frame news as just a commodity produced by journalistic institutions. Instead, respondents perceive news as something dynamic, contextual, and deeply embedded in lived experience. Schrøder (2014), building on Peters (2012), argues that news is also about the space in which it is consumed, something "we do in a particular place." This idea subtly surfaces in the data. While some respondents shared traditional definitions, others highlighted platform-specific consumption patterns such as TikTok and News24, suggesting that the meaning and function of news are shaped by where and how it is encountered.

Furthermore, Dijk's (2016) differentiation between news as a physical object and news as content or meaning is also reflected in participants' language. Respondent two, for instance, described news as "any significant thing that happens to be reported," suggesting that what counts as news is not just the event itself, but how it is communicated and framed.

News Consumption Frequency

Out of the 100 respondents, 47 spend less than one hour on news consumption a day. Meanwhile, 40 respondents say they consume the news for between one to two hours per day. Only one respondent consumes the news for more than five hours a day.

Engaging with News

The way in which this cohort consumes the news can be described as both passive and active. Some respondents are intentional about consuming news and make a conscious decision to stay informed about what's happening around them. On the other hand, there are those who mention that they just stumble upon news content on social media and are therefore not intentional about seeking news.

Respondent 11 reveals: "They just pop up, the news I get are based on what I had watched recently and every time I try to actively look for news." This respondent also mentions that paywalls are often a hindrance to their news consumption habits. "I have to pay for a subscription, but considering the course I'm doing, I have to keep up to date with the news… So says my lecturer."

Respondent 11's response points out a complex view on the consumption of news. While the participant is not intentional about seeking news, they engage with it according to past viewing habits and what they are exposed to on social media. On the other hand, subscription fees also hinder their ability to be active seekers of news.

Reasons for Consumption

When asked why they consume the news, 76 out of the 100 respondents had one objective: to keep up with what's happening in the country and around the world. They shared various news topics of interest to them, including current affairs, politics, finances, and entertainment.

Explaining why current affairs is important to them, respondent 15 said: "They provide current information which I believe affects my day-to-day life. Crime topics help me to be on the look out and make sure that I am safe as I am travelling every day using public transport." On the political side of things, respondent 19 is always on the lookout for significant changes in the country.

Staying informed about crime is important for this cohort. Respondent 51 feels that being aware of crime rates as a female in South Africa is crucial. Respondent 68 echoes these sentiments, saying: "I find most relevant is crime, rape and kidnapping. I find them compelling because nowadays the world is not safe anymore and crime comes in many different ways, sometimes when we are not even aware that it is indeed happening."

Respondent 88 is another who deeply engages with crime news based on gender-based violence rates in the country. "It's something that feels close to home and could impact me someday. That's why I make sure to stay informed, it's about being cautious and aware. Additionally, my empathetic nature compels me to ensure that such incidents do not go unnoticed or unaddressed. Consequently, I actively engage in sharing such information to create awareness."

Another topic that some of the participants engage with is politics. Participant 62 links their interest in political news to their religious affiliation. "As a Muslim, I firmly believe in being updated on happenings in the world that relate to oppression, genocide and apartheid. I believe that everyone

regardless of their faith or background should try and seek out this type of news. In this manner we may stand for justice," they shared.

For respondent 88, being aware of what is happening politically is as crucial as staying informed about crime. "As I mature and gain independence from my parents, I find myself increasingly attuned to the details of South African politics. Government policies that influence economic factors such as the stability of the Rand, healthcare provisions, and job security seem to directly impact my financial aspirations and decision-making process. Therefore, staying well-informed is important before making any consequential decisions."

An interesting trend to note when it comes to this cohort is that a majority of them consume news that directly affects their lives. Respondent 81 is interested in educational affairs because "it directly involves my education", while respondent 91 engages with political news because "it is relevant to my field of study". For respondent 58, current affairs matters because it informs some of their decisions.

This respondent noted load shedding as an issue that they constantly need to stay informed about. They explained: "As a student, I have to schedule my studies, so I need such information to avoid unsolicited inconvenience." On the other hand, politics and current affairs are important to them as they are funded by the government. "I am funded by a government bursary therefore news about current affairs in politics do affect how officials respond or complete their responsibilities."

Digital vs Traditional Consumption

Generation Z, according to the survey, consumes news mainly through digital and social media platforms. These are platforms that this audience finds easily accessible and trustworthy. Forty-three respondents revealed that they use News24 as their primary source of news consumption. The news site is often mentioned on its own or alongside other platforms such as SABC News, eNCA, or IOL. WhatsApp also appears to be a platform that this cohort uses to engage with news. When it comes to trusted news platforms, among many respondents, News24 appears to be the most frequently cited in their responses.

While the video-streaming platform YouTube can be seen as an entertainment outlet, some respondents also view it as a credible source for news content. For respondent 43, X, formerly known as Twitter, has been a reliable source of information. “Also, you get multiple chances of verifying if the news is true or not. Generation Z relies very much on electronic devices, really,” the respondent pointed out.

Although digital platforms are emerging as the go-to choice for most respondents, traditional platforms such as radio and television remain popular, especially among those with established routines or preferences for non-digital news formats. As highlighted by the survey, traditional media still plays a key role, with some respondents sharing just how integral it is in their daily lives.

Some respondents consume news through traditional platforms daily. News is often consumed on the radio every morning and afternoon while respondents are commuting to and from school. Respondent five shared that they listen to news on the radio “whenever in the car, usually every day”. Respondent six engages with news on traditional platforms “every morning and afternoon”. For Respondent 28, engagement is usually “throughout the day, more often in the mornings”. Respondent 60 said mostly uses the television for news. Meanwhile, Respondent 70 noted: “Most of the news I consume is through TV, which is approximately an hour or two a day on average.”

This mixed engagement reflects Ndlovu’s (2014) findings, which reveal that while traditional print readership among South African youth is declining, traditional platforms such as radio, television, and community media remain relatively stable. Meanwhile, Ndlovu (2014) also highlights the rise in digital and non-mainstream sources, particularly among younger audiences. This is reflected in the current study’s findings that digital platforms, especially social media, are increasingly favoured due to their accessibility, immediacy, and integration into individuals’ daily routines.

From a uses and gratifications theory framework, this demonstrates how different media types satisfy different needs for users. For some, traditional media aligns with habitual and passive consumption, while others actively seek news via digital platforms. Therefore, news consumption patterns among younger audiences are not the same but reflect a spectrum of motivations and

gratifications. Furthermore, several individuals represented in the study don't engage with news regularly. They cite various reasons such as limited access or preference for other platforms.

Topics of Interest

To dive deeper into their topics of interest, respondents were asked to share news stories that they recently engaged with. Responses varied from South African and international politics, to the elections, and government coalition updates. Respondent five revealed that it has been interesting to read up on the Government of National Unity (GNU) updates. This was also an area of interest for respondent 12. "The South African coalition government and policies that ministers are going to implement," they noted. Other cited responses related to this topic include "2024 Election", "South African politics/elections", and "the new board in the parliament and the issue of appointment of ministers."

Other respondents took a keen interest in news about museum openings, load reduction, crime and car accidents. The responses are diverse, revealing the uniqueness of topics this cohort is interested in. Respondent 14 shared that they recently engaged with "news on a Japanese music producer who had murdered his underage girlfriend", while respondent 10 shared, "an island in Hawaii where no outsiders are allowed any access". Some participants show an interest in big crime stories, dramatic legal decisions, and fraud. Respondent six mentioned that a story about Kyle Clifford, who used a crossbow to kill a BBC reporter's wife and two kids, caught their eye.

While political stories appear to be a common theme, respondents also show interest in topics such as entertainment, sport, and other local and international events. Some participants gravitate towards topical news events, whether these are political developments, high-profile crime stories, or major events like the Cricket World Cup.

Ndlovu (2014) observes a global phenomenon of young adults rejecting hard news, particularly political and economic reporting, while showing increased interest in soft news and popular culture. Referencing researchers like Buckingham (1997a), Patterson (2007), and Duncan et al. (2013), Ndlovu notes that younger audiences are more likely to follow stories involving celebrities, sport, music, and human-interest narratives, specifically those marked by drama and

sensationalism. This trend was evident among some of the participants, who appeared more engaged with stories that offered emotional or entertainment value.

Stories of Significance

The genocide in Gaza has drawn the attention of this cohort. One of the questions they were asked was whether there had been significant news stories or events that had impacted their beliefs. Sixteen percent of the participants surveyed shared that what is happening in Palestine has hugely affected them.

Respondent five said: “News about Palestine has shown me how horrible true human nature can be,” adding that keeping up with news around this topic informs them which businesses to support or boycott. Respondent seven has also shifted their purchasing decisions based on the conflict. “It has changed the way in which I shop. I no longer buy from stores that support Israel,” they said.

According to respondent three, money and power are huge factors in what is happening. “What’s happening in Palestine, and seeing how quiet developed countries were endorsing Israel and how quiet influential people were about the situation. It showed me how money can shield a person to the point that they get detached from the world around them.”
For respondent 22, “the children suffering” made them go from not supporting a specific side to completely being pro-Palestine. Respondent 30 said the war “hurt my faith in humanity more than anything I can recently recall”.

Meanwhile, the war between Russia and Ukraine has significantly impacted respondent 35. They said: “The Ukrainian war and all the information that has come out about the Russian government influencing global politics against democratic nations has established a firm belief in me that any authoritarian regime aims to create chaos and discord in democratic nations to weaken that nations action against them.”

Respondent 15 stated that a story about an accident encouraged them to be more cautious in their daily life. “The accident of a school transport that took the lives of learners on their way to school.

I am more responsible every time I use my own car the incident taught me to be more careful, not only for my sake but also for other passengers on the road," they explained.

Other significant stories or news events that have impacted participants' beliefs or actions include certain companies leaving the country, the increase of femicide and rape cases in South Africa and the rape of a University of Cape Town (UCT) student. A theme that appears in a number of responses is how gender-based violence has influenced how some participants think and operate. Respondent 42 shared: "There are news stories that have impacted me. Such stories include gender-based violence news stories, such as Tshegofatso Pule's murder, the gang violence in the Cape Flats…" The respondent said these stories influence them in a negative way. "They suggest to me that society is on a constant decline no matter how much technology we create to improve our lives and our access to information to improve our lives, the cynical and depraved human condition that we have seen and continue to see throughout human history remains prevalent." They are also of the view that different news outlets play a fundamental role in fostering how the narrative of these events and stories are told and interpreted.

News Sharing and Staying Informed

There is also a habit of news-sharing among respondents, especially topics that they are interested in. However, among this cohort, there is also an occasional behaviour of non-sharing. From the sample, 73 respondents agree that the consumption of news is important for being an informed citizen and participating in societal discussions. A key theme among this cohort is the idea that staying informed with news contributes to making effective decisions, especially related to topics of public interest. Some respondents point out the importance of understanding current events for personal decision-making and for influencing societal change.

Adding to this, some suggested that being informed also helps shape who a person is and influences the way in which they engage the world. Respondent 41 stated, "It is important to understand what is going on around the world because oblivion often results in one being gullible. When having discussions, being informed allows one to discern whether what is spoken is the truth or not." There is also the opinion that news provides context for their actions and opinions. Respondent

one shared: “Being informed allows you to make effective choices about career and about voting for an effective government.”

While respondent 21 agrees on the importance of being informed, they also highlighted: “It is also important to understand that there are educational and economic barriers to news consumption, so people who don't consume news cannot be discarded as uninformed. Even if someone doesn't know what’s happening in the country at large, they know about the issues affecting their lives and should be taken seriously when they express their concerns/desires.”

Being aware of current affairs, according to some respondents, plays an important role in the shaping of the broader context of their lives and in encouraging empathy towards others. Some respondents shared that staying informed with the news also creates an environment where they can consider perspectives outside of what they know. While news consumption is seen as vital, there is also the view that some reports tend to be biased or sensational.

The overall belief reflected by these responses among this cohort is that news consumption is essential for informed citizenship and active participation in societal discourse. Respondent 60 summed it up: “It is very important for discussions to happen, especially around the youth, so that awareness can be raised on some issues and some solutions of how the youth can change the circumstances of the country.”

News Perceptions and Engagement

Another element revealed by the survey is Generation Z’s perception of news consumption among their peers. There is a belief that news serves to initiate conversations. As suggested by some individuals, news provides a common ground for discussions on various issues, including local and global events.

About 60% of the respondents revealed that the consumption of news within their social circles results in insightful and meaningful conversations, with some sharing that staying up to date with current events inspires their discussions and often fuels debate among their groups.

On how news consumption among their peers influences discussions and interactions, Respondent 59 shared: “It allows us to accept other people’s opinions as we respect their right to defend it, it provides a sense of belonging as we have something in common, provided we’re all well informed, and it aids involvement in activist movements regarding current affairs.”

These findings further affirm the shift from passive to active news consumption among Generation Z. As highlighted by McQuail (2010), earlier models portrayed audiences as passive recipients of information. However, in today’s digital media landscape, younger audiences have evolved into active participants who curate, share, and even co-create news content across digital and social platforms. This transformation is reflected in the responses from participants in this study, many of whom noted that they share news stories they find relevant or thought-provoking with peers in their social circles.

Although there is a large number of respondents who have highlighted how news consumption sparks important debates among their peers, they also pointed out feeling overwhelmed or disengaged from news, especially due to the volume of information and how news is presented. Too much of the same information from “different sources with different agendas” has left Respondent two feeling overwhelmed. For Respondent 10, the way in which news is presented – especially in written form – “is quite overwhelming as I sometimes get bored by the number of words”. The participant shared that this often leads to a loss in interest “quite quickly”.

For one participant, the media has been a major concern, often leading to them feeling overwhelmed. “There might be a numerous amount of news reports on the same event that can alter how we perceive the event, and cross-checking all that can be tiresome,” Respondent 14 stated. This view highlights the challenges of navigating numerous perspectives when it comes to news reporting.

Respondent 21 also points out a similar concern, mentioning the difficulty in following South African news. “There seems to be an ever-rotating roster of important figures who I find difficult to keep track of. I also find political coverage difficult sometimes when it stops being about policy

and outcomes but just a litany of accusation and investigations into corruption and other criminal activity." They added that crime coverage is "exhausting and uninformative".

Another issue that makes some respondents feel overwhelmed by news is how "negative" it can be. "News is very often negative and I think too much negativity and doom makes people want to bury their heads in the sand and rather not know what terrible things are happening in the world," Respondent 30 said, adding that the events of 7 October, 2023 [Palestine vs Israel] was "one of those overwhelming events where I almost didn't want to look".

Respondent 45, is of the view that "the overwhelming dread and/or fear that news stations push forward is a way to scare their viewers into believing that the world is always in turmoil and forcing them to watch more content from the news stations."

Respondent 42 said they have felt overwhelmed and sometimes "nearly depressed" by news. They linked this to having access to too much information. "Sometimes deciphering which information is relevant, true and impartial is quite difficult." For this participant, there is also a sense that news organisations are more concerned with promoting agendas instead of telling the truth. "As a result, we are constantly engaging news which is flustered with polarised sentiments that agitate people to constantly be in conflict with each other over issues which they should be objectively engaging each other in," Respondent 42 shared.

The respondent went on to add that they get overwhelmed by news because it often depicts biased, violent, and politically polarised viewpoints that don't serve any objective purpose besides pushing the narrative of certain organisations. This leads to a lack of trust. Seeing graphic news content has had a negative effect on some participants. Respondent 51 said: "Graphic videos shared on social media that showcase people being bombed, injured severely, or begging for donations so that they can escape, can be extremely draining to watch."

"Seeing mutilated bodies, bloodshed, and torture on my phone screen every day from scenes in Gaza has caused me to feel anxious and distressed. I often feel helpless when seeing these scenes,"

Respondent 62 said. Respondent 88 has felt “emotionally depleted and hopeless” after being exposed to news about violence, crime, and political strife.

The COVID-19 pandemic was another subject that has had a lasting emotional impact on this cohort. Being exposed to too much information about the virus led to Respondent 94 being disengaged from the news. “I didn't want to hear anything because it was all becoming too much,” the respondent explained.

Meanwhile, 39% of the respondents have expressed that they have never felt overwhelmed or disengaged from the news. “I've never felt overwhelmed or disengaged from news due to any factor. I'm always intrigued and interested when I consume news content,” Respondent 70 said.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this section, the research findings of the study will be explored and analysed. This will be in relation to the research questions, shedding light on the news consumption habits and preferences of Generation Z. The study reveals that when it comes to news consumption, the sample has clear expectations regarding news sources and formats.

Preferred News Platforms and Formats

Media sites and social media platforms emerge as critical platforms for news consumption and also for influencing perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness. Moreover, societal events such as political news, crime and other significant stories play a key role in shaping Generation Z's perceptions and attitudes towards news.

Based on the findings, Generation Z highlighted a preference for digital-first news sources. They demonstrated a liking towards platforms such as News24, which emerged as the most trusted and frequently visited news platform, and social media channels, including TikTok and Instagram. In their study, Dlamini and Daniels (2023) found that Generation Z prefers social media platforms as their go-to sources of news.

This aligns with Newman et al. (2022), who found that younger audiences gravitate towards more accessible and visually engaging formats. In the 2022 Reuters Digital Report, Newman et al. (2022) mention that younger audiences have moved to video-first sites such as TikTok, which has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in modern history. Furthermore, Newman et al. (2022, p.42) stated that "existing platforms like Instagram" have been gaining markedly in popularity among young audiences.

Similarly, in a study that was conducted by Schwaiger et al. (2022), 19 young adults from Switzerland aged between 20 and 25 years old were surveyed and it was revealed that participants lean more towards news that is attractively packaged. According to the report, they prefer content that is accompanied by audio-visual formats that are easily understandable and integrate into everyday life.

In the same way, in this study, the sample expressed a strong preference for visual content, with some respondents suggesting that news organisations should focus on short-form video content, which was described as a strong way for young people to connect and engage with the news. According to Newman et al. (2022), TikTok and Instagram are providing more visual content, optimised for younger audiences. Respondents also mentioned a "short attention span", an issue mentioned by Subramanian (2017, p. 85), who highlighted "shrinking attention span" as one of the challenges that have been brought by the digital age. While social media is preferred by this cohort, they still value credibility and suggest that news shared on social media platforms should be delivered by verified accounts.

When it comes to traditional news platforms, SABC News, eNCA and the BBC are still relevant. However, it is important to note that a smaller number of respondents consume the news through the television. Therefore, these outlets are usually accessed through their online platforms, rather than traditional television. The radio is also a source of news for some respondents and is usually consumed during their daily commute to and from school. As stated by Flamingo (2019), this generation doesn't look to traditional media as the best or only source.

Impact of Societal Events

The research clearly shows that this cohort is influenced by key political and societal events. A number of respondents expressed how the conflict between Israel and Palestine has affected the way in which they engage with news. Additionally, the conflict has also influenced their perceptions of the media and the organisations they support.

According to Newman et al. (2022), younger people increasingly choose to avoid the news. The scholar states that younger audiences say the news has a negative effect on their mood. "In particular, the longstanding criticism of the depressing or overwhelming nature of news persists in young people. For instance, in the UK, two-thirds (64%) of news avoiders under 35 say the news brings down their mood," Newman et al. (2022, p.43) Too much coverage of politics and Covid-19 has contributed to news avoidance (Newman et al, 2022).

Several respondents in this survey have expressed feeling overwhelmed by what they have seen in the news, including Covid-19 coverage and being presented with too much information. Respondent 22 said they were spending too much time on social media during the pandemic. “It was hard not to be on your phone, but it was so sad and taxing to keep seeing the same kind of stories and information and no way of escaping it because my algorithm was just about that,” the Respondent said.

In the Reuters Digital News Report, a respondent told Newman et al. (2022) that they try and limit the amount of negative news they consume, especially first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and that they don’t want it to affect their day or make them worry.

Another issue highlighted by some of the individuals surveyed is the heaviness that comes with consuming crime stories. Some respondents mentioned issues related to gender-based violence and rape, which leave negative effects on them.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Generation Z values credibility when it comes to news consumption and prefer news outlets that they can trust. They have expressed that misinformation is a concern in some instances, especially on digital platforms, and they are more discerning when engaging with news content. Some respondents have encouraged news organisations to be more transparent about their sources and fact-checking processes, to be clear about fact and opinion and to avoid bias in their reporting.

This view is also affirmed by Newman et al. (2022), who observe that some younger people are wary of bias from mainstream news brands. This, according to Newman et al. (2022), tends to push them away from consuming news altogether. One respondent told the scholar in the 2022 Reuters Digital Report: “I do not think anything is 100% reliable in the mainstream media. You can never think that is the absolute truth, because we are not sure of anything” (Newman et al., 2022). Another respondent pointed out that a lot of the time, mainstream news can be very biased or politically motivated” (Newman et al., 2022). This makes it hard to decipher its credibility, according to the respondent.

Recommendations

The sample highlighted various ways in which the news organisations or media platforms can make news more appealing, trustworthy or accessible to this generation. According to the insights, more tailored approaches are needed to cater to this age group's media consumption preferences.

Relate the news to young people's lives.

Some participants noted the importance of news being relevant to their age group. Their view is that news organisations should demonstrate how issues impact their generation and present stories around events that resonate with them directly.

"Link the news to how it impacts [people] my age," Respondent one shared. Respondent 41 suggests that news outlets should "add more topics that influence the youth". "Make news more relevant and explain how the events happening are affecting us," added Respondent 53, with Respondent 60 echoing their sentiments, sharing: "Media platforms should emphasise news information on their platforms and conversation that concern the youth."

Less bias, more transparency.

Among respondents, there was a concern about bias in news reporting. They called for news outlets to practice more objectivity and transparency in their reporting. "They [media organisations] should stop being biased," Respondent three pointed out. "News platforms can try to be more transparent on the resources used to create their news reports and by doing so, make it easier for the consumers to cross-check the facts from the opinions," Respondent 14 said.

Respondent 22 suggested that there should be a clearer distinction between facts and opinions. "If facts were simply told rather than the reporter/writer writing with their agenda in mind. We can tell, through the use of emotional words when a reporter or writer has an opinion on the 'facts' they are presenting," the respondent shared.

"State what sources are factual and scientific, as well as flag opinionated articles which use language aimed at swaying a narrative in a certain direction, so as to make people aware of any

unconscious biases they could gain from such articles," Respondent 27 added. Respondent 45 called for "more fact-checking that is transparent".

Shorter and more concise news.

Several respondents pointed out their shorter attention span. For this reason, some participants requested shorter, more digestible news summaries. Respondent three suggested: "Make shorter news summaries because my generation has a very short attention span."

Respondent 19 also highlights their age group's attention span, mentioning that the long news stories don't interest them. The participant requested a quicker way to consume media, backed by a more detailed version for those who are looking for in-depth details. "Give summaries on the major topics so that those interested can look it up on their own accord," Respondent 33 shared. News articles that are concise and focus on necessary facts, according to respondent 88, should be prioritised.

More social media presence.

A number of respondents emphasised the need for news organisations to focus on social media as a dissemination platform for news. They specifically mentioned platforms that are popular with Generation Z, such as Instagram and TikTok. Respondent five shared: "Gen Z consumes lots of information through social media. To engage with us they should increase their social media presence." Respondent 16 believes that moving news to TikTok and Instagram would make news more appealing as this is where their generation spends "every second of their free time".

Respondent 18, on the other hand, believes that these news on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram would be more credible if they came from verified accounts. This is important for maintaining trustworthiness.

This cohort also wants news that is visual on social media platforms. "Use TikTok and Instagram but it should be a verified news account," said Respondent 23. According to Respondent 21, the shift to video medium is important. "Short form news content can be a great hook for young people, allowing them to discover news stories which they can then read deeper into if they are

interested/affected." Respondent 22 shared the same sentiments, adding: "My generation likes visual imagery, like videos and photos."

Respondent 59 believes that more social media integration could be effective if news organisations had their own apps that would allow audiences to tailor content to their interests.

Make language and tone appealing.

Some respondents are not interested in overly formal language when it comes to news reporting. This, according to them, can be off-putting to their generation. They suggested that news organisations should use language that is more relatable and conversational to make the content easier to understand.

Respondent 94 noted: "Use easy to read and understand English, eliminate unnecessary jargon." This sentiment was echoed by Respondent 88: "Reporting the news in my age group's jargon," they said. Respondent 89 suggested: "Lay out the information in a manner that prevents it from looking like a large sum of words to intake in a few seconds."

Accessibility

Making news more accessible is another suggestion from respondents. They mentioned the need to make news freely available online, or, according to Respondent 27, offer student discounts on subscriptions. Respondent 21 proposed removing paywalls, "as many young people are unwilling/unable to pay for news subscriptions". They acknowledged that "this is, of course, easier said than done".

Build content strategies.

News organisations can create content strategies that can not only attract this market, but also turn them into loyal consumers of their content. This should include content that resonates with them and that they care about. Flamingo (2019), states that news organisations wishing to better engage with younger audiences face five challenges, namely, access and ease of use; third-party spaces; building habits; relevance; and point of view.

According to Flamingo (2019, 48), 'access of ease' refers to the type of content that responds to audience frustration around complicated or long news stories, "particularly those that require sufficient background information or knowledge to engage with".

When it comes to 'third party spaces', Flamingo (2019, p.50) observes: "Audiences feel that news content on third party platforms have not been designed for how they use the platforms, are often trying to get them off the platform and onto another ('click-bait'), and/or feel inauthentic to the news brand". It mostly fails to mimic content that is native to the platform, while news content that does do well in 'third-party spaces' feels authentically part of the platform where the audience finds it. "This content enhances instead of detracting from the user's experience of the platform" Flamingo (2019).

With regard to 'building habits', Flamingo (2019) suggests two ways in which content in this area encourages and facilitates habitual consumption: Attempts to bring back conventional news habits and cultivate new ones aligned with today's lifestyle.

The fourth element is 'relevance'. Here, Flamingo (2019) points out that audiences want news that feels relevant to their lives. This was also highlighted by several respondents in the study, who mentioned that news should be linked to how it connects to people in their age group.

Lastly, Flamingo (2019) talks about 'point of view' and discusses how audiences expressed concern about news organisations' tendency to force their own ideology on the reader. This point encourages news outlets to present the facts, instead of opinions, and to allow the audience to come up with their own opinions.

Tailor content for social media platforms.

Newman et al. (2022) note that 39% of social natives (ages 18-24) use social media as their main source of news. Data in this study has shown that Generation Z prefers to consume news via visually-appealing social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, with video content as one of the preferred formats.

Dlamini and Daniels (2023) point out a challenge faced by South African news organisations. In their research, they focused on three media houses: Media24, Independent News and Media, and Arena Holdings. The scholars found that the three organisations' news outlets "are not investing in strategies to reposition themselves adequately within the changing media landscape".

News organisations should find young people where they are and create news content that is visually appealing, engaging and interactive, specifically tailored for each social media platform.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study sought to answer three research questions: Generation Z's preferred news sources and formats, how they are impacted by societal events, and how they make sense of credibility and trust in news and how that affects their consumption habits.

The research revealed that this audience consumes news in two ways: passively and actively. While some intentionally look for news, others stumble upon it on social media and consume news that they are served by the algorithm. On average, this cohort spends 1-2 hours a day on news consumption, engaging on a variety of news topics including politics, current affairs, entertainment, sports, and financial news. Digital platforms are the preferred method of consumption for this generation.

While Generation Z is aware of what is happening in the country and the world, they also tend to feel overwhelmed by news, especially topics related to crime, disease outbreaks, and social injustice. This type of content affects how they engage with the news, with some choosing to avoid it altogether due to "too much information" and "negative" content. The genocide in Gaza had an impact on them. When engaging with content related to the genocide, respondents felt emotionally drained. News about the genocide has been widely covered by online publications and on social media platforms, with some people even sharing graphic images of bombings and dead bodies. It is not surprising that being exposed to such content has resulted in some participants feeling overwhelmed. While there was also a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness among respondents, this major news event inspired others to make bold statements, such as becoming pro-Palestine and also boycotting organisations that are known to support Israel.

Another pattern found in the research is that this cohort tends to avoid news when it becomes too heavy or negative. This is an attempt to protect their mental health. COVID-19 news coverage impacted some respondents negatively, as thousands of deaths were reported around the world. Not only that, but some people lost friends and family members, and the losses were amplified in the news and on social media platforms. This, in turn, made it challenging for some respondents

to ‘escape’ as major platforms carried Covid-19 news. Another topic that tends to impact this cohort negatively is news about gender-based violence (GBV).

Additionally, the study has found that Generation Z consumes news that directly affects their lives, whether in their capacity as students or as South African citizens. This was shown in the examples they provided, such as keeping up with the load-shedding developments; elections; current affairs; and crime. They don’t only want to read or engage with the news, but there is also a need to know how the news they are engaging with impacts or changes their lives. As highlighted by respondent 88, keeping up with crime-related news helps them to be more cautious.

As the news media landscape continues to change, audiences’ news consumption habits are also evolving. The shifting dynamics between traditional and digital platforms were explored in this study. One of the key findings is that social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram, have become the go-to platforms for news among younger audiences. While this has been revealed in previous studies such as the Reuters Digital Report, this study insight is significant as it focuses on the South African context.

Credibility, trustworthiness, and transparency are major points that this generation looks out for when consuming the news. They opt to turn to platforms that they trust, such as News24 as a credible source, or social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, that align with their consumption preferences.

Another key takeaway from this study is that while Generation Z could be perceived as an audience that opts for entertainment content, they do engage with topics outside of that category, such as politics, current affairs, and crime. The genocide in Gaza is a major example of how deeply connected this generation is to news around the world, and how some news events shape and influence their decisions. There is also a habit of sharing and discussing the news with peers, stemming from the belief that this sparks healthy and meaningful debates. This audience believes that staying informed about what is happening around them makes them better citizens.

This study was aimed at understanding the news consumption habits of the Generation Z audience. For the research, 100 students from the University of the Witwatersrand were surveyed. While participants represented different races, socio-economic backgrounds, and different years of study, they were chosen mainly based on their classification as Generation Z. This research has shed light on how this cohort consumes the news, which platforms they prefer when consuming the news, and also highlighted their concerns around credibility and trust in news, and how that affects their news consumption.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that there is still an appetite for news among younger audiences. They are not disengaged but rather prefer to engage through platforms that tailor content in a visually engaging way. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of digital news literacy. It illustrates that for Generation Z, news consumption is deeply emotional, and not just passive. It is influenced by a need to stay informed about what's happening in the country and globally. While they engage with news, this cohort is also intentional about protecting their mental well-being and tends to stay away from traumatic or heavy topics.

These findings contribute to media studies and journalism by challenging existing views on audience apathy, especially where this cohort is concerned. Instead, they point to a more nuanced form of news engagement that requires more credible, engaging, objective storytelling from media organisations. Future researchers could focus on Generation Z throughout the country and explore if there is an appetite for Generation Z-only news platforms. This is based on the data presented in the study, revealing that this cohort engages with news content that directly impacts their lives and issues that they resonate with.

Chapter 7: References

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your ethnic group?
4. Where do you reside?
5. Do you have access to the internet outside school premises?
6. How much time do you spend on consuming the news in one day?
7. Why do you consume the news?
8. Which news topics do you consume the most?
9. Do you actively look for news?
10. What is a news topic that you recently engaged with that you
11. Do you share news you find interesting with the people around
12. How would you define news?
13. Which digital or social media platforms do you use to access news content?
14. Which news sources or websites do you trust and frequently visit for news?
15. How often do you consume news through traditional media sources such as newspapers, TV, or radio?
16. How often do you actively seek out news information or stay updated on current events?
17. What types of news topics or issues are most relevant or interesting to you, and why do you find them compelling?
18. Have there been any significant news stories or events that have impacted your beliefs, values, or actions? Could you elaborate on how these news stories influenced you?
19. Do you think news consumption is essential for being an informed citizen or for participating in societal discussions? Why or why not?
20. How do you think news consumption among your peers or within your social circle influences discussions and interactions?
21. Have you ever felt overwhelmed or disengaged from news due to the volume of information available or the nature of news content? If so, what factors contributed to these feelings?

22. What could news organisations or media platforms do to make news content more appealing, trustworthy, or accessible to individuals of your age group?