Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Bachelor in Global Communication

Final Bachelor Thesis

Infodemic and News Consumption in Young Adults: Incidental News Exposure on TikTok and Instagram Reels

Student: Martín Fernández Martínez

Supervisor: Prof.ª D.ª Isabel Escribano Bourgoin

Madrid, April 2024

Abstract

In the age of digital media, the influence of platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels on news consumption is increasingly significant, especially among young adults. This thesis explores the crucial role that these platforms play in shaping the news landscape in an 'infodemic' context, where an excess of information is the norm. It delves into how young people, deeply connected, and accustomed to unique formats such as vertical video and operational modes of TikTok and Instagram Reels such as "infinite scrolling" navigate their news consumption.

The focus is on understanding their preferences, attitudes, and how they engage with incidental news content within these algorithm-driven environments. Then, it examines the level of trust young adults place in news obtained through these new, influential content recommendation and visualization systems. Literature on this topic remains relatively new and not extensively explored given TikTok's recent emergence and the introduction of Instagram Reels in 2020.

Keywords: Infodemic, Social Media, TikTok, Instagram Reels, Trust in news, News Consumption, Incidental Exposure

Resumen

En la era de los medios digitales, la influencia de plataformas como TikTok e Instagram Reels en el consumo de noticias es cada vez más significativa, especialmente entre los adultos jóvenes. Este trabajo de fin de grado explora el papel crucial que desempeñan estas plataformas en la configuración del panorama informativo en un contexto "infodémico" en el que el exceso de información es la norma. Profundiza en cómo los jóvenes, profundamente conectados y acostumbrados a formatos únicos como el vídeo vertical y a modos operativos de TikTok e Instagram Reels como el "desplazamiento infinito", navegan en su consumo de noticias.

La atención se centra en comprender sus preferencias, actitudes y la forma en que se relacionan con el contenido informativo incidental dentro de estos entornos impulsados por algoritmos. A continuación, este estudio examina el nivel de confianza que los jóvenes adultos depositan en las noticias obtenidas a través de estos nuevos y complejos sistemas de recomendación y visualización de contenidos. La bibliografía sobre este tema sigue siendo relativamente reciente y no se ha explorado ampliamente dada la reciente aparición de TikTok y la introducción de Instagram Reels en 2020.

Palabras clave: Infodemia, Redes Sociales, TikTok, Instagram Reels, Confianza en las noticias, Consumo de Noticias, Exposición Incidental

Table of Contents:

I.   Introduction

A.   Historical context, non-traditional media and infodemic

In the current digital era, news consumption has undergone a drastic revolution. As Casero-Ripollés (2012, p.151) pointed out: "News consumption is in a process of major mutations due to the advance of digitalization". Since 2012, audience patterns were beginning to experience even more profound transformations that significantly altered traditional dynamics. Indeed, these transformations are reaching content production, business models, distribution strategies, and even work routines (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p.152).

Historically, the media have been constantly evolving. As early as the 1990s, there were noticeable changes in the way news were consumed compared to earlier times. Fernández (2010, p. 135) illustrates this change through the survey carried out by George Gallup in 1965, which showed that 71% of Americans had read a newspaper the day before the poll, while 25 years later, only 43% did so. While newspapers were traditionally considered one of the most important sources of news for young people (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p.153), many authors began to highlight a noticeable decrease in the number of younger audiences reading the press at the turn of the millennium. An example of this can be the study by Lauf (2001, p.241) which concluded that young readers were indeed progressively "vanishing".

The results of current studies reveal that, indeed, non-traditional media are growing as preferred news sources compared to traditional media, such as radio, television or, most notably, the printed press (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p.153). Moreover, as stated in the Reuters Digital News Report 2023, recent events such as the war of Russia against Ukraine or the coronavirus pandemic (Newman et al., 2023, p.10) have accelerated structural changes toward a world dominated by more digitalized media environments. In the specific case of Spain, for the first time in 2022, more people accessed the internet than people watched television (AIMC, 2023, p.11-63) and the print media sector continued its decline, with a loss of around 60% of its total readership in the last decade (AIMC, 2023, p.12). All of this shows the changes in people's preferences most notably those of young adults.

But, in addition to these changes in the modes of news consumption, it is also important to highlight that the current information context is characterized by an unprecedented flow of information. As Casero-Ripollés (2012, p. 154) points out, we live in a world of "information overabundance", which many experts refer to as "infodemic". In this current panorama, the exponential growth in the amount of information is largely due to an increase in information outlets. This growth allows today's younger generations to access a broader range of platforms to get news and, as a result, they obtain an information diet that is much more varied and diverse in both its sources and content.

B.   Predominance of mobile devices and digital content

As mentioned above, information consumption preferences are constantly evolving. In recent years, this transformation process has been accompanied by a significant increase in the use of mobile devices, which have become one of the main channels for accessing news content. Amoedo (2023, p. 109) highlights in his study that seven out of ten individuals, use their smartphone as the main channel to consult news digitally. In fact, smartphone use has been on the rise in the face of the decline of other devices such as the computer. As a matter of fact, according to the *Digital News Report* of the University of Navarra in 2023, the use of computers by adults in Spain to access news fell by approximately 36 percentage points from 2014 to 2023, while conversely, the trend for smartphone usage has been clearly positive, with an increase of approximately 22 percentage points between 2014 and 2023 (Amoedo, 2023, p.110). However, besides their positive and negative trends, both devices remain ahead of other types of gadgets in terms of usage for news-gathering activities, such as tablets, connected TVs, smartwatches, and smart speakers (Amoedo, 2023, p.110).
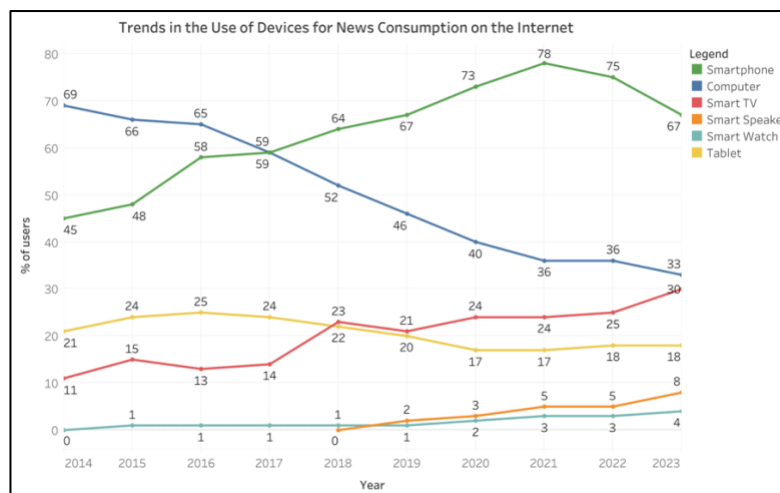
Figure 1 Source: Self-made on Tableau Public © with Amoedo (2023) data

It is important to note that emerging trends in news consumption by 18–24-year-olds, such as the increased use of podcasts, news aggregators, or newspaper apps, among others, are intrinsically linked to the prevalence of mobile device users mentioned in the previous paragraph. In fact, according to Newman et al. (2023, p.10) only one-fifth of respondents in the 2023 *Reuters Digital News Report* (22% of participants) prefer to start their daily news experience directly through a website or traditional media application, which represents a 10-percentage point drop from 2018. That is particularly evident in younger age groups who show a weaker connection to traditional news channels and prefer to access news through indirect channels, such as social networks, podcasts, or news aggregators. In fact, data shows that traditional online media remained with a consistently low percentage of use from 2016 to 2023, at around 20 % of the surveyed users, while online media, including social networks, have seen a considerable increase in their use from 38% in 2016 to 49 % in 2022 (Casais et al., 2023, p.78).

Figure 2. Source: Self-made on Tableau Public © with Casais et al. (2023) data

Several studies also highlight the importance that young adults give to digital media for gathering news. Some of these studies show that this population group, despite maintaining some contact with traditional media, considers the internet to be a "fundamental space" (Jiménez et al., 2018, p.26) to access news 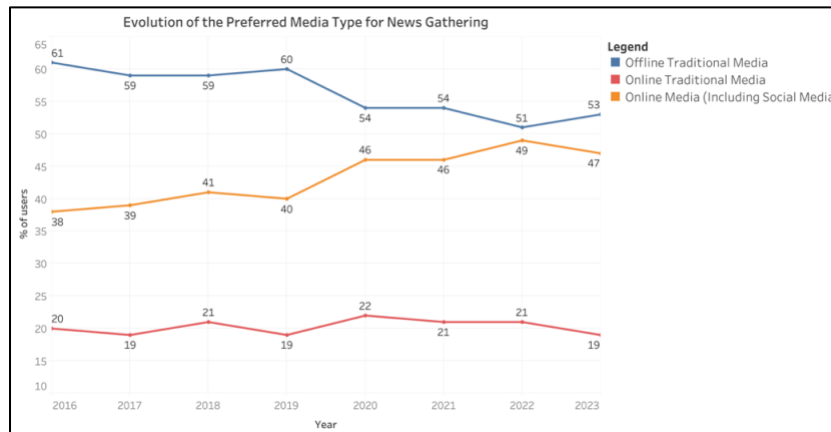and often values it as a "more relevant channel" than "other traditional channels" such as television. Many individuals highlight the instantaneousness of access to information, the possibility of selecting content based on personal interest, or also, among others, due to the constant updating of data and the permanent and flexible availability of it (Jiménez et al., 2018, p.25). In line with some of the above arguments, Gangadharbatla et al. point out in their study that digital platforms, by giving users greater control over the content they see, provide greater flexibility in their news-seeking behaviour allowing information to find users as much as they seek it, in other words, there is a move away from the "one-way search" of online information (Gangadharbatla et al., 2014, p. 59) allowing it to be found in active and passive manners.

C.   Role of social media in news consumption

Regarding social networks, since their very beginning, they have been consolidating as a strong force in the new paradigm of news consumption, especially among younger population groups. Boczkowski et al. (2017, p. 1787) point to a direct correlation between the proliferation of the use of mobile devices on the one hand and the increase in news consumption on social networks on the other. Indeed, establishing this connection is essential to understand the intensification of these platforms use to get news in today's highly interconnected world. Chen & Peng (2022, p. 331) explain that the uses and gratifications theory assumes that people select and consume different media to satisfy their psychological and social needs such as social interaction, entertainment or even relaxation. Therefore, when applied to social networks, it helps to explain why some of them have become favoured by certain social groups for these purposes.

The *Reuters Digital News Report 2023* highlights that social networks are gaining considerable ground in the daily lives of young people. In fact, 60 % of respondents in that study used Instagram "in the last week", followed by WhatsApp with 54 %, TikTok and Facebook with 38 %, and finally Twitter (today named "X") with 33 % (Newman et al.,

2023, p.12). Moreover, also along the same lines, the report "Juventud en España 2020", concluded that most Spanish young adults aged 18-25 used their mobile phones mainly to access social networks, with figures amounting to 95.6 % of respondents, rather than to listen to music, watch films, intentionally search for news on the web, play videogames or chat with friends. This shows the great importance given to these new platforms.

When examining news consumption on social media across all age groups in Spain, Amoedo (2023, p. 76) notes that, despite a general declining trend in news consumption across all media types, social networks remain the second largest news source, with weekly usage around 50% among participants, just behind television at around 60%. Within the 18-24 age group, Casais et al. (2023, p.78) highlight that social media exceeds television by 13 percentage points, the dominant category for this demographic. Furthermore, the data showing social media as the second most significant news source across all age groups implies that older population segments are the ones contributing more to the increase of the figures showing the use of traditional sources like newspapers, magazines, and radio (Casais et al., 2023, p. 78).

Social networks were not originally intended to be exclusive platforms for news dissemination (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017, p.2461), and today are probably still not, as most people use them to communicate with each other or for entertainment purposes. However, according to Fletcher and Nielsen (2017, p.2461), the functionalities that these networks are acquiring, and their growing popularity, have turned them into significant sources of news for many of their users. Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022, p. 3824) reinforce this idea by describing the sharing of news on social networks as a type of "social glue" and point out that these platforms have become essential tools for finding, consuming, and distributing news for more than 6 years now.

Among the whole conglomerate of social networks that exist and that are used for news consumption, two of them stand out. According to Newman et al. (2023, p.11), Instagram and TikTok are standing out for their constantly increasing use for news, with Instagram rising from 2 % to 14 % of users to obtain news since 2014, and TikTok experiencing a rise from 1 % to 6 % in just three years, from 2020 to 2023. In the case of Instagram, an acceleration can be seen from 2021 onwards, coinciding with the launch of the Instagram Reels format for content in August 2020 (Menon, 2022, p.1).
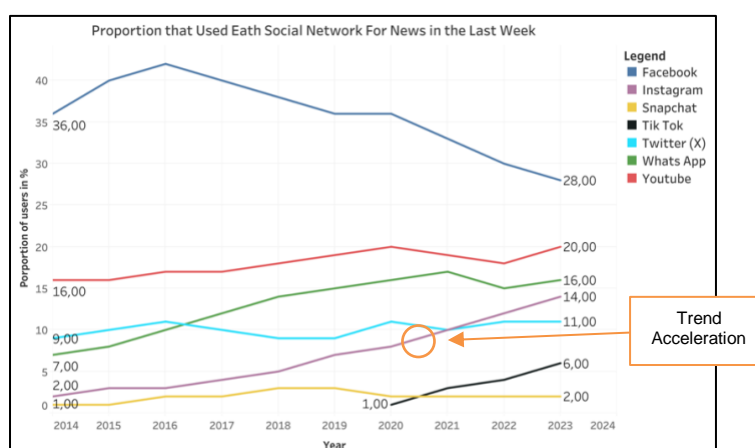

Figure 3. Source: Self-made on Tableau Public © with Newman et al. (2023) data

Moreover, in the case of Spain, the relevance of these applications is even more evident: Instagram, just after WhatsApp and Facebook, is positioned as the third main application for reading news (Casais et al., 2023, p.136). While Facebook and WhatsApp have experienced a loss of five percentage points in the last year, Instagram has, on the contrary, gained four percentage points (Newman et al., 2023, p.10), all ages combined. In addition, although TikTok accounts for half of Instagram's usage for these purposes, it shows a remarkable growth trend (Casais et al., 2023, p.136).

This phenomenon is seen in the news consumption habits of young people under 25 who, according to ElDiario.es (2022), prefer TikTok and Instagram to traditional media for information, suggesting a marked difference in channel preferences compared to previous generations. It should be noted that, despite the growing popularity of TikTok, many studies show that official news brand's presence on the platform is still limited. However, users seem to start following "news intermediaries" in the dissemination of news on the platform, indicating the importance of the "two-step-flow" phenomenon (Peña-Fernandez et al., 2022, p.10), and little by little these news companies are starting to join these new ways of communication as well. Although a widespread presence of established news brands on TikTok cannot still be seen, for the time being, users still seem to be accessing news. A study by Hagar & Diakopoulos (2023, p.15) indicates that one-third of TikTok users regularly turn to this platform for information.

D. Non-professional journalism

This clear evolution in the use of social media to obtain information has also led to a considerable transformation in the practice of journalism. It has redefined the role of traditional news producers and blurred the boundary between producers and consumers of information. Indeed, contemporary definitions of social media, mentioned by Kümpel et al. (2015, p. 3) and Carr & Hayes (2015, p. 49) highlight the central role of user-generated content, considering people not only as recipients of information but also as active creators of content. However, it should be noted that, as recognized in *The State of the News Media 2006 Report* (Fernandez, 2010, p. 135), this is not necessarily the end of journalism as such, but rather a transformation in the way individuals get informed about the events that are occurring around them.

A concept that quite adequately encapsulates this phenomenon is Hermida's concept of "ambient journalism", mentioned by Burns (2010) and Palmer & Toff (2022). He understands that social networks have become always-on information systems, facilitating a kind of collective intelligence among users that generate a constant flow of messages, which, although they do not require the full cognitive attention of other formats such as email, they do contribute over time to forming an overall mental picture of the news. Yet, the growing influence of celebrities, influencers, or personalities reporting through social media raises questions about the de-professionalisation of journalism. (Newman et al. (2023, p. 10) indicate that audiences are paying increasing attention to these non-traditional actors on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram as time goes by.

E. Media consumption's new landscape on social media

Within social networks, a phenomenon that is completely changing how we understand the consumption of news on these platforms is emerging. Indeed, the phenomenon of incidental news consumption is redefining the interaction that young people have with the information they receive through these channels. This trend has been boosted in recent years by the emergence of the so-called "infinite scrolling" and, lately, with the notorious inclusion of short video formats on social media, which have led to a certain blurring of the distinction between entertainment and news content. All these changes introduce a significant shift in the way content is consumed and shared.

In the past, these platforms used to recommend content based on the accounts followed directly by users, by the hashtags they voluntarily followed, or by other explicit user-controlled features. Today, however, this control has been reduced. On these new infinite scroll platforms based on the consumption of content in short video format, sophisticated recommendation algorithms have been incorporated so content is now much more personalized and selected based on users' instantaneous and intuitive reactions (Peña-Fernández et al., 2022). That generates a much more diverse, extensive, and less controlled audience than in the past while contributing to increasingly obtaining news in an incidental way, based more on the virality of the content and user interactions. In this sense, Peña-Fernández et al. (2022) and Menon (2022) underline the attractiveness of TikTok for digital natives highlighting its highly intuitive interface and its "algorithm-driven engagement" that promotes strong user engagement.

II. State of the art
A. Incidental news consumption
1. Concept and historical evolution

Historically, accessing news content has almost always been seen as an active pursuit, that is, understanding that people freely, and on their own initiative, decide what content to consume (Scheffauer et al., 2021, p.634). The concept of incidental news exposure (INE) came to challenge this traditional view. Several authors, such as Scheffauer et al. (2021, p. 634) and Schäfer (2023, p. 247), highlight in their studies that, despite conceptual variations among the different research that have used this concept, INE occurs when "users come into contact with the news while they are online for other reasons" (Schäfer, 2023, p. 247). This can include both searching for information unrelated to the news, which is often referred to as "intention-based INE" or stumbling upon it while searching for another news topic, which is often referred to as "topic-based INE" (Schäfer, 2023, p. 247). Other scholars also differentiate between incidental news contact (INC), which would refer merely to accidental encounters with news when it appears in a person's feed or "for-you-page" without further interaction with the content, while the concept of incidental news exposure (INE) goes a step further, and would also refer to the process of "coming into contact" with the incidental news, processing it and interacting with it, therefore, adding additional steps beyond the mere contact with the publication (Schäfer,

2023, p. 248). Conceptualizations have been many in recent years, especially since 2015, but naturally, they all refer to the same process of encountering a non-intended item by the individual in their process of online digital platform usage on their mobile devices.

As far as the historical evolution of the concept is concerned, it is important to mention the first contributions of Downs in 1958. In his work *An Economic Theory of Democracy* he introduced, on the one hand, the idea that citizens can obtain political information "accidentally" through their daily activities, such as reading, chatting with family or friends, or any other activity, and, on the other hand, he identified "sought-for" political information which, as the term suggests, would be the content sought more deliberately by each individual. Over time, as digital and social media have evolved, this initial pioneering distinction has progressively evolved into today's more modern concept of incidental news consumption.

Looking more closely at the history of INE research, the first scholars to incorporate the concept started investigating how individuals were incidentally exposed to the news while channel-switching for entertainment and watching programs on television. The focus was primarily on those who were less interested in the news and who were able to receive some news content when performing these channel-switching actions (Palmer & Toff, 2022, p. 3). Later, studies began to appear on how the different "media repertoires" that people had according to their tastes and viewing preferences influenced the amount of incidental content they would be exposed to (Palmer & Toff, 2022, p. 3). Many of these studies, for example, concluded that people would have a "set of preferred channels" through which they would switch while avoiding other channels, therefore, limiting their likelihood of being exposed to incidental news (Palmer & Toff, 2022, p. 3). Finally, during the last decade, and especially since the 2000s, with the rapid emergence of electronic devices and social networks, many scholars have been attracted by them. Most of their studies focused on the association and correlation between social media use and its impact on aspects of social life, such as political participation. However, the literature that focused specifically on incidental news consumption through social media has been more limited in recent years (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017, p. 2452).

Nonetheless, the concept of incidental news exposure seems to be taking a central role in understanding today's news consumption, especially among young social network users. As seen above, this age group individuals are more likely to consume new types of content through social networks, characterized by greater briefness, incidental consumption, and personalization. In fact, according to Scheffauer et al. (2021, p. 634), the number of users who claim to obtain information "by accident" on social networks is increasing, which has led to coining the term "news-find-me perception". Although it is very illustrative, some scholars proceeded to a more academic definition. Among all of them, the definition by Gil de Zúñiga et al. stands out:

> *"The extent to which individuals believe they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs — despite not actively following the news — through general internet use, information received from peers, and connections within online social*

networks".

Based on this definition, it is simply the perception by people that the "news finds them" and that they do not need to carry out their own research to find informative material. As the authors point out, it should be noted that it does not mean that young people are not interested in current affairs, but rather that they have the sensation of not needing to actively find the news. They are already automatically provided through the channels they consult on a day-to-day basis. Research by Boczkowski et al. (2017, p. 1785) provides evidence of this trend, especially amongst younger readers. In their study on news consumption on social networks in Argentina, they found that most young people consume news on their mobile devices as part of their regular use of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter for general purposes: "They find the news, rather than searching for them" (Boczkowski et al., 2017, p. 1785). Moreover, one of the poignant conclusions of these scholars was that the algorithmic logic of these platforms made the news they received incidentally "almost indistinguishable" from the rest of the content they consumed, in other words, the content "becomes part of the users' own experience" (Boczkowski et al., 2017, p. 1785).

2.   Infinite scrolling inclusion and algorithm relevance

Incidental consumption of news has become a common phenomenon, especially among young adults using social networks such as Instagram Reels and TikTok. Indeed, the default or intended user experience on these platforms as of 2021 is marked by the so-called "for you page", an interface that, according to Hagar and Diakopoulos (2023, p.1-2), is driven by an algorithmic recommendation system that generates a personalized feed based on: (1) user interactions, such as likes and comments; (2) content details, such as hashtags or sounds; and (3) other data such as device or account details, language or country of location. Therefore, this page does not require users to necessarily follow or interact with specific accounts for their content to appear in the feed (Hagar and Diakopoulos, 2023, p. 2). Cardenal et al. (2019), cited by Park & Lee (2023), describe this phenomenon as "pre-selected personalization".

In a TikTok research, Peña-Fernandez et al. (2022) observed that journalistic content blends with entertainment within the "continuous stream" of videos that parade before users, that is, "infinite scrolling", the action of the user sliding from one video to another without a predetermined end. The mix of information and entertainment often leans towards the superficial, even on journalists' accounts, and short informative content coexists with challenges and humorous content with no explicit journalistic intent.

This user experience is reinforced by what Casais et al. (2023, p.116) describe as a predominant access to news through recommendation "algorithms" in social networks. One of the figures shown in this study is that most adult users in Spain access news through these algorithms. The continuous interaction with this recommended content, without an active search, suggests that the content searched for directly is less relevant compared to the content found passively. A total of 58 % of adult Spanish users confirmed in this study

that they obtained news through algorithms, which is 8 percentage points higher than those who directly accessed a news website or app to obtain the information. Furthermore, the report reveals that for young adults aged 18-24, the proportion of news received via algorithms is the highest compared to other age groups (Casais et al., 2023, p.117).
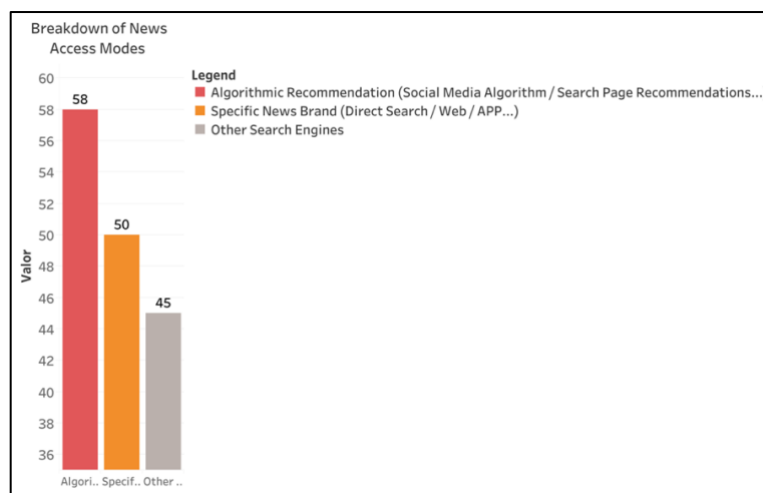

Figure 4. Source: Self-made on Tableau Public © with Casais et al. (2023) data

3. Algorithmic impact on filter bubble creation through INE

The concept of "filter bubbles" in social media refers to how these platforms use algorithms to personalize content based on each user's preferences. This customization can restrict exposure to diverse topics and viewpoints. Experts, such as Chen & Peng (2022, p.332), have explored this phenomenon, noting that social networks' "affordances" encourage users to engage in similar experiences and connect with content and people who share their opinions. This creates a virtual environment where users are more likely to encounter opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs. Fletcher and Nielsen (2017, p.2452-2453) support this viewpoint, pointing out that social media's rise has created concerns about "echo chambers" where people are exposed mainly to viewpoints they agree with. The combination of self-selected content and sophisticated algorithms can further narrow this exposure, thus, leading users to more biased content (Takano et al., 2021, p.3836) while hiding opposing views. These issues have led to significant empirical research, particularly regarding how social media exposure to different political ideas affects political knowledge and participation. Fletcher and Nielsen (2017, p.2452-2453) have contributed to this research, highlighting the need to understand the impact of social media on political discourse and engagement.

However, these concerns regarding filter bubbles in social media haven't been fully resolved, and many questions remain only partially answered. This is partly because it's a relatively new area of research. Additionally, the constantly changing design of social networks and the opacity surrounding their algorithms, which are complex and not publicly disclosed, complicate in-depth analysis. For these reasons, studies on the impact of filter bubbles offer varied results. Fletcher & Nielsen (2017, p. 2452-3) reference researchers like Messing and Westwood, who found that social networks often provide politically diverse information thereby diminishing the impact of filter bubbles and selective

exposure. Conversely, Flaxman et al., also cited by Fletcher & Nielsen, noted that while social network users tend to have more polarized views, they still encounter content from different political perspectives. While other research including, for instance, a study using vast quantities of Facebook's data, indicates that selective exposure does indeed influence user experiences, leading to slightly less exposure to news from politically differing sources. That is mainly due to political homophily and, to a lesser extent, Facebook's algorithms (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017, p. 2452-3).

B.   Transition to a hybrid news consumption paradigm

Within the evolving mode of news consumption among young adults, numerous studies have been reporting a trend towards a "hybrid approach" in which the incidental information received on social media is combined with the greater depth offered by other types of media, including traditional media sources. It is worth noting, as several scholars point out, that this new consumption pattern does not imply directly abandoning traditional sources, but rather integrating traditional and non-traditional sources, with digital media acting as a springboard or starting point toward a more thorough understanding (Jimenez et al., 2018, p.23).

As seen in the previous section on incidental news consumption, different authors have developed different classifications of INE types depending on whether it is only a brief exposition, whether there is a greater thinking process, etc. These classifications can become even more important when trying to determine the user's reaction to this type of content. As seen in the study by Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2020, p.3), users, after a casual encounter with a news item that attracts their attention, may first opt for an "active path" that leads them to engage with it, for example, by accessing a link to read a full article on the topic. Alternatively, after exposure to this type of content through the feed, the person could proceed with an automatic scroll to the next publication, thus ignoring the content to which they have been exposed, or, on the contrary, they could take "an incidental path" (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020, p.3) which is what these authors call "snaking on the news", making only a superficial approximation to it. This involves superficially analysing the information of the publication they have incidentally received without actively seeking further information through a link or making a deliberate personal search to deepen or contrast their knowledge through other means (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020, p.3-4).

Young people's approach to news, as highlighted by Jiménez et al. (2018, p.28), is no longer characterized by a direct and deliberate search for information and studies have underlined that a model of rapid surveillance and access to traditional media has emerged, delving deeper only when a news item "resonates with particular force in the individual's mind" (Jimenez et al., 2020, p.3). This growing consumption pattern has been corroborated by Gangadharbatla et al., who noted that young people often find out about the news on social media and then they rely "on traditional sources for confirmation" (Gangadharbatla et al., 2014, p.59). This not only highlights this hybrid consumption but also shows the persistent relevance of traditional media in the newsgathering of young adults.

C. Digital age scepticism

Although young adults have historically considered news as important in civic terms (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p. 151), and as an essential element for a good social life, news consumption patterns have been changing significantly among people in this age range. Although Jiménez et al. (2018, p. 23) highlighted that interest in the news had not diminished among young adults, other studies seem to suggest that traditional news channels are failing to meet their expectations. Casero-Ripollés elaborates on this last idea, arguing that the decreasing figures of news consumption among the young public, and in particular, the reading of newspapers, is not only due to apathy towards the information or a generalized disinterest but rather, in most cases, to dissatisfaction with how information is presented, especially in conventional media, an argument supported by scholars such as Costea, Tuñez or Raeymaeckers, among others (Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p.151). This lack of communication has led young people to turn away from traditional press and seek information presented in other ways in other media, such as social networks and other. This phenomenon is supported by various studies that have detected young people's preference for non-repetitive news agendas, in which a negative view of reality is not predominant, and which are free of politicized opinions (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022, p. 3836).

However, despite the existence of numerous studies that support that young people's interest in news has not diminished, several other studies detect a rise in scepticism towards online news. For example, in a study conducted by Qayyum et al. (2010) in a university environment, they found through interviews that students were highly distrustful of information found online and presented a lack of credibility and trust. Some of them even reported that much of the content was of "low quality". This scepticism has probably intensified with the multiplication of channels and sources of information (Qayyum et al., 2010, p.189).

In addition to the scepticism, more recent studies seem to indicate that since 2016, the proportion of Spaniards who do not use any source of information has grown, a figure that is just as important among the young adult population. A report found that the percentage of Spaniards who did not use any information source increased from 1% in 2016 to 7% in 2023, reflecting a growing disconnection from the news (Casais et al., 2023, p. 84). Similarly, studies such as those by Newman et al., show that the number of individuals "very" or "extremely interested" in news has declined in some countries including Spain, and those who are "interested" lost 34 percentage points between 2015 and 2023. In addition, a high percentage of news consumers indicate that they avoid the news, either completely, restricting their consumption to certain topics or showing more interest in more "positive" or "solution-based" journalism (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11). Globally, trust in news has declined in all markets, especially among young people. Newman et al. (2023, p.10) note that, on average, only four in ten people say they trust news, which is a drop of 2 percentage points in the past year.

III.   Theoretical framework
A.   Gatekeeping theory in the 21st century

The concept of gatekeeping, according to Shoemaker et al. (2013, p.3), is fundamental to understanding how news is selected and disseminated around the world. Indeed, as mentioned throughout this paper, the news world is amid an infodemic and of the countless events that occur daily, only a few subsequently become news, which is where gatekeeping comes into play. As highlighted by these authors, the theory focuses on two fundamental statements: (1) an innumerable number of events occur in everyday life and (2) the media outlets used to communicate are unable to cover all events in their totality. In this line of thinking, information must go through "decision points" called "gates" and those who decide whether information goes through these gates are the so-called "gatekeepers" (Shoemaker et al., 2013, p.3). Any person, organization or other can be considered a gatekeeper: "anyone who has information about the event and decides to pass it to another person or organization" (Shoemaker et al., 2013, p.3).

In terms of the historical evolution of this theory, in the 1940s and 1950s literature began to be written about it. The idea has its roots in the study of Kurt Lewin (1947), who initially introduced it in the context of his study on the factors influencing the food consumption of American families in the post-World War II context. Lewin found that different "gatekeepers" were responsible for determining what was ultimately consumed in households, for example, the actors with relevant decision-making power within the household or in supermarkets. This idea was later extrapolated to media and news consumption and laid the groundwork for further research in this field (Shoemaker et al., 2013, p. 3). In the wake of this study, further research was carried out, for example by Hovland and colleagues who determined, in their study on persuasive factors, how the reception of messages is affected by external influences, the characteristics of the communicator or the situation. They revealed "how the choices of content creators - gatekeepers- can directly or indirectly sway audiences" (Shoemaker et al., 2013, p. 4). Finally, other related theories emerged as a result of the creation and deepening of the gatekeeping concept, such as the two-step-flow theory proposed by Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955), which suggested a "top-down" conceptualization in which information flows from the media to opinion leaders, and then through them to the general population, thereby, highlighting the role of intermediaries in the distribution of information (Shoemaker et al., 2013, p.4).

All these early approaches to the concept and theoretical developments had one idea in common: the traditional understanding that the role of gatekeepers was reserved for news organizations, news companies, and most notably, journalists as such. It was these actors who deliberately selected information and highlighted the news items that stood out from the rest to produce their articles. However, this traditional understanding of the gatekeeper has been changing, especially since the 21st century, with the emergence of new digital media. These platforms have resulted in more actors having the ability to determine which information is the most relevant, and thus moving away from the old concept of the "top-down path" (Shoemaker et al., 2012, p.3). Indeed, as Salonen &

Laaksonen (2023, p. 256) assert: "news organisations have lost their control as traditional gatekeepers in the digital news environment, as they can no longer solely decide which items are in or out of the public sphere", and as Chin-Fook & Simmonds (2011, p.7) claim, it would highlight the "multidirectional" nature of information flow in the digital age, where institutions, professional communicators, networked individuals, and ordinary people influence each other online through digital media. This shift implies that digital platforms allow for fewer filters and online gateways, leaving individuals to determine the veracity, what is newsworthy and what is important (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011, p.22). Wallace (2017) reinforces this shift by pointing to the involvement of non-journalistic actors in the creation of news content for social media, evidencing a de-professionalisation of journalism, an issue that has already been mentioned above.

In contrast to the belief that the advent of social networking would make the gatekeeping theory obsolete, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) assert its continued relevance. Indeed, they argue that although the internet seems limitless, information still passes through multiple 'gates' before it is published. Indeed, there seems to have always been "an obsession" with only understanding gatekeepers as natural persons, and few studies have considered adding other actors in the gatekeeping process, such as those by Bui in 2010; Diakopoulos in 2014 or Napoli in 2014 (Wallace, 2017, p.277). Thorson & Wells (2015, p.12) proposed a revised framework for understanding the new dimensions of content exposure brought about by changes in social structure and media today, thus, modifying the traditional understanding of gatekeepers. This framework considers the role of journalistic actors in content production and dissemination of information (gatekeeping) alongside other curation actors: individual media consumers, social networks and algorithms designed to shape the discovery and presentation of content in digital contexts. Similarly, Wallace in 2018 described the triadic relationship between platforms, news organisations and audiences in his model of digital gatekeeping, which considers four different actors: journalists, individual amateurs, strategic professionals, and algorithms (Salonen & Laaksonen, 2023, p.256).

In the context of the present investigation that aims to shed light on youth news consumption on TikTok and Instagram Reels with a focus on incidental news consumption, these modern theoretical variations of the gatekeeping theory become especially relevant because they consider algorithms as new gatekeeping actors. Algorithms select and disseminate information in a similar way to human gatekeepers (Wallace, 2017, p.277), but with the ability to process much larger volumes of data. These "problem-solving mechanisms" that assign in an "automated" manner relevance to certain pieces of information (Wallace, 2017, p.177), considerably affect what is highlighted in the "newsfeeds" (West, 2017, p.28-29) of platforms such as Facebook and in search engine results. Indeed, West (2017) elaborates on this idea by looking at how Facebook algorithms, for example, shape the content users are exposed to by ranking, channelling, promoting content, and, at times, censoring and deleting it (West, 2017, p.34). These systems thus act as a form of gatekeepers that can significantly influence political debate and have discriminatory effects (West, 2017, p.28-29). Thorson & Wells (2015, p. 19) introduced the idea of 'algorithmic curation', which is a process where algorithms filter and

select information, directly impacting how users discover and engage with news. This notion connects to the second objective of this paper which aims to analyse the use by young adults of infinite scrolling systems and incidental news.

Finally, discussing the negative impacts that the role of gatekeepers could have, some authors such as Thorson & Wells (2015, p. 20) suggest that algorithms can create 'filter bubbles', by overly personalizing information and potentially limiting exposure to a variety of perspectives. This view is relevant to the third objective of this paper which addresses young adults' degree of trust and engagement with news content. However, in an information-collapsed world, these negative views are also nuanced by some authors who claim that gatekeeping procedures can also help mitigate the effects of information overload in these new media by selecting information that is especially relevant to users and discarding information that is not (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2021, p. 1234).

Therefore, modern gatekeeping theory in the current era, with its emphasis on algorithms and new actors, provides a valuable theoretical framework for analysing how young adults interact with news through infinite scrolling on social networks by offering critical insights for understanding news consumption patterns.

B.   Uses and gratifications theory

The theory of uses and gratifications emerged mainly from the 1970s onwards, a time when the research focus began to shift from "analysing the impact of media on people" to "what people do with the media", thus providing a theoretical framework for understanding patterns of media use. Before that date, different authors such as Mendelsohn conducted studies determining, for example, the objectives and impact of radio use, such as: relaxation, changing moods, providing information, or increasing social interaction (Liu, 2015, p.72). However, the focus was anchored in the traditional study of "media effects" (Liu, 2015, p.72) which emanated from a "mechanistic perspective" that viewed audience members as passive and reactive, focusing only on the changes in thinking that could be observed, measured and based the short term, while always assuming a "direct media influence" on these audiences (Rubin, 2008, p.165).

The shift that occurred from the 1970s onwards was most likely due to the criticisms of expert scholars in the field of mass communication who had highlighted: (1) weak conceptual frameworks, (2) a lack of precision in major concepts, (3) a failure to adequately understand audiences' perceptions of media, and ultimately (4) confusing theoretical explanations (Liu, 2015, p.72). These new approaches began to explore how more active audiences selectively engaged with media to "fulfil special needs". At the heart of gratifications theory are several distinct assumptions that have been defined by numerous scholars. The first of these is that (1) people are considered "active participants" who actively choose the media or its content. Secondly, as already introduced by Katz in 1973, (2) people select and use the media because it allows them to satisfy their needs appropriately. Thirdly, and among other important claims, (3) people's social and psychological factors also impact their behaviour and shape their expectations of the

content and media they use, or (4) that media compete with other forms of communication, such as interpersonal interaction, to help people satisfy their needs (Rubin, 2008, p.167).

Originally, this theory had been developed in the context of traditional media but over the years it evolved considerably by embracing digitization and especially the emergence of social media and other digital platforms. Indeed, with the advent of the internet, social networking and mobile technologies expanded the scope of the theory making it particularly relevant for examining the dynamics of use and the nature of users' interactions with their media experience (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 511). As Liu (2015, p. 75) asserts, for many decades the theory was not very popular among scholars, but it experienced a process of revitalization with the advent of telecommunication technologies. Particularly Ruggiero (2000, p.15-16) highlighted three aspects that contributed to this revitalization of the theory, due to the unique attributes of these new platforms: (1) asynchronicity, (2) demassification and (3) interactivity (Liu, 2015, p. 75).

Simply put, the first of these refers to the idea that content can be published and received at completely different points in time giving people greater freedom to access content and greater possibilities to satisfy their needs. This is especially relevant for this paper as it can help understand, within the framework of the second objective, the reasons and motivations that may influence young adults' behaviour when deepening their research on news through other sources of information. Secondly, the concept of demassification presumes that "the control of the individual over the medium" (Ruggiero, 2000, p.16) has increased offering them greater control over the content. That is also relevant in the framework of the current study as it could be called into question in the framework of the second objective when exploring whether young people feel that news are received incidentally through social media. Finally, the last unique feature of new media mentioned can be easily understood as the degree to which people are able to engage in mutual discourse through these platforms (Ruggiero, 2000, p.15).

That said, the theory of uses and gratifications in the context of social media is particularly relevant to understanding why users interact with platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, as well as understanding how they receive news through them. It clearly offers insights into the gratifications sought, such as entertainment or the desire to be informed, which may influence how young adults "interact with" and perceive news content on these platforms. It can also help to understand their preferences for specific types of news, which will be specifically investigated in the first part of this study, such as the preference for "light" news as opposed to "hard" news, or the preference for short versus longer formats. In addition, the theory helps to understand the role of platform-specific features, such as algorithmic curation and infinite scrolling, in shaping news consumption behaviour. Furthermore, the personalisation of news feeds based on user's preferences and behaviours, which is a distinctive feature of social networking platforms, aligns with the theory's emphasis on active selection and reward-seeking in media use.

IV.   Objectives and hypothesis

In terms of the objectives and hypotheses (Annex 2), a carefully delineated and structured set of elements designed to investigate the consumption of news on social media platforms by young adults is presented. It is intended to explore various aspects of their news consumption specifically on TikTok and Instagram Reels, from users' preferences to their incidental news reception and their reliance on them. The three main objectives are complemented by a series of hypotheses that will explore and test specific assumptions about young people's behaviours on these platforms. The hypotheses have been formulated to directly address different aspects of each objective, thus trying to maintain coherence and a clear structure.

Regarding objective one, which aims to understand young people's attitudes and behaviours when obtaining news through TikTok and Instagram Reels, the aim is to understand not only what type of news they prefer, but also why they interact with this content as opposed to other types of content. Hypotheses related to this objective, such as H1 and H2, suggest a preference for "soft" news and short video format, indicating a tendency towards the consumption of faster and more visually appealing content. Hypothesis H3 reinforces this idea, proposing that young people are inclined towards short-form news in these media and that their main objective platforms is to consume entertainment content and do activities other than news consumption. Finally, hypothesis H4 assumes that a significant proportion of young adults frequently obtain news from non-professional journalists as opposed to more traditional news institutions or news brands.

In relation to the second objective, the study will focus on analysing how algorithms and platform-specific features such as infinite scrolling influence the way young people find and consume news. Hypotheses H5 and H6 point to a mainly incidental consumption of news, which might indicate a passive exposure to information rather than an active search. Furthermore, hypothesis H6 suggests that this incidental consumption often does not come from sources directly followed by users, which raises questions about the new influences of algorithms in the diversification of news sources and their acting as gatekeepers nowadays. Hypotheses H7 and H8 assume that young people, when exposed to incidental content, will only incorporate other traditional and non-traditional sources of information to deepen their knowledge of the subject when they are really interested or attracted by the content they are exposed to, thus highlighting a mainly hybrid consumption. Finally, hypothesis H9 assumes young adults perceive the news they receive through these media to be highly tailored to their interests, due to the recommendation systems present in these platforms through algorithms.

Finally, the third objective seeks to assess the perceived credibility and level of engagement with news obtained through these digital platforms. Hypotheses H10 and H11 assume that young adults show a lower level of trust in this new type of content they received incidentally compared to other mediums such as traditional media outlets, and that they are afraid of not having an adequate news diet because of filter bubbles and recommendation systems of these platforms. Finally, hypotheses H12 and H13 assume that

a considerable number of young adults deliberately avoid interacting with social media content and that the overabundance of information and infinite scroll systems negatively impact young people's trust in receiving news through these new media.

V.   Justification

In the age of digital media, the influence of platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels on news consumption is increasingly significant, especially among young adults. This thesis explores the role that these platforms play in shaping the news landscape in an 'infodemic' context, where an excess of information is the norm. It delves into how young people navigate their news consumption while progressively adapting to the unique formats such as vertical video and operational modes of TikTok and Instagram Reels such as "infinite scrolling". The focus is on understanding their preferences, attitudes, and how they engage with incidental news content within these algorithm-driven environments. Then, it examines the level of trust young adults place in news obtained through these new influential content recommendation and visualization systems.

The thesis focuses on the 18-24 age group, a demographic that is experiencing radical changes in their news consumption habits compared to previous generations. In fact, Prensky (2001) notes that individuals born into the digital age have different physically structured brains due to the experiences they have had since younger ages with these new technologies, and Casais et al. (2023) further underline this point by observing that young adults aged 18-24 have unique news-sharing behaviours on social media, differentiating them from older age groups. This age range is included in the so-called "Generation Z". Estrella et al. (2023) note that, unlike previous generations, Generation Z "has never known a world without the internet", thus, heavily rely on their smartphones and social media for communication. What is more, their behavioural characteristics, as defined by Vilanova and Ortega (2017), include: (1) irreverence, (2) immediacy, (3) inclusion, and (4) uncertainty (Estrella et al., 2023, p.4) which align closely with the evolving perceived trends on digital news consumption.

Furthermore, the literature on this topic remains relatively new and not extensively explored given TikTok's recent emergence and the introduction of Instagram Reels in 2020. Most of the previous literature tends to focus on these platforms as a whole.

VI.   Methodology

To carry out this study, a questionnaire was developed, targeting young adults from Generation Z. It was specifically focused on individuals between the ages of 18 and 24. The methodology chosen for the study was 'non-experimental' and 'cross-sectional' in nature. This implied a focus on analysing phenomena as they occurred in a natural setting, without direct intervention or manipulation by the researcher. The main aim was to observe and record differences and relationships between the participants' responses as captured at

a single point in time. The survey design was oriented towards a 'retrospective' approach, collecting data based on the respondents' previous memories and experiences. In addition, a random probability sampling method was applied, focusing on the Spanish population aged 18-24 years of both genders. This approach was essential to optimally control for unknown variables within the sample, which contributed to the reliability of the results. The main purpose of the survey was descriptive.

One of the essential aspects of any research is the selection of an appropriate sample size to ensure the representativeness of the target population and the validity of the results. In this sense, a statistical estimation was carried out. The target population comprises young adults aged between 18 and 24 in Spain, which is estimated to be around 3,500,000 individuals according to data provided by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2022).

To calculate the sample size, the formula adjusted for finite populations was applied:

$$n = \frac{N * z^2 * p * (1 - p)}{(N - 1) * e^2 + z^2 * p * (1 - p)}$$

The required sample size (n) was determined based on the estimated total population (N) of approximately 3,500,000 individuals. The critical value (z) from the standard normal distribution was employed for the desired confidence level, which in this case was set at 95% (approximately 1.96). The estimated proportion (p) of the target characteristic within the population was conservatively set to 0.5 due to the absence of a precise estimate. Furthermore, a margin of error (e) of 5% (0.05) was specified for the study. The detailed calculation using this formula yielded a required sample size of approximately 384 individuals. This number was determined to achieve a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.

A total of 432 responses were collected through the internet and random QR distribution of survey links in different areas of the country, as well as through a social media advertising campaign restricted to Spain as a geographical criterion. The results were filtered to exclude those responses that did not meet the three participation criteria: (a) being between 18 and 24 years old, (b) residing in Spain and (c) being a user of TikTok or Instagram Reels. After this data cleaning, 22 entries were eliminated, resulting in a sample of 410 valid responses, thus exceeding the minimum sample size of 384 responses calculated above. All respondents gave their consent to the use of their data at the end of the survey, so no responses were discarded for this reason. The survey was distributed in Spanish to facilitate comprehension (given that it was completed by young adults living in Spain), although it was translated appropriately for the purposes of this study. All open-ended answers were appropriately translated into English and textual clarifications were added between brackets when needed to ensure correct interpretation.

With regard to the demographics of the respondents, in terms of mean age, 15 % of responses were obtained for each age group surveyed, although with a prevalence of

responses from the age of 22 years with 23.90 %. As for the gender of the respondents, there was a slight prevalence of 50.98 % feminine respondents compared to 48.05 % male respondents and 0.73 % of non-binary respondents. Finally, most of the respondents had finished their secondary education, 56.10 %, about 21.95 % had finished their university degree and 13.17 % had finished their vocational training.

Simultaneously, the information garnered from primary sources was augmented by the inclusion of pertinent secondary sources in the realm of incidental news consumption and the news-gathering behaviour of young individuals on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The selection of relevant literature was done through the exploration of academic databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, employing specific keywords such as 'incidental news consumption", "young adults TikTok" or "news on Instagram". An effort was made to prioritize sources that possessed a direct connection to the research objectives, with particular attention to materials published within the past five years. This temporal criterion ensured the contemporaneity and applicability of the information collected, thereby enhancing the rigour of the study.

VII.   Development and Discussion

A.   Chapter 1: Young adults' preferences when obtaining news through infinite viewing systems on social media

1.   Widespread and persistent interest in news

Before delving into young adults' preferences when accessing news on social media, it is important to talk about the perceived disinterest of young adults in news content. In fact, due to the emergence of social media platforms and the introduction of new content delivery systems, such as infinite scrolling, there have been concerns about this phenomenon. However, as this section will show, data seems to reflect less a loss of interest and more a change in young adults' preferences. These changes are influenced by new ways of content consumption on social networks and a possible lack of innovation and adaptation of traditional media to young adults' preferences online.

Contrary to the idea of disinterest, numerous studies seem to show that most young adults still use social networks for information, for example, a study conducted by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022, p. 3828) showed that 93.8 % of young people surveyed used it for those purposes, and a third of them followed journalists and media outlets regularly. This finding underlines the relevance of social media as a vital tool to stay informed about current events and shows the persistent interest of young adults (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022, p. 3828). Furthermore, although since 2008 some studies pointed towards a decline in the number of young people who say they enjoy "a lot" following the news (Armstrong et al., 2019, p. 3), but most studies continue to recognize a widespread interest in news among young adults who access it mainly through mobile devices (Martínez-Costa et al., 2019, p. 19). Moreover, online browsing habits are a key factor in how young people are

interested in news, highlighting the importance of adapting news presentation to these habits (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018, p. 43).
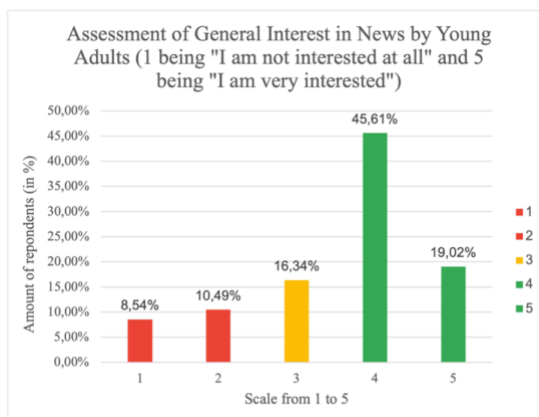

Figure 5. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Additionally, data obtained in the survey conducted for this thesis seems to verify these findings. As illustrated in Figure 5, more than 60% of participants indicated that they are "interested" or very "interested" in news in general. This percentage reinforces the idea that, while there has been a perceived decline in enthusiasm for following the news "a lot", as noted by Armstrong et al. (2019), intrinsic interest in news has not vanished among the young adult population.

2. Topics and types of content preferred by young people on social media

First, the daily use of social media platforms among young people is remarkably high, which reveals consumption patterns that are fundamental to understanding their content preferences. In the survey conducted for this research, it was found that more than 50 % of participants, specifically 53.65 %, spend more than three hours a day on social media. This contrasts sharply with the small percentage, just 3.66 %, who said that they use social media less than one hour a day. An additional 42.68 % indicated that they use social media between one and two hours a day. These figures not only seem to indicate a significant presence of social media in the daily lives of 18–24-year-olds but also suggest a deep integration of these platforms into their daily routines (see Figure 6). Coinciding with these personal findings, Umar et al. (2023) identified similar consumption patterns in their study, with most young people spending 2-4 hours a day on social media. Without a doubt, this coincidence of findings highlights a consistent trend toward the intensive use of these platforms by young adults (Umar et al., 2023, p. 41).

All these figures referred to the general use of TikTok and Instagram Reels, but the frequency of young people using infinite scroll on such platforms is also quite revealing. The numbers reflect the dominance of infinite scroll across these platforms. When combining the responses 'frequently' and 'very frequently' obtained in the survey, 74.63 % of respondents indicated a high use of this content visualization tool. While only 5.61 % said they rarely use it (see Figure 7).
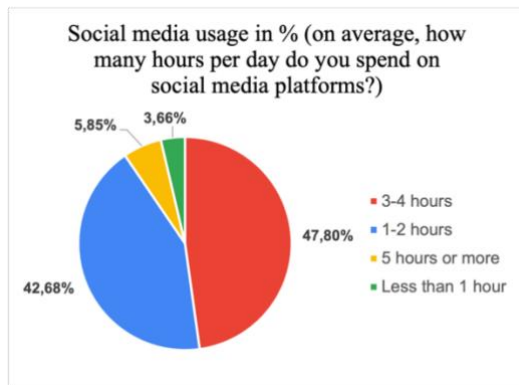
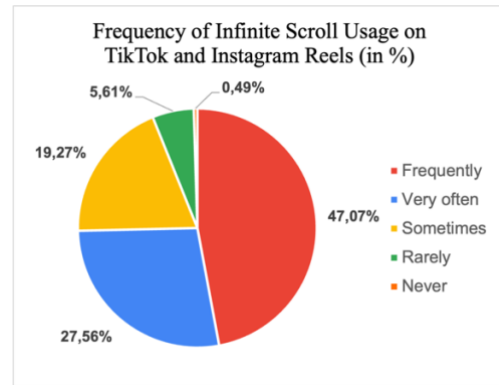**Figure 6. Source**: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Figure 7. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

In terms of the type of content consumed on these networks, the situation is multifaceted. Umar et al. (2023) highlight that, although entertainment dominates, young people access a diverse mix of genres including music, news, sports and lifestyle. News content, while not the main attraction, is seen as part of this wide range of interests that capture young people's attention in their extensive daily social media sessions (Umar et al., 2023, p. 41).

In this line, the survey sheds light on the inclinations of Instagram and TikTok users. Specifically, an overwhelming 92.93 % of respondents claimed to primarily seek or consume entertainment content, such as humorous videos, memes, and similar. This underlines the priority given to entertainment on these platforms. The lifestyle, fashion, and personal development category remains significant, selected by 71.95 % of participants; art and creativity come in third place, with 54.88 % of respondents showing interest; followed by content related to food and travel; animals and nature; news, and, finally, games and sports. It is noteworthy that the open-ended "other" option was offered in the survey so that participants could add categories not initially listed. Some participants mentioned DIY content (n = 3), bachata videos, motorbikes, series and movies, or political content (n = 6). Another notable response was from a 22-year-old male university student who said that he consumes "*whatever comes up*", which encapsulates the nature of passive content consumption on these platforms that will be explored later.
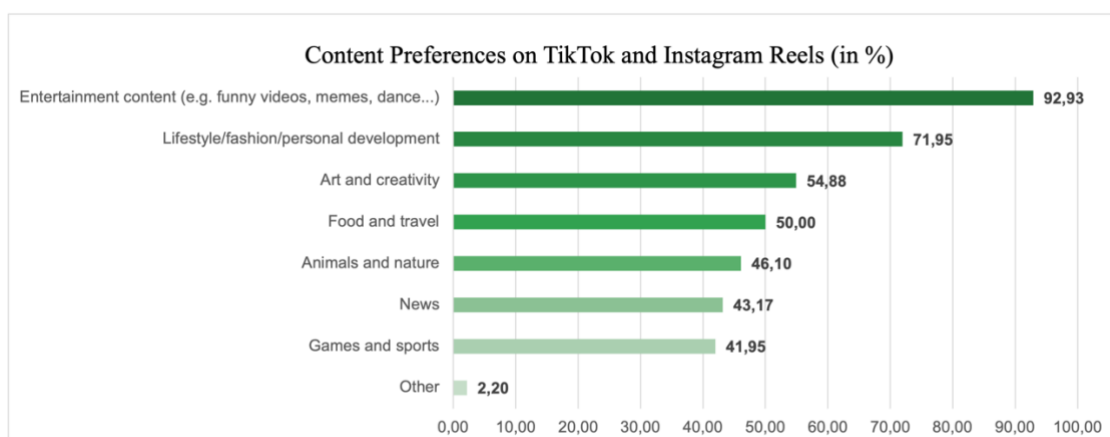

Figure 8. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

21

What is most revealing about this data is the relative position of news in content preferences. Even though 43.17 % of respondents mentioned using these platforms to consume news, this type of content is ranked sixth out of the seven initially proposed categories, suggesting a lower priority compared to other forms of content. This phenomenon reflects a primary focus on entertainment on social networks. That is corroborated by Deng et al. (2023, p.2), who reported that entertainment is one of the main motivations for TikTok users, along with self-expression, escapism, as well as socializing, and information-seeking.

Interestingly, the same study by Deng et al. (2023, p.10) reveals that, when comparing the data obtained for the United States, Spain, and Chile, in the case of Spain, the gratifications and uses related to information-seeking on social media are placed in the lowest category of all, indicating that this activity is not a priority as entertainment. Further research finds similar results for Instagram Reels.

Now, looking specifically at the nature of the news content consumed by young adults on social networks, the study by Casais et al. (2023) from the University of Navarra provides a detailed insight into their content preferences. In their comparative analysis of different media including TikTok and Instagram, a trend towards soft news to the detriment of hard news is observed. Indeed, data reveals that categories that could be classified as "soft news" generate more interest among users of these two platforms. For example, if figures from both social networks are combined, news with elements of fun, satire, and humour reach 42 % of respondents, followed by news related to entertainment, and lifestyle. In comparison, news about national politics attracts 32.5 % of respondents, while news about business, finance, and economy interests only about 21 % (Casais et al., 2023, p. 142).

In parallel, the Reuters Digital News Report 2023, conducted by Newman et al. (2023), corroborates that the predominant news content on these social networks is of an "entertaining" nature. The percentages in the latter study indicate that funny news captures 44 % of attention, while business and economics attract 34 %, and national politics 37 % (Newman et al., 2023, p. 15). In the specific case of TikTok, the study "Algorithmic indifference: The dearth of news recommendations on TikTok" by Hagar & Diakopoulos (2023, p.13) addresses a distinctive feature of the platform concerning content consumption and user preferences. Analysis of trends in popular news and entertainment hashtags shows in this paper that the content that overlaps and gains traction on TikTok tends to be soft and closely related to entertainment.
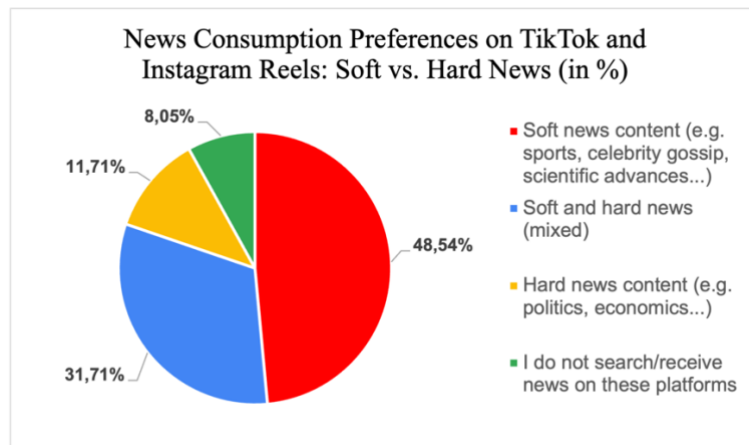
Figure 9. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

In the results of the survey conducted for this thesis, the trends towards a strong preference for soft content are further confirmed possibly due to the focus of the study. While the previous research cited above covers general social media usage, this thesis survey focuses on news consumption via infinite scroll exclusively on Instagram Reels and TikTok. Moreover, it is specifically limited to the users that engage with these viewing mechanisms daily, which could explain the observed sharpening of preferences.

The survey revealed that almost half of TikTok and Instagram Reels users, 48.54 %, showed a preference for soft news content, in contrast to only 11.71 % who prefer hard news, as shown in Figure 9. This represents a broader trend towards a preference for content that is softer and arguably more entertaining and easier to digest in the fast-paced and ephemeral nature of infinite scroll. However, it is crucial to note that, as noted in the Casais et al. (2023) and Newman et al. (2023) studies, there is still a substantial proportion of young people who also prefer to receive harder news. This interest could be reflected as well in the 31.71 % of respondents who expressed a preference for a mix of soft and hard news, suggesting an openness to a broader spectrum of news content. In addition, 8.05 % of participants indicated no clear preferences, which could be interpreted as a willingness to consume a variety of news, regardless of tone or subject matter. These findings highlight the diversity of expectations and information needs of young social media users. Although soft content predominates, there is a considerable demand for more serious and in-depth news.

3. Preferred format of news content consumed on TikTok and Instagram

The University of Navarra's digital news report (Casais et al., 2023) clearly reflects through its surveys that news consumption is amid a transformation towards more audio-visual and "multimedia" consumption (Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2023, p. 1-2). Young adults aged 18–24 years are indeed leading this transition by preferring, compared to other age ranges, video, and sound formats over written content. According to the same study, 85 % of respondents claimed to have watched news-related videos online in the last week (Casais et al., 2023, p.170), and similar conclusions were reached by Newman et al., (2023), noting

that "across all markets, almost 2/3 of respondents consumed video via social media". In fact, according to the latter authors, video consumption has grown exponentially in the last five years, coinciding, interestingly, with the emergence of TikTok and Instagram Reels in 2020 (Newman et al., 2023, p.28). The dominant feature of TikTok, the short video format, or the carousel image format, demands a news production that breaks away from the traditional workflow of written articles, adapting to fast and visual consumption. Hagar & Diakopoulos, (2023) and Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022, p.3845) indicate that news companies are recognizing the need to adapt to these new formats to reach the young population.

For example, research by Chan & Allman-Farinelli (2022) found that young Australian adults prefer video posts on Instagram for nutritional information. Not only is this format more engaging and visually preferred by this audience but it is also considered more motivating for changing dietary behaviours. That shows that visual content changes habits and perceptions (Chan & Allman-Farinelli, 2022). Also, Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022) acknowledge that, although Instagram incorporated the video format later than TikTok, many media outlets are already adapting their content to these fast-paced formats. On Instagram, for example, examples of adapted news content have been found, including short explainer videos and eye-catching current event coverage, often presented by journalists and non-professional ones. TikTok is forcing even faster its adaptation by the media. Content is constantly being altered for informational purposes, seeking to progressively combine virality with truthful and relevant information (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022, p. 3833).
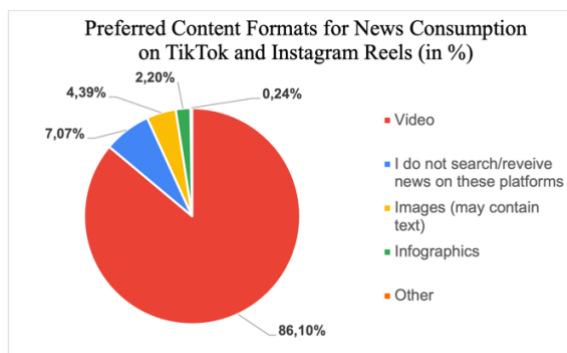

Figure 10. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data
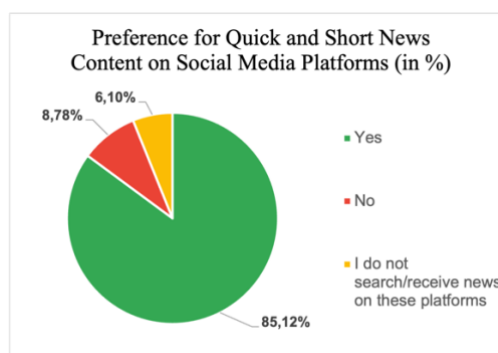
Figure 11. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

This preference for the video format and for quickly consumable content is also reflected in the survey conducted for this thesis. The data shows that an overwhelming majority, 86.10 %, prefer to consume news in video format on TikTok and Instagram Reels before other formats such as images with headlines, infographics, or others. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 11 above, 85.12 % of respondents prefer short and quickly digestible content, while only 8.78 % indicate no preference for short and concise content for information.

4. The relevance of non-professional journalists

As mentioned above, some studies seem to point out that traditional media does not adapt in a fully effective way to the way young people want to receive information nowadays and that it, somehow, disappoints them. It is less a question of a progressive decline in the general interest in the news, which, as demonstrated above, remains quite high among young adults according to the primary and secondary sources, and it is more about how the news is presented and by whom. In this sense, it seems that the traditional way of presenting news does not always meet the expectations of young information consumers, sometimes resulting in a sense of disconnection.

New so-called "non-professional journalists", often characterized as 'ordinary people', are offering innovative ways of communicating the news. Through platforms such as TikTok and, to a lesser extent, Instagram Reels, it is becoming more common for people to receive news from non-professional sources. In fact, according to the data collected in the survey for this thesis, 90.98 % of respondents claim to have received news via these types of accounts on TikTok or Instagram Reels (figure 12).
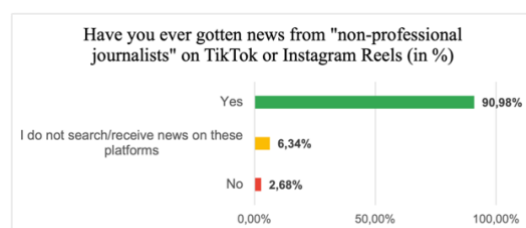

Figure 12. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

According to the Digital News Report of the University of Navarra (Casais et al., 2023), there is a significant difference in news sources between TikTok and Instagram. While on Instagram (in general, not specifically on Instagram Reels) following mainstream media is more prevalent, on TikTok it is much more common to follow "ordinary people". In fact, on TikTok, "ordinary people" represent the most important news source (44%), followed by social media personalities and content creators (39%), and celebrities (36%). Yet, despite these differences observed in the literature, according to the data collected in the survey conducted for the thesis, if data from both TikTok and Instagram Reels is combined, it can be observed that overall, more than half of the respondents (53.67%) shared that they are "frequently" or "very frequently" exposed to the news given by non-professional journalists on these two platforms. That is quite a considerable figure, while less than 20% claim to receive "not very frequently" news from these types of accounts or "not frequently" at all (figure 13). That shows an important exposure to this type of content.
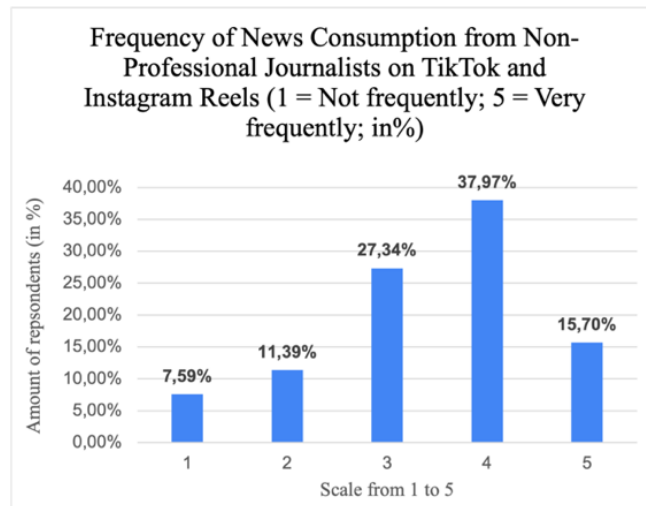
Figure 13. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Very interestingly, if one goes deeper into the data and looks at the number of people who say they prefer to receive one or the other type of content, it can be observed that a majority of the survey responses show a preference for news content from "non-professional journalists" (n = 177 or 43.17 %) while the population that prefers news published by traditional media accounts such as Mainstream newspapers like El País or El Mundo in Spain represent approximately one-quarter of the responses, approximately 25.61% (figure 14). This shows that there is considerable use of this type of accounts, and although one-quarter of the responses indicate that people "do not have clear preferences", the number of people who prefer news published by traditional media is notably lower. Indeed, such non-professional sources are often perceived as more authentic or relatable, and their content tends to be more direct and easily understood.

	Amount of answers (n)	Amount of answers (in % of total)
I prefer the news published by "non-professional journalistis" on social media	177	43,17%
I prefer the news published by "traditional media" (ex: El País, El Mundo...) on these platforms	105	25,61%
I have no clear preferences	103	25,12%
I do not search/receive news on these platforms	25	6,10%

Figure 14. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

In order to elaborate on these preferences of young adults for non-traditional news sources and non-professional journalists, some textual opinions have been collected from some of the respondents. The majority show clear support for these alternative communicators, highlighting several perceived benefits in their approach to information. Although there are some dissenting voices, they are not as numerous as those in favour.

"I really like the way news are explained by people who are not journalists from traditional media. The way they explain the news is more pleasant and

understandable. I think they even give more context. I follow accounts that tell you about complex issues in a simple way." (**Answer 1: Masculine gender, completed secondary education, moderately interested in news, 22 years old**)

"In these accounts the information is usually more concise, you get the most important points if you want to know more in-depth later and also the ideology or goals of the "non-professional" media is more transparent than in established newspapers." (**Answer 2: Feminine gender, completed university studies, moderately interested in news, 23 years old**)

"Sometimes I prefer non-professionals (if they are rigorous and good) because I know that they are not paid by a business conglomerate with certain interests or influenced by political power and are therefore more independent." (**Answer 3: Masculine gender, undergraduate student, very interested in news, 21 years old**)

Looking at the comments made by these respondents, it can be noted that the preference for non-professional journalists is often based on the perception of a more pleasant and understandable communication compared to more traditional media accounts. For example, according to the first person (answer 1), the news provided by these accounts is much more "understandable" and he states that some of these accounts contextualize news more effectively while at the same time explaining complex issues in a simpler way. This opinion is shared by the second person mentioned (answer 2), who also acknowledges that the information from these accounts is generally more concise and lays the groundwork for further research through other means.

In the same way, another recurring argument is the fact that people seem to feel that these non-professional journalists are more independent than the traditional media accounts. In other words, it is argued that many of them do not have an editorial line to follow, thereby eliminating the filters through which information would pass, resulting in news content that is more transparent and less biased than the one that can be received through other media. This last point was highlighted by the second person (answer 2) and the third (answer 3) mentioned above.

"Traditional national media often do not mention issues that I consider relevant in the world or do so in a very general and imprecise way." (**Answer 4: Feminine gender, undergraduate student, very interested in news, 22 years old**)

"I get the feeling that they are more realistic and more interesting than what the traditional media". (**Answer 5: Masculine gender, completed secondary education, moderately interested in news, 19 years old**)

These two additional answers also show the perception that these non-professional journalists offer a more realistic and engaging narrative (e.g. answer 5) while at the same time showing a critical view towards traditional media coverage (answer 4). Indeed, her perspective suggests a dissonance between the issues that the mainstream media tend to

cover and those that the interviewee considers to be of global importance. She questions not only the selection of the issues per se but also the depth and accuracy with which events are reported. This suggests that some non-traditional journalists' news sources do express information in a clearer, more complete, engaging, and rigorous way than some traditional media accounts.

> *"Despite the "excitement" of receiving so much and so diverse news from non-professional journalists, I prefer news from official media because it is a way of verifying the veracity of the former [non-professional journalist's] news (which tends to appear more frequently and often before the official media share it)".*
> (*Answer 6*: **Feminine gender, undergraduate student, very interested in news, 19 years old**)

As mentioned, not all opinions are favourable towards news provided by non-professional social media accounts. The opinion of this 19-year-old university student illustrates a more cautious stance. Despite acknowledging the "excitement" that can be generated by receiving a large amount of varied and frequent news from non-professional sources, she expresses a clear preference for news coming from professional media outlets. The reason behind this preference is the desire to verify the veracity of the information. For her, the fact that news from non-professional journalists is often published faster and more frequently than in traditional media creates a need to check the authenticity of the information. This highlight concerns about the possibility of facing misinformation and an appreciation for the verification processes associated with the established media, considered more reliable. This position is very interesting given the apparent phenomenon of hybrid news consumption, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

In sum, the research in this chapter has shown that the apparent decline in enthusiasm for following traditional news does not imply a lack of interest in news per se by young adults, but rather changing preferences for the way in which news is presented and consumed, with an inclination towards multimedia content and short video formats, which are characteristic of these infinite scroll platforms (confirmation of hypothesis H2; see Annex 2). Indeed, the high prevalence of the use of these platforms among young people has been highlighted, and it has been observed that entertainment content predominates in the users' diet (confirmation of hypothesis H3; see Annex 2), pushing news content to a much less relevant position compared to other types of content. Yet, the results of the survey confirm the use of these social networks for news gathering and confirm young adults' preference for soft news content, with almost half of TikTok and Instagram Reels users showing a predilection for it over hard news (confirmation of hypothesis H1; see Annex 2). Finally, one of the most significant findings of the chapter was the relevance of non-professional journalists and the increasingly important role they seem to be playing in these infinite scroll systems. While most of the opinions collected were supportive of these alternative communicators, noting their authenticity, attractiveness, coverage, and innovative approaches (confirmation of hypothesis H4; see Annex 2), it was also acknowledged that there are concerns about the veracity of the information they provide, underlining the importance of the balance between immediacy and authenticity in digital news distribution.

B.   Chapter 2: Young adults' attitudes to incidental news content on TikTok and Instagram Reels

1.   Rational or incidental news consumption?

In today's digital age, the way in which young adults consume news has changed dramatically, as seen throughout the previous chapter, with a notable increase in the incidental consumption of news through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. This phenomenon is undoubtedly influenced by factors related to the nature of digital platforms and companies' strategies to capture users' attention. Indeed, as Bhargava (2023) highlights, social media platforms have developed business models focused on monetizing user attention, resulting in the development of a sort of digital addiction. Some sources highlight that this approach not only negatively affects the user's ability to concentrate and their memory but is also related to loneliness and depression (Bhargava 2023, p.18). This digital addiction is generated by taking deliberate actions to exploit the cognitive limitations of users and promote content that, although not illegal, can be harmful. That includes shocking or controversial content to capture the user's attention and maximize their time of use (Bhargava, 2023, p. 2).

As seen above, the use of social media to obtain information is common, but the reception of this news content is taking place in a context where platforms that mix content of different kinds are increasingly important. Since the introduction of infinite scroll platforms such as TikTok, or Reels in 2020, these platforms have prioritized these formats, helping them to achieve higher views, likes and comments (Liang & Wolfe, 2022) than other formats formerly available. Short, entertaining videos adapted to the tastes of younger population groups such as Generation Z, have led to an integration of journalistic information between the consumption of entertainment and other types of content present on these scrolling platforms. In other words, the literature seems to suggest that recipients of news content encounter it incidentally while using the social network for other purposes, not necessarily the willingness to receive news (Bolz, 2023).

Here, it is interesting to talk about the written comment from one of the participants in the survey conducted for this thesis, who states that people are often becoming desensitized to content because they are constantly exposed to shocking posts. In the same way, they point out that there is a normalization of important news consumption on TikTok and Instagram Reels while scrolling through entertaining content, which further undermines the informative content:

> *"The world is desensitized to such an extent that they go from this shocking news [the death of a worker in an accident at work] to suddenly talking about the "Island of Temptations" [a Spanish reality show], to give an example. The news is controlled and directed to shock the viewer, but almost nothing surprises anymore because violence or other catastrophic circumstances have been normalized as if it was the daily routine, gradually distancing the viewer from empathy".* (**Answer 7: Non-binary gender; carrying out vocational training formation; not interested in news at all; 21 years old**)

Indeed, according to other studies, such as the one conducted by Scheffauer et al. (2021), social media platforms have become the main hub for incidental news consumption (INE). The data collected in that study shows that 63 % of respondents claimed to have received incidental content on Instagram, although without a specific focus on Instagram Reels. Still, it could be interpreted as remarkably high values that show the importance of this mode of content consumption on social media.
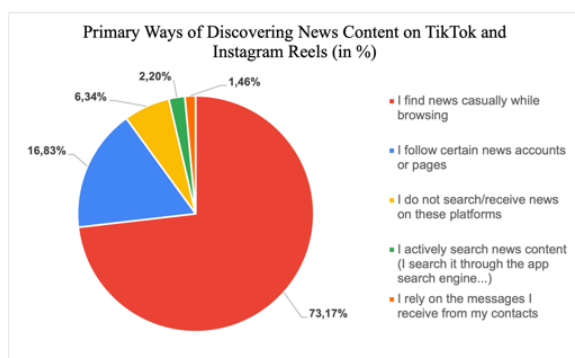

Figure 15. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data
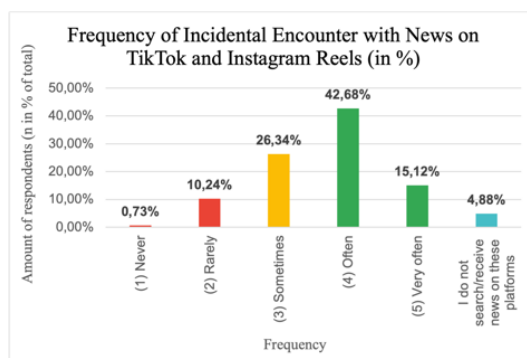

Figure 16. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Referring specifically to the data collected for this thesis, it can be seen in Figure 15 that almost three-quarters of the respondents, that is, 73.17 % claim to discover news on TikTok and Instagram Reels, "casually while browsing" content, to the detriment of other categories, which represent much smaller shares such as "actively following certain news accounts" (n% = 16.83 %), or "actively searching for news content" via the app's search engine (2.20 % of the respondents). These results certainly reveal the trend towards the incidental encounter of news while engaging with the platform in a normal way. It is worth noting that the results of the survey could be higher due to the focus of this study solely on infinite scroll platforms such as TikTok and Instagram reels.

Furthermore, when looking at Figure 16, related to the frequency of encountering news incidentally on Instagram Reels and TikTok, more than half of the respondents, 57.8 %, responded that they used to encounter them in this way "frequently" or "very frequently" as opposed to only 10.97 %, who responded "never" or "rarely". The data in these two graphs clearly shows the prevalence of incidental news on these platforms.

2. Following news accounts

Speaking precisely about whether people follow the accounts from which they obtain information, it can be said that several studies, such as the one carried out by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022, p.3836), seem to show that people do follow certain profiles, in which they are already interested rather than referring directly to traditional journalistic media. It should be noted that this study does not refer specifically to Instagram Reels, but more generally to this social network as a whole. Along the same lines, other studies seem to show that users of social networks try to alter the accounts they follow to shape the

content they subsequently receive. In fact, approximately 65 % of those investigated in a study state that from time to time they follow or stop following certain people because they are or are not interested in their content (Casais et al., 2023, p.129). The same report states that the higher the interest in news, the higher the frequency with which people try to change the content they receive through social media. This behaviour is done for a variety of reasons as confirmed by the Reuters Digital News Report 2023. Some of them are, for example, in the specific case of TikTok and Instagram: to get more reliable content (44.67 % of respondents), see more diverse perspectives (41.67 %), see less toxic content (31 %), make it more interesting (25 %), among other factors (Newman et al., 2023, p.17). However, along the lines of the previous paragraph, other studies recognize the "incidental nature of news consumption" (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022, p.3828).
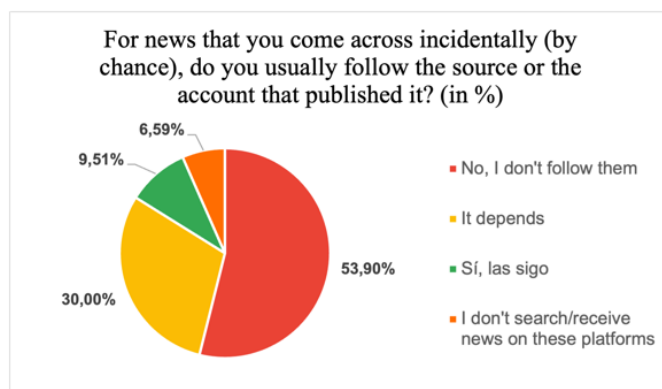

Figure 17. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Indeed, looking directly at the results obtained in the survey when asked the question: "for news that you come across incidentally, do you usually follow the source or account that published it?" (figure 17), more than half of the respondents, that is, 53.90 % of them claim not to follow the accounts that publish the news they receive, as opposed to 9.51 % who claim to follow them. This means that these people are the minority and demonstrates that most people come across this content in a completely incidental way. This data is exacerbated if it is mentioned that approximately 30% of people say that depending on the situation they do or do not follow the account that published the post, which would also indicate a high amount of incidental content. That would exceed 80 % of respondents, when combining the data of "yes, I follow them" and "it depends".

This incidental consumption of news generates various feelings among people, including the so-called "News Finds Me Perception". It refers to the perception that users can stay sufficiently informed without actively following traditional media, relying more on social networks and recommendations from personal contacts without an active search for information (Segado-Boj et al., 2019). Moreover, personalization of content on social networks has become a common practice to tailor information to users' interests, which could exacerbate this "News Finds Me" feeling. Xu (2022) points out that social media platforms use algorithms to personalize content distribution schemes, allowing for efficient and accurate information matching, although clearly with some risks. In the same line of reasoning, Karizat et al. (2021) delve into the perception of content personalization on specific platforms, such as TikTok. Surveyed users who use this platform believe that the algorithm adapts content to their personal identities and suppresses content related to

marginalized social identities based on aspects such as "race and ethnicity, size and physical appearance", socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or political group affiliation.
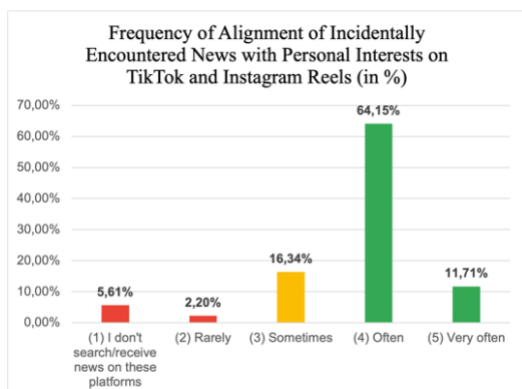

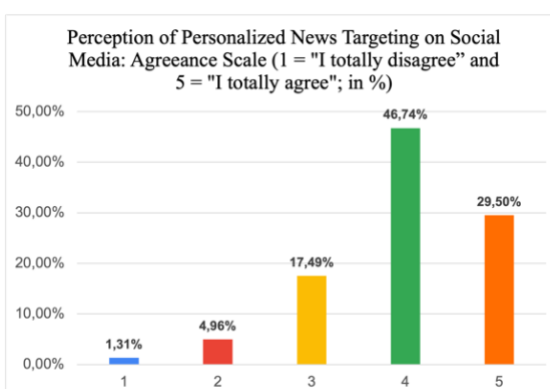Figure 18. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Figure 19. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

The data found in the survey conducted for this thesis clearly indicate this phenomenon, people claim that the incidental content they receive on TikTok and Instagram Reels aligns in more than 75 % of the cases "often" or "very often" with the personal interests of the person receiving them (figure 18), while only approximately 18.54 % claim that such content aligns only "rarely" or "sometimes" with their interests. In the same way, if the answers "I agree" and "I totally agree" are combined, it can be seen in Figure 19 that approximately 76.24 % of the respondents claim to agree with the sentence "I have a news find me perception".

3. The hybrid aspect of young adult news consumption on TikTok and Instagram Reels.

Young adults receive news incidentally; however, it is also very important to assess how these people react when confronted with this type of news content. According to several reports, young adults are increasingly passive when confronted with it. As the Reuters Digital News Report notes, the proportion of passive consumers of news consumers is increasing from 2018 to 2023 (Newman et al., 2023, p.35). This refers to people who neither comment, repost, or share the content they observe, in fact, nor do they consult beyond their incidentally received content. The proportion of these people increased by five percentage points, from 42 % in 2018 to 47 % in 2023 (Newman et al., 2023, p.35), and with that, there was also a decrease in active participants by 11 percentage points, from 33 % to 22 % over the same date range. Besides not actively engaging with the content, other scholars highlight that many young adults who receive incidental news do not access it but pass by or simply analyse it in a very simple and superficial way (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2017, p.110).

This attitude towards the content obtained through these social networks appears in the statements of some of the survey's respondents, for example:

"Most of the time I stick to the news I receive while I look at other types of content, and I don't look at other sources. I tend to inform myself most of the time with the content that appears in my feed." (***Answer 8***: **Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; not very interested in the news; 19 years old**)

In fact, this news consumption often does not require as much depth as reading a newspaper article or trying to understand it. Additionally, people enter the links sporadically (Boczkowski et al., 2017) or search for more information on the topic when they are really interested in the information. A "hybrid media consumption" may occur here. Indeed, the consumption pattern is characterized, according to some reports, by casual access to the news from social networks carrying out quick monitoring or surveillance on the Internet, and subsequently turning to traditional media or other news media to expand the information only when a news item particularly catches one's attention, that is, when it comes close to one's interests in the large flow of data and information existing on the Internet and in social networks (Jiménez et al., 2018, p.23). According to Martínez-Costa et al. (2019, p.19), this is exacerbated when the content affects people directly or if they empathize with the topic of the news item.

Some comments from respondents for this thesis survey effectively emphasize this behaviour of looking for additional information when the news item is attractive, "to check the information" as Gangadharbatla et al. (2014, p.59) acknowledged, or to go deeper into a specific topic. As it is stated in "Answer 10", on Instagram and TikTok often only a brief explanation is received, so people turn to other media to expand or check the information they have received:

*"I only tend to search for [additional] content **when I'm really attracted to the news**, **intrigued by it** or when it **doesn't give me enough information**. Sometimes you're so immersed in the feed that you're only attracted to something if it makes a big impact on you or has a lot of likes, so only when something really hits me do I look to check it out. But there are accounts that explain things very well and I don't look at other sources".* (***Answer 9***: **Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; moderately interested in the news; 22 years old**)

"On Instagram [Reels] and TikTok you see the headline and a brief explanation. To go into detail or to make sure it's real, you look for the news item." (***Answer 10***: **Masculine gender; has completed vocational training; moderately interested by the news; 22 years old**)

*"Often the news has a very strong bipolar tendency and I find what it says so shocking that **I look for background information to make sure if it is really that serious**. Often, they leave out important information. For example: I saw a news item about a government minister in Israel saying that a nuclear bomb should be dropped on Palestine. However, the news item did not comment on the fact that he was instantly dismissed after that comment."* (***Answer 11***: **Feminine gender; undergraduate student; interested by the news; 22 years old**)
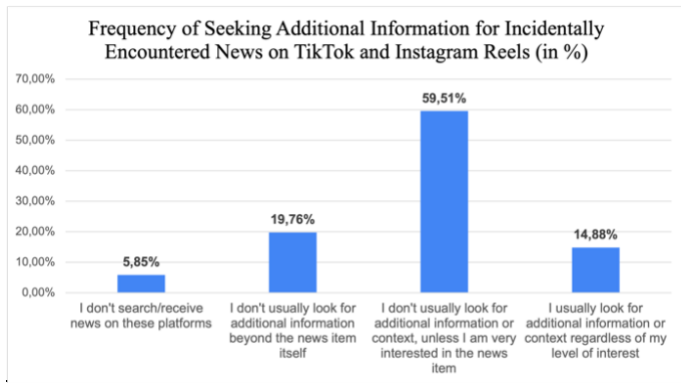
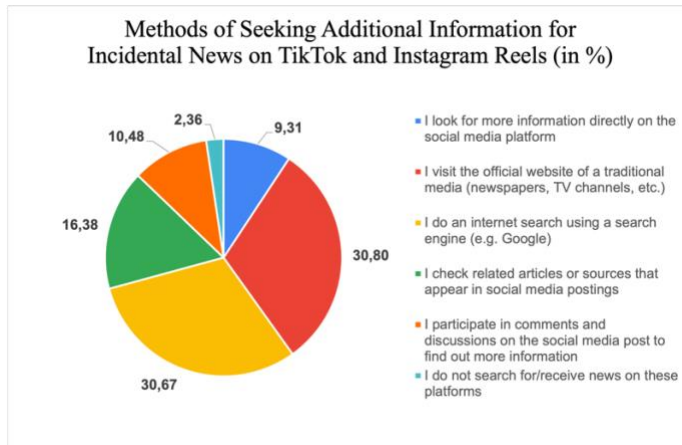**Figure 20. Source**: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Figure 21. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Looking closer at the results obtained in the survey, when young adults are asked whether they seek information beyond the incidental content found on both TikTok and Instagram Reels, the majority of them, 59.51 %, stated that they do not usually seek additional information or context beyond the incidental content itself "unless they are very interested in the content of the news item". The last part of this answer provides the key and is clearly in line with the ideas put forward by the reports and authors that have been consulted. Generally, the reception of these news items is passive and superficial, and only other media are used if there is a very important interest or if the news has a special impact on the person. Continuing along the line that consumption is mainly superficial, the second most frequent response to this question, with 19.76 % of the votes, was not seeking additional information beyond the news content regardless of interest. This result is higher than the 14.88 % who say that they always look for additional information, regardless of the level of interest. This clearly underlines this trend.

As previously mentioned, young adults continue to maintain their interest in news and sometimes positively value traditional media. In fact, if one refers to Figure 21, people who do look for additional information content after being exposed to incidental news content on TikTok or Instagram Reels, mainly resort to the official website of traditional media for it while another very important part considers searching in an Internet search engine such as Google to go beyond the incidental content. Therefore, indeed, a hybrid consumption of media seems to be taking place, with an important relevance of traditional media to complement the information received through non-traditional sources. As recognized by this respondent:

34

"Sometimes the briefness of the videos is insufficient to fully understand what is being explained. [I usually] contrast the same news item in different media (sometimes there are 'different' realities)." (***Answer 12*: Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; interested in the news; 21 years old**)

It is crucial to remember that, despite the rise of social media platforms as important sources of news, the prevalence of the "News Find Me" phenomenon, and the prevalent existence of hybrid media consumption, there is still a small segment of the young adult population that shows a clear preference for receiving news from sources considered traditional and professional. For example, a recent study in Switzerland illustrates this point, revealing that young Swiss still positively value professional journalism, value its veracity and timeliness (Schwaiger et al., 2022, p.19).

To conclude this chapter, it can be said that news consumption among young adults has undergone a significant transformation, driven mainly by the reception of news incidentally through TikTok and Instagram Reels. Indeed, this is how most news content is received through these two platforms (confirmation of hypothesis H5; see Annex 2). It is evident that, as users browse for entertainment content or content related to their other interests, they encounter news incidentally. Many of the accounts that publish such news are not followed by users, and although people try to follow or unfollow them to alter the information they receive in their feed through infinite scrolling, most of the content they keep receiving generally does not come from sources they follow (confirmation of hypothesis H6; see Annex 2). This was notably amplified by the business models of those digital platforms that seek to capture the user's attention, pushing toward a more passive and less in-depth approach to information due to the instantaneity and brevity of the scroll (confirmation of hypothesis H8; see Annex 2). Furthermore, this chapter revealed that, despite the prevalence of INE, there is a clear tendency among young adults to seek additional information from traditional media or other information sources when the content incidentally encountered arouses their particular interest (confirmation of hypothesis H7; see Annex 2). All of that is amid an increasing feeling that news are being targeted to individuals due to algorithm recommendation systems (confirmation of hypothesis H9; see Annex 2). This points to the prevalence of hybrid news consumption in which traditional media remains an important source of accurate, more detailed, and even verified information.

C.   Chapter 3: Young adult trust in this incidental news content
1.   Trust in incidental news and a comparison with traditional media

As reflected in reports such as the Reuters Digital News Report 2023, trust in news has declined by 2 percentage points across the board in all markets surveyed in the last two years. In fact, in that same report, it is highlighted that as few as 4 in 10 people on average among those surveyed say they believe the news most of the time (Newman et al., 2023, p.10). Furthermore, non-traditional news sources, according to other scholars, are associated with lower trust (Park & Lee, 2023, p.2). Specifically in the case of TikTok, the

study conducted by Hagar and Diakopoulos (2023) on news attention indicates a high user disinterest in news content on the platform, which could be related to the low level of trust in news.
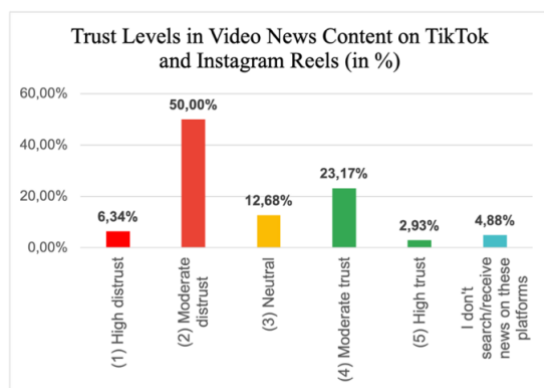

Figure 22. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Looking at the results obtained in the survey conducted for this thesis, it can be seen that, in a generalized way, respondents, when asked if they trust the news videos received by TikTok and Instagram Reels, more than 50 % of them claim to have "high" or "moderate" distrust when dealing with this type of content. This data is very surprising, since, even though in the first chapter of this thesis it was argued that people showed a greater interest in the news given by non-professional journalists, mainly due to the format and the way the news were delivered, when asked specifically about the credibility of these formats, people still perceive traditional media as more reliable. Some textual responses were collected throughout the survey:

> *"I think that there are accounts, especially from non-traditional media on TikTok and insta [Instagram Reels] that are good at reporting the news and putting it in a more attractive and clear way, but it also sometimes generates more distrust than what a traditional media outlet could publish, which is supposed to contrast the information more."* (***Answer 13*: Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; moderately interested in the news; 22 years old**)

> *"Although traditional media are more trustworthy because they usually indicate their sources or they can't put anything because legally they can have more repercussions, there are online newspapers of journalists that instill total professionalism like "esdecirdiario" on Instagram."* (***Answer 14*: Feminine gender; has completed secondary education; interested in the news; 22 years old**)

> "I believe that the people who are giving us the information based on news have been trained in that field of knowledge and are therefore more reliable than a person who simply makes TikTok videos to get likes. I also think that on TikTok people are there to get money more than anything else." (***Answer 15*: Feminine gender; undergraduate student; interested by the news; 22 years old**)

Here indeed although the format of news given by non-professional journalists is often preferred, trust per se may not be as high and it is still perceived that traditional media, still seem to have greater credibility for young adults, despite being "more biased" or influenced by news conglomerates as previously stated.
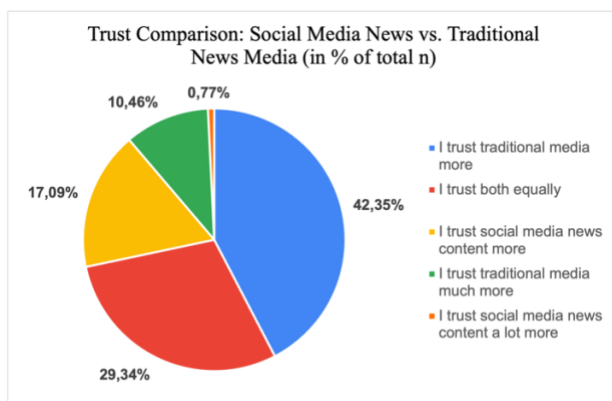
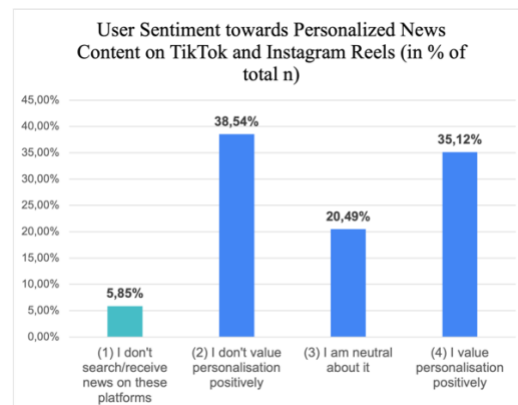Figure 23. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

Figure 24. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

In fact, looking at the data from the question asking whether people trusted more traditional media, or the news shared by these two social networks, the largest proportion of respondents said they trusted traditional media more, with 42.35 %, followed by 29.34 % who said they trusted both equally, and only 17.09 % who said they trusted social media news more. Therefore, the opinion is quite divided but still seems to indicate a greater trust in traditional media.

Regarding whether personalization is valued positively, there is a very divided opinion on the subject, with 35.12 % of respondents valuing personalization positively. That figure is slightly lower than those who answered that they did not value personalization positively, accounting for 38.54 % of the results. Finally, in the middle ground, 20.49 % of respondents answered that they were neutral about it. Still, results seem to indicate that even those who are in favour of news personalization on these scrolling platforms show some concern with algorithmic selection. The following opinions reflect these varied views:

"Personalization is good when you choose it, not when it is imposed on you." (*Answer 16*: **Feminine gender; has completed secondary education; very interested in the news; 21 years old**)

"I don't value it because I think that personalization makes us sick, and in fact, we don't have access to a lot of information." (*Answer 17*: **Feminine gender; undergraduate student; moderately interested in the news; 21 years old**)

2. Generation of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

The aforementioned personalization can often create certain concerns in users' minds. According to the different reports that have been consulted, for example, people who are moderately or fairly interested in news are generally more concerned about not receiving news that are contrary to their own (Casais et al., 2023, p.128). According to data from the same report, 46 % are concerned about not receiving information contrary to their personal views, and 48 % stated that they are afraid of losing important information. This

perception was also reflected in the survey questions conducted for this thesis with several people stating that they often feel a certain FOMO for content different from their preferences:

"It seems negative to me that echo chamber effects are generated in which people are prevented from interacting with other circles (mainly ideological) and thus generate biased opinions and a polarized society". (**Answer 18: Masculine gender; has completed or is carrying out undergraduate studies; very interested in the news; 23 years old**)

"I like that it is personalized because I see news that I might be more interested in, but sometimes I think about it, and maybe I lose a bit of perspective on other issues that are also current because my feed only shows me content that I like or is more viral at certain times" (**Answer 19: Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; not very interested in the news; 19 years old**)
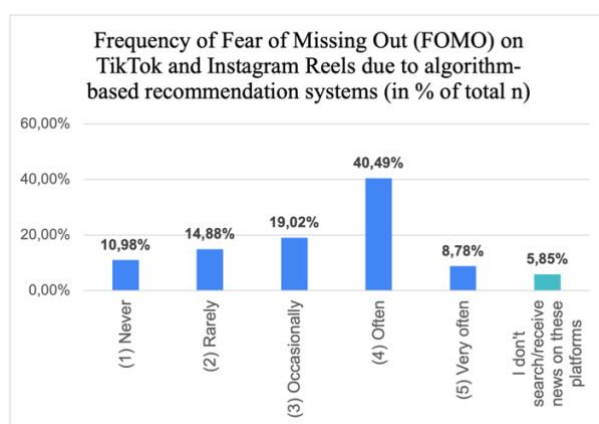

Figure 25. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

In fact, in addition to the questions collected, a question was also asked to inquire about the frequency in which people are afraid of missing out on this type of content (figure 25). It was observed that most people (40.49 %) answered that they were afraid of missing out on such information due to the algorithmic nature of the recommendations on Instagram Reels and TikTok. While only about 25.86 % of the respondents said that they never felt that FOMO or only "rarely". Thus, it can be concluded that this concern is relatively prevalent among young adults.

3.   The impact of information abundance on trust

The report by Newman et al. (2023), addresses the growing concern about how people access news in the digital age, focusing especially on the impact of algorithmic personalization on public perception and trust of these information sources. As mentioned above, the study shows that there is a noticeable trend towards distrust of algorithms, social networks based on short infinite-scroll videos and other platforms that systematically select the news that users see. Despite this reluctance, algorithmically selected news is still slightly preferred over news chosen by editors or journalists, suggesting that concerns about algorithms are part of a broader concern about news selection in general (Newman

et al., 2023, p. 10). In addition, the report highlights a growing concern among the younger population about how feed personalization allows access to news. This negative perception appears to be on the rise, as evidenced by a comparison of data between 2016 and 2023 in countries such as the UK and the US, especially among this demographic.

In addition to these concerns, it should be noted that the context of information overabundance is often mentioned as a contributing factor to young adults' progressive lack of trust in news. The graph below, figure 26, made with the responses from the survey conducted for this thesis, provides a visual representation of people's trust in news content on TikTok and Instagram Reels, asking whether the vast amount of information they consume through infinite scrolling negatively affects their trust in incidentally received news. Although 8.54 % do not consider that the overabundance of information affects their trust, and 11.46 % of participants are uncertain, most respondents, with 74.39 % of answers, affirm that the overabundance of information does negatively affect their trust in the news obtained through these platforms. This not only underlines the relevance of the problem of information oversaturation but also reflects a possible correlation between the excessive volume of content and the erosion of the credibility of news sources.
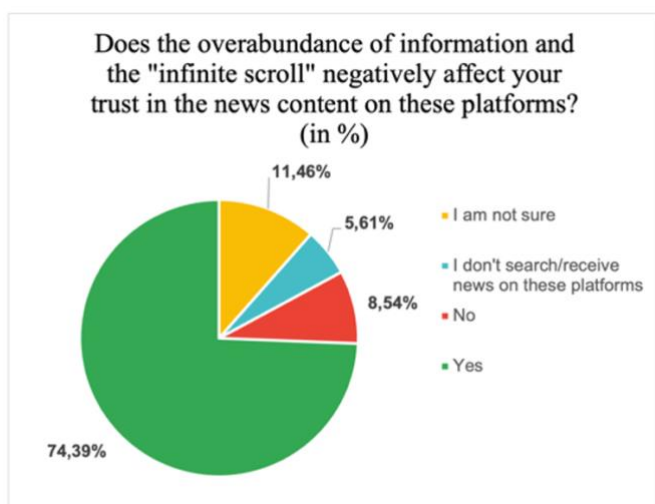
Figure 26. Source: Self-made on Excel © with self-collected data

These answers were also collected:

> *"Sometimes you're scrolling and you become a robot, you don't know how long you've been watching videos, so you only stay with a news item if it impacts you a lot, and sometimes you even pass it by because you're in automatic mode."* (***Answer 20***: **Masculine gender; has completed secondary education; moderately interested in the news; 22 years old**)

> *"Absolutely agree. I find that I don't even retain 80% of what I read given the overwhelming amount of it."* (***Answer 21***: **Feminine gender; has completed secondary education; very interested by the news; 22 years old**)

> *"It is true that sometimes there is so much information that it clouds my mind a bit and makes me doubt what I see, especially when something goes viral and I only get videos about it."* (***Answer 22***: **Masculine gender; undergraduate student; not very interested by the news; 19 years old**)

"Intoxication. We don't know what we have just seen, nor are we clear about what we saw yesterday. We forget what we saw last week. It is a continuous immediacy that does not allow for reflection and attention." (**Answer 23: Feminine gender; has completed secondary education; very interested in the news; 21 years old**)

The responses reflect a common concern about the dynamics of news consumption on digital platforms. One participant describes the experience of swiping through content as becoming "a robot", where the notion of time fades and only the most impactful news makes an impression, often overshadowed by entertainment content, such as memes, which are easier to consume and require less attention. This statement resonates with that of another respondent, who confesses that he barely retains "not even 80 % of what he reads" due to the "overwhelming amount" of information available. Another individual expresses that information saturation sometimes "clouds the mind" and causes doubts about the veracity of what is seen, especially when a topic goes viral and dominates their news feed. Finally, the description of the situation as "intoxication" underlines a deep concern about the inability to adequately process information, quickly forgetting what was seen even a week ago, suggesting that the constant immediacy of news prevents reflection and sustained attention. These personal testimonies undoubtedly demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon of information overabundance and its detrimental effects on users' trust and recall of news.

4. News avoidance

All the previously mentioned issues, such as information overabundance or the very nature of short videos can impact trust and can result in an effect that seems to be exacerbated in recent years: news avoidance. In an effort to define the term, Palmer & Toff (2022, p.4) in their article state that Skovsgaard and Andersen coined a definition of it: "low news consumption over a continuous period of time caused either by a dislike for news (intentional) or a higher preference for other content (unintentional)".

The factors affecting this attitude are diverse but undoubtedly have a lot to do with those mentioned above. According to the Reuters Report, it can be seen that more than half of the people who avoid news content on a regular basis do so by, among other ways, "scrolling the news content" itself, that is, by scrolling down their feed to consume other types of content, thus avoiding news content. According to the same report, it seems that the number of young people avoiding the news appears to be slowly growing (Newman et al., 2023).
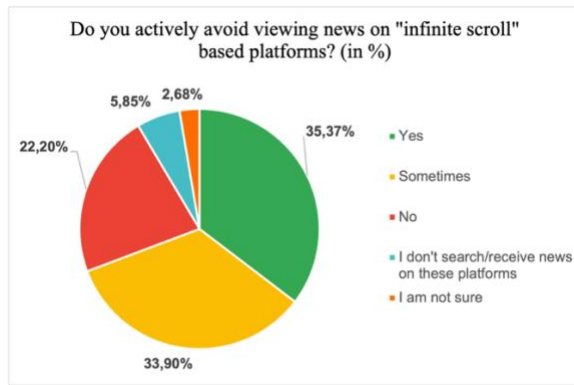
Figure 27. Source: Self-made on
Excel © with self-collected data

Although it is difficult to interpret its meaning, figure 27, made with the data collected for this thesis, shows that when people are asked if they actively try to avoid news content found in the infinite scroll on TikTok or on Instagram Reels, 35.37 % of people say that they do, a figure that is undoubtedly quite high. In addition to this, 33.90 % of the respondents say that they "sometimes" do so, suggesting that more than 65 % of young adults do indeed "avoid" or "avoid sometimes" certain news content, compared to only 22.20 % who say that they never do so. This data is undoubtedly quite revealing of the impact that infinite scroll systems are having on people's attitude towards news content and their reaction to it on these platforms.
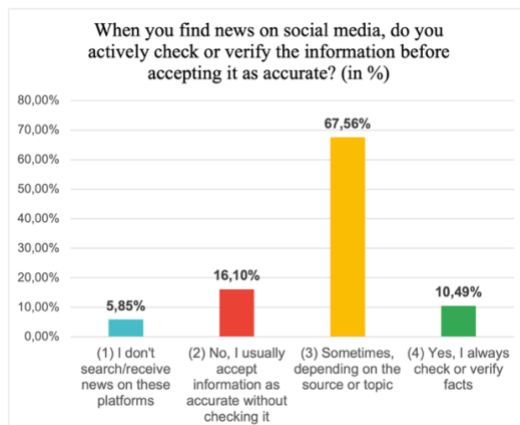
Figure 28. Source: Self-made on
Excel © with self-collected data

Before concluding this chapter, it is interesting to comment on this last figure, it answers the question of whether people actively verify information before accepting it as true after encountering it through TikTok or Instagram reels. The data reflects the reality of young people, quite effectively. Even though young adults say they generally prefer more innovative ways of getting news and explaining it, such as those given by non-professional journalists in short video formats on these social networks, and at the same time reveal a lower credibility of these sources compared to other media, when specifically asked the aforementioned question, more than 6 out of 10 people claim to accept sometimes the information as true depending on the source or subject matter. In other words, the source becomes a very important element in the accessibility that young people give to news. It is according to the nature of the content, the information it contains and its source that people accept it as correct, incorrect, or doubtful and then decide to accept its content, reject it, ignore it or as previously mentioned, check it, sometimes in a hybrid way with traditional media. This is, of course, without prejudice to young adults who generally do

not check or, on the contrary, always verify information.

In short, this chapter shows a trend of distrust towards incidental news, while at the same time traditional media, despite its biases, seems to be more trusted by young adults (confirmation of hypothesis H10; see Annex 2). Despite the interest in innovative formats presented by non-professional journalists, credibility remains higher for traditional media. The personalization of content on social media, while valued by some, raises concerns about the echo chamber effect and the fear of missing out on important information (FOMO). Furthermore, the overabundance of information contributes to a decrease in trust in digital news, with a notable effect of information saturation that leads users to retain less information and to discredit the news they receive (confirmation of hypotheses H11, H13 and H14; see Annex 2). Finally, the phenomenon of news avoidance was addressed, where more than half of young people tend to move towards alternative content, avoiding the news (confirmation of hypothesis H12; see Annex 2).

VIII. Conclusions

This thesis had three main objectives which were addressed in three different and logical chapters: (1) understanding young adults' preferences when obtaining news on TikTok and Instagram Reels; (2) understanding attitudes towards the news content received and (3) assessing young adults' trust in news content encountered. These chapters revealed the complex relationship of young adults with news content in the digital age, marked by a significant transformation in consumption preferences, trust in news sources and interaction with news content through their feeds.

In the first chapter, there was evidence of a shift in young people's preference for multimedia and short formats, a characteristic of TikTok and Instagram Reels, but that did not seem to indicate a growing disinterest in news but rather an evolution in the modes of consumption (confirmation of hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4; see Annex 2). What is more, despite the predominance of entertainment content on these platforms, a considerable number of users still turn to them for information, however, showing at the same time a clear preference for soft news content. The emergence of non-professional journalists as alternative sources of information was also notable because of their innovative approach to communicating the news, although it also raised questions about the veracity of their content as seen in chapter three.

The second chapter highlighted a transformation in news consumption, where incidental exposure through TikTok and Instagram Reels becomes the norm (confirmation of hypotheses H5, H6, H7, H8, H9; see Annex 2). This mode of consumption, although passive and less in-depth due to the instantaneous and brief nature of these media, does not exclude resorting to traditional media to delve deeper into topics of particular interest for the users, evidencing a quite notable hybrid model of news consumption.

Finally, the third chapter revealed a tendency towards distrust of incidental news,

contrasting with greater credibility given to traditional media despite their alleged "biases" (confirmation of hypotheses H10, H11, H12, H13, H14; see Annex 2). The personalization of content on social media, while appreciated, still raises concerns about the echo chamber effect and the fear of missing out on relevant information. Furthermore, the overabundance of information seems to contribute to a lowering trust in digital news, leading to information saturation that promotes limited retention and scepticism toward incoming news content. Interestingly, the phenomenon of news avoidance is addressed, with a noticeable trend towards alternative content.

Thus, this thesis has unveiled the complex dilemmas faced by young adults browsing news in the digital age, especially through infinite scrolling platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, which present a quite paradoxical scenario. On the one hand, these platforms respond to a demand for attractive and non-traditional news formats that captivate young adults for their novelty and accessibility, satisfying the appetite for diversified, brief, and multimedia-rich content. On the other hand, this preference coexists with a notable scepticism towards the credibility of such sources, as traditional media are still perceived as more reliable. This dichotomy is also embedded in a broader struggle and context: the challenge of confronting the attractive but overwhelming flood of information that is characteristic of the infodemic. Young adults find themselves locked into platforms that effortlessly blend incidental news content into their daily digital diet, but this can lead to superficial engagement with news, as the large volume of information to which they are exposed makes it difficult to remember or prioritize the informational content they encounter. This scenario draws a complex panorama of information consumption, in which the attraction of modernity and accessibility clearly clashes with the concern for depth, accuracy and trust in news, revealing the critical need for strategies and actions that could help to circumvent these contradictions and difficulties.

IX.   Limitations and Future Research

The complexity of human interactions with social networks, coupled with the limits of this paper's scope, inevitably leads to limitations that must be taken into account. Firstly, the selection of platforms was limited to Instagram Reels and TikTok because of the changes they introduced in terms of news content consumption due to the implementation of infinite scroll. Therefore, comparisons with a larger number of platforms could provide a broader picture. Secondly, the research did not differentiate in detail by demographic data, although it was collected to ensure a representative sample. This could be of interest in future research to identify possible differentiated patterns of news consumption on these platforms by intersecting variables such as gender or socio-economic background with the results. Third, the exclusive focus on the Spanish young adult population offers an interesting insight into the national reality; however, an international comparison or a larger-scale study could offer broader views and establish interesting comparisons to determine whether the reality observed coincides with the one observed in other contexts. Fourth, it is also important to consider that this study did not take into account other factors that might be potentially relevant when trying to measure people's reaction to news content

found incidentally on social media, such as the importance of metadata like the dates or the mentions made in the posts; or also, the impact of the number of "likes" or "comments" on young people's perception of them. It could be inferred that, depending on the level of engagement of the post, incidental content might be perceived differently by users. Finally, as additional lines of research on trust, it might be interesting to evaluate the perception of artificial intelligence in content creation and examine how its emergence might influence young people's perception and trust of news on social media, or how the implementation of systems such as fact-checking might also impact trust in news received.

X.   References

AIMC. (2023). Marco General de los Medios España 2023. *AIMC.* https://www.aimc.es/a1mc-c0nt3nt/uploads/2023/02/Marco_General_Medios_2023.pdf

Amoedo, A. (2023). *Disminuye el consumo de noticias en medios digitales y se estabiliza el uso de las fuentes tradicionales offline | Digital News Report España 2023 (DNR): informe de noticias digitales en español.* https://www.digitalnewsreport.es/2023/disminuye-el-consumo-de-noticias-en-medios-digitales-y-se-estabiliza-el-uso-de-las-fuentes-tradicionales-offline/

Armstrong, C. L., McAdams, M. J., & Cain, J. (2019). Hazy habits: What kinds of news do young people want? *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, *31*(1). https://doi.org/10.58997/smc.v31i1.13

Bergström, A., & Belfrage, M. J. (2018). News in Social Media. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(5), 583–598. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1423625

Bhargava, H. K. (2023). If It's Enraging, it is Engaging: Infinite Scrolling in Information Platforms. *Graduate School of Management University of California Davis.* https://questromworld.bu.edu/platformstrategy/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2023/06/PlatStrat2023_paper_48.pdf

Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2017). Incidental news: How young people consume news on social media. *Proceedings of the . . . Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.* https://doi.org/10.24251/hicss.2017.217

Bolz, L. (2023). Co-writing journalism on TikTok: media legitimacy and edutainment communities. *Online Media and Global Communication*, *2*(3), 446–467. https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2023-2005

Burns, A. (2010). Oblique strategies for ambient journalism. *M/C Journal*, *13*(2). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.230

Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A. (2015). Social Media: defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, *23*(1), 46–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2015.972282

Casais, A. A., Moreno-Moreno, E., Negredo-Bruna, S., Kaufmann-Argueta, J., & Vara-Miguel, A. (2023). *Digital News Report España 2023. El periodismo afronta el reto de la confianza ante los nuevos referentes*. https://doi.org/10.15581/019.2023

Casero-Ripollés, A. (2012). Beyond Newspapers: News Consumption among Young People in the Digital Era. *Revista Científica De Educomunicación*, *20*(39). https://www.revistacomunicar.com/index.php?contenido=detalles&numero=39&articulo=39-2012-17

Chan, V. J., & Allman-Farinelli, M. (2022). Young Australian Adults Prefer Video Posts for Dissemination of Nutritional Information over the Social Media Platform Instagram: A Pilot Cross-Sectional Survey. *Nutrients*, *14*(20), 4382. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14204382

Chen, M., & Peng, A. Y. (2022). Why do people choose different social media platforms? Linking use motives with social media affordances and personalities. *Social Science Computer Review*, 089443932110491. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211049120

Chin-Fook, L., & Simmonds, H. (2011). Redefining Gatekeeping Theory For A Digital Generation. *McMaster Journal of Communication*, *8*. https://doi.org/10.15173/mjc.v8i0.259

Deng, T., Vargas-Bianchi, L., & Mensa, M. (2023). Cross-Cultural comparison of TikTok uses and gratifications. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2023.2270534

Downs, A. J. (1958). An economic theory of democracy. *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, *2*(3), 324. https://doi.org/10.2307/2109186

elDiario.es. (2022, June 14). Los jóvenes rechazan los medios tradicionales y se informan por TikTok e Instagram. *elDiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/jovenes-rechazan-medios-tradicionales-informan-tiktok-e-instagram_1_9083485.html

Estrella, E. C. M., Samacá-Salamanca, E., Rivero, A. G., & Cifuentes-Ambra, C. (2023). Generation Z in Chile, Colombia, México, and Panama: Interests and new digital consumption habits. Their use of Instagram and TikTok. *Profesional De La Informacion*. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.mar.18

Fernández, S. P. (2010). Consumo de medios de comunicación y actitudes hacia la prensa por parte de los universitarios. *Zer: Revista De Estudios De Comunicación = Komunikazio Ikasketen Aldizkaria*, *15*(28), 133–149. https://doi.org/10.1387/zer.2354

Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2017). Are people incidentally exposed to news on social media? A comparative analysis. *New Media & Society*, *20*(7), 2450–2468. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817724170

Gangadharbatla, H., Bright, L. F., & Logan, K. (2014). Social Media and News Gathering: Tapping into the Millennial Mindset. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, *3*(1). https://thejsms.org/index.php/JSMS/article/view/63/33

Gil De Zúñiga, H. G., Weeks, B. E., & Ardèvol-Abreu, A. (2017). Effects of the News-Finds-Me perception in communication: Social media use implications for news seeking and learning about politics. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *22*(3), 105–123. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12185

Hagar, N., & Diakopoulos, N. (2023). Algorithmic indifference: The dearth of news recommendations on TikTok. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231192964

Hermida, A. (2010). TWITTERING THE NEWS. *Journalism Practice*, *4*(3), 297–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512781003640703

INE. (2022). *Población por edad (grupos quinquenales), Españoles/Extranjeros, Sexo y Año*. Instituto Nacional De Estadística (INE). https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Tabla.htm?path=/t20/e245/p08/l0/&file=01002.px&L=0

Jiménez, A. G., Tur-Viñes, V., & Pastor, Y. (2018). Consumo mediático de adolescentes y jóvenes. Noticias, contenidos audiovisuales y medición de audiencias. *La Revista Icono 14*, *16*(1), 22–46. https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v16i1.1101

Karizat, N., Delmonaco, D., Eslami, M., & Andalibi, N. (2021). Algorithmic Folk Theories and Identity: How TikTok Users Co-Produce Knowledge of Identity and Engage in Algorithmic Resistance. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-computer Interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1145/3476046

Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Hermida, A., Valenzuela, S., & Villi, M. (2020). Studying incidental news: Antecedents, dynamics and implications. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, *21*(8), 1025–1030. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920915372

Kümpel, A. S., Karnowski, V., & Keyling, T. (2015). News sharing in Social Media: A review of current research on news sharing users, content, and networks. *Social Media and Society*, *1*(2), 205630511561014. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115610141

Lauf, E. (2001). Research note: The Vanishing Young Reader. *European Journal of Communication*, *16*(2), 233–243. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323101016002005

Liang, S., & Wolfe, J. L. (2022). Getting a Feel of Instagram Reels: The Effects of Posting Format on Online Engagement. *Journal of Student Research*, *11*(4). https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v11i4.3600

Liu, W. (2015). A Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory. *Cross-cultural Communication*, *11*(9), 71–78. http://52.196.142.242/index.php/ccc/article/download/7415/8421

Martínez-Costa, M., Serrano-Puche, J., Portilla, I., & Sánchez-Blanco, C. (2019). Young adults' interaction with online news and advertising. *Comunicar*, *27*(59), 19–28. https://doi.org/10.3916/c59-2019-02

Menon, D. (2022). Factors influencing Instagram Reels usage behaviours: An examination of motives, contextual age and narcissism. *Telematics and Informatics Reports*, *5*, 100007. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teler.2022.100007

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T. R., Eddy, K. E., & Nielsen, R. (2023). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/es/digital-news-report/2023

Palmer, R., & Toff, B. (2022). Neither absent nor ambient: incidental news exposure from the perspective of news avoiders in the UK, United States, and Spain. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 194016122211031. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221103144

Park, S., & Lee, J. Y. (2023). Incidental news exposure on Facebook and its relation to trust in news. *Social Media and Society*, *9*(1), 205630512311588. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231158823

Peña-Fernández, S., Larrondo-Ureta, A., & Morales-I-Gras, J. (2022). Current affairs on TikTok. Virality and entertainment for digital natives. *Profesional De La Informacion*. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.ene.06

Potnis, D., & Tahamtan, I. (2021). Hashtags for gatekeeping of information on social media. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *72*(10), 1234–1246. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24467

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On The Horizon*, *9*(5), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816

Qayyum, M. A., Williamson, K., Liu, Y., & Hider, P. (2010). Investigating the News Seeking behavior of Young Adults. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, *41*(3), 178–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2010.10721462

Rubin, A. M. (2008). The Uses-and-Gratifications Perspective of Media Effects. In *Media Effects : Advances in Theory and Research* (pp. 165–182). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410602428-24

Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication and Society*, *3*(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0301_02

Salonen, M., & Laaksonen, S. (2023). Post-publication gatekeeping practices: Exploring conversational and visual gatekeeping on Finnish newspapers' Instagram accounts. *Nordicom Review*, *44*(2), 253–278. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2023-0014

Schäfer, S. (2023). Incidental news exposure in a digital media environment: a scoping review of recent research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *47*(2), 242–260. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2169953

Scheffauer, R., Goyanes, M., & De Zúñiga, H. G. (2021). Beyond social media news use algorithms: how political discussion and network heterogeneity clarify incidental news exposure. *Online Information Review*, *45*(3), 633–650. https://doi.org/10.1108/oir-04-2020-0133

Schwaiger, L., Vogler, D., & Eisenegger, M. (2022). Change in News Access, Change in Expectations? How Young Social Media Users in Switzerland Evaluate the Functions and Quality of News. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *27*(3), 609–628. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072787

Segado-Boj, F., Díaz-Campo, J., & Quevedo-Redondo, R. (2019, October 1). *Influence of the "News Finds Me" Perception on News Sharing and News Consumption on Social Media*. https://reunir.unir.net/handle/123456789/9529

Shoemaker, P. J., Riccio, J., & Johnson, P. J. (2013). Gatekeeping [Dataset]. In *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*. https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756841-0011

Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*. Routledge.

Simón, P., Clavería, S., García Albacete, G., López Ortega, A., & Torre, M. (2020). Informe Juventud en España 2020. *Instituto De La Juventud*. https://www.injuve.es/observatorio/demografia-e-informacion-general/informe-juventud-en-espana-2020

Sundar, S. S., & Limperos, A. M. (2013). Uses and Grats 2.0: New gratifications for new media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *57*(4), 504–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.845827

Takano, M., Ogawa, Y., Taka, F., & Morishita, S. (2021). Effects of incidental brief exposure to news on news knowledge while scrolling through videos. *IEEE Access*, *9*, 37772–37783. https://doi.org/10.1109/access.2021.3063484

Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2015). How Gatekeeping Still Matters: Understanding Media Effects in an Era of Curated Flows. *In Gatekeeping in Transition*, 39–58. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315849652-8

Umar, N. J., Hastuti, H., & Wandi, W. (2023). Media Consumption Patterns and Preferences among Young Adults: A Survey Study. *Palakka Media and Islamic Communication*, *4*(1), 35–44. https://doi.org/10.30863/palakka.v4i1.5088

Vázquez-Herrero, J., Negreira-Rey, M. C., & Sixto-García, J. (2022). Mind the Gap! Journalism on Social Media and News Consumption Among Young Audiences.

International Journal of Communication, *16*. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19643

Wallace, J. (2017). Modelling contemporary gatekeeping. *Digital Journalism*, *6*(3), 274–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1343648

West, S. M. (2017). Raging against the machine: network gatekeeping and collective action on social media platforms. *Media and Communication*, *5*(3), 28–36. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i3.989

Xu, J. (2022, September 21). *Analysis of Social Media Algorithm Recommendation System*. https://www.paradigmpress.org/SSSH/article/view/229

XI. Annexes
A. Annex 1: Questionnaire

This questionnaire was distributed in Spanish to facilitate the respondent's answering process. It has been translated to English for the purpose of this thesis data analysis and to add the questionnaire into the annexes as follows.

———

"Infodemic and News Consumption in Young Adults: Incidental Exposure to news on TikTok and Instagram Reels

Hello! My name is Martín Fernández Martínez, I am a 5th-year IR-COM student at Comillas Pontifical University. Thank you for your interest in contributing to this research for my Global Communication Thesis. Your participation will help to better understand how Generation Z consumes, understands, and trusts the new news formats distributed through the so-called "infinite scroll" on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Reels.

In this questionnaire of 38 short questions (approx. 8 min.), the anonymity of the participants is guaranteed, as well as the confidentiality of their data. The latter will only contribute to the realization of this thesis.

IF YOU DO NOT RECEIVE NEWS THROUGH THESE PLATFORMS, PLEASE ANSWER THE "I DO NOT RECEIVE NEWS" OPTIONS IN EACH QUESTION.

Basic definitions of terms that will appear in the questionnaire:

Infinite Scroll: In Instagram Reels and TikTok it is a feature that allows you to scroll from one piece of content to another automatically and endlessly, simply by swiping the screen upwards.

Incidental News Consumption: On platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikTok it occurs when you come across news while consuming content of any kind, without having specifically searched for it.

Part 1: Basic requirements

1. **Are you between 18 and 24 years old?**
- Yes
- No

2. **Do you currently reside in Spain?**

- Yes
- No

3. Do you use TikTok or Instagram Reels?

- Yes
- No

Part 2: Demographic data
This section aims to obtain basic information about respondents to contextualise responses and ensure a diverse representation of the survey results.

4. Please select your age.

- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24

5. Please select the option that best describes your gender.

- Masculine
- Feminine
- Non-Binary
- I prefer not to say
- Other_____

6. Educational level (select the highest level of education you have completed):

- Secondary education or equivalent
- Vocational/technical education
- Bachelor's degree/university degree
- Postgraduate degree
- I prefer not to say
- Other_____

7. Approximate income level (please select the range that best represents your household's annual income in Euros):

- Less than 10.000€.
- From 10.001 to 20.000 euros
- From 20.001 to 30.000 euros
- From 30.001 to 40.000 euros
- From 40.001 to 50.000 euros

- From 50.001 euros to 60.000 euros
- More than 60.001 euros
- I prefer not to say

8. Employment status (please select your current employment status):

- Full-time student
- Part-time student
- Full-time employee
- Employed part-time
- Unemployed
- Prefer not to say
- Other_____

9. Social media usage (on average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media platforms?)

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 5 hours or more

Part 3: News consumption and preferences on social networks
This section explores how young adults consume, prefer and interact with content on TikTok and Instagram Reels.

10. Please rate your general level of interest in the news on a scale (1 being "I am not interested" and 5 being "I am very interested").

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

11. In your daily life, how often do you use the "infinite scroll" (infinite scrolling of content) on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels for all purposes (entertainment, keeping in touch with your areas of interest...)?

- Very often
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

12. When using TikTok or Instagram Reels, what type of content do you search for/consume?

- Entertainment content (e.g. funny videos, memes, dance...)
- News
- Lifestyle/fashion/personal development
- Food and travel
- Games and sports
- Art and creativity
- Animals and nature
- Other_____

13. If you receive news on TikTok or Instagram Reels, what type of content do you look for/prefer?

- Hard news content (e.g. politics, economics...)
- Soft news content (e.g. sports, celebrity gossip, scientific advances...)
- Soft and hard news (mixed)
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms.

14. If you receive news on TikTok or Instagram Reels, which content formats do you prefer when you scroll?

- Video
- Images (may contain text)
- Infographics
- I do not search/receive news on these platforms
- Other_____

15. Do you prefer quick and short news content on social media?

- Yes
- No
- I do not search/receive news on these platforms

16. Have you ever obtained news provided by "non-professional journalists" on TikTok or Instagram Reels (e.g. bloggers, non-traditional news accounts, citizen journalists)?

- Yes
- No
- I do not search/receive news on these platforms

17. If so, how often do you get news stories from "non-professional journalists" on TikTok and Instagram Reels? (1 being "Not frequently" and 5 being "Very frequently").

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

18. If you receive news on these platforms, which do you prefer: news from "non-professional journalists" or "news from traditional media accounts" (newspapers, radios...)? Select the option that BEST represents your preferences.

- I prefer news published by "non-professional journalists" on social media.
- I have no clear preferences
- I prefer news coming from "traditional media" (ex: El País, El Mundo...) on these platforms.
- I do not search/receive news on these platforms.

19. Optional: If you prefer news published by non-professional journalists to news published by traditional news accounts on TikTok and Instagram Reels, or the other way around, and would like to share your reasons, please explain them in the field below.

Open-ended answer.

Part 4: Interaction with the incidental news

This section examines how participants discover news incidentally on social media and how they react to it.

20. How do you primarily discover news content on TikTok or Instagram Reels?

- I actively search for news content (I search for it through the APP search engine...).
- I find news casually while browsing.
- I rely on the messages I receive from my contacts.
- I follow certain news accounts or pages.
- I do not search/receive news on these platforms.
- Other_____

21. When you scroll through your social media page (TikTok or Instagram Reels), how often do you incidentally (by chance) come across news?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms

22. When you come across incidental news (by chance), how often do you look for additional information or context beyond the incidental news content itself?

- I tend to look for additional information or context, regardless of my level of interest.
- I do not usually look for additional information or context unless I am very interested in the content of the news item.
- I do not usually look for additional information beyond the incidental context itself.
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms.

23. Optional: If you wish, you can develop your answer in the following field. Ex: Why do you seek information beyond the content you find? Or why not, when do you usually do it?

Open-ended answer.

24. If you are looking for additional information beyond the incidental content of the news item, how do you usually search for it? (Select one or more options)

- I look for more information directly on the social media platform.
- I visit the official website of a traditional media (newspapers, TV channels, etc.).
- I do an internet search using a search engine (e.g. Google).
- I check related articles or sources that appear in social media postings.
- I participate in comments and discussions on the social media post to find out more information.
- I do not search for/receive news on these platforms.

25. For news that you come across incidentally (by chance), do you usually follow the source or the account that published it?

- Yes, I follow them
- No, I don't follow them
- It depends
- I don't search/receive news on these platforms

26. How often do you consider that the news content you come across incidentally (by chance) matches your personal interests or preferences?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms

27. Only if you receive news on social media: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with this statement: "I get the impression that news is directed at me when I scroll". (1 being "I totally disagree" and 5 being "I totally agree").

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Part 5: Trust and engagement with news on social media

This section focuses on the perceived trustworthiness of news on TikTok and Instagram Reels. It assesses users' trust in video news content.

28. How much trust do you place in news disseminated in video or similar formats on social networks such as TikTok and Instagram Reels?

- High trust
- Moderate trust
- Neutral
- Moderate distrust
- High distrust
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms

29. How much do you trust social media news content compared to traditional news media?

- I trust social media news content a lot more.
- I trust social media news content more.
- I trust both equally.
- I trust traditional media more.
- I trust traditional media much more.

30. Optional: If you wish, you can develop your answer to the previous question in the following field. What makes you trust one medium more than another?

Open-ended answer.

31. When getting informed through TikTok and Instagram Reels, how often do you experience the fear of missing out (FOMO) on other important informational content due to algorithm-based recommendation systems that recommend specific content to you?

- Very often

- Often
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms

32. How do you feel about the personalization of news content on social media, especially TikTok and Instagram Reels, based on your interests and previous interactions with the platform?

- I value personalization positively
- I am neutral in this respect
- I do not value personalization positively
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms

33. Optional: You may wish to elaborate on your answer to the previous question in the following field.

Open-ended answer.

34. In your opinion, does the overabundance of information and the "infinite scroll" nature of social media negatively affect your trust in the news content presented on these platforms?

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure
- I don't search/receive news on these platforms

35. Optional: If you wish, you may elaborate on your answer to the previous question in the following field.

Open-ended answer.

36. Do you actively avoid viewing news on "infinite scroll" based platforms?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- I am not sure
- I don't search/receive news on these platforms

37. How do you perceive the credibility and reliability of algorithmically selected news content delivered through social networks such as TikTok and Instagram?

- Highly credible and reliable
- Moderately credible and reliable
- Neutral
- Not very credible nor reliable
- Not at all credible nor reliable

38. When you find news on social media, do you actively check or verify the information before accepting it as accurate?

- Yes, I always check or verify facts.
- Sometimes, depending on the source or topic.
- No, I tend to accept information as accurate without checking it.
- I do not seek/receive news on these platforms.

39. Do you consent to the data provided in this survey being used for the purposes of this university research? Please note that the data will be treated completely anonymously and confidentially.

- Yes
- No

Your contribution to this research is highly relevant. Thank you very much for your for your participation."

B. Annex 2: Objectives and hypothesis
1. Objectives

Objective 1: To explore and understand the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of young adults in consuming news on infinite scrolling social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, focusing on the factors that motivate their engagement with news content in today's digital media landscape.

Objective 2: To analyze how young adults interact with incidental news content on TikTok and Instagram Reels, particularly focusing on the impact of infinite scroll systems and platform algorithms on their news consumption behaviors.

Objective 3: To evaluate the degree of trust and engagement young adults have towards news obtained through social media (TikTok and Instagram Reels especially) and recommendation systems, examining their perceptions of news credibility and the impact of new media formats on news consumption

2.   Hypothesis

Related to Objective 1:

- **H1**: Young adults predominantly engage with 'soft' news on social media platforms, preferring entertainment and lifestyle content over hard news

- **H2**: A majority of young adults prefer video news formats on TikTok and Instagram over traditional formats like images and text aligning with the fast-paced nature of platforms like TikTok and Instagram

- **H3**: The main content young people seek using these platforms is mainly entertainment or any other content rather than news content

- **H4**: A significant proportion of young adults frequently prefer obtaining news from non-professional 'journalists' on social media platforms

Related to Objective 2:

- **H5**: Most young adults primarily consume news incidentally rather than actively seeking it out on social media

- **H6**: The majority of news content consumed by young adults on social media does not originate from sources they directly follow

- **H7**: When highly interested in an incidental news item, news consumption among young adults is predominantly hybrid, incorporating both traditional media sources and social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram

- **H8**: When encountering news incidentally, young adults are likely to engage only superficially, often not seeking additional information or context beyond the initial content unless they are very interested in them

- **H9**: Young people perceive that the news they receive on social media is more tailored to their interests due to algorithm-based recommendation systems

Related to Objective 3:

- **H10**: Young adults exhibit lower trust in news content delivered through video formats on social media compared to traditional media outlets

- **H11**: People fear of missing out due to the algorithm recommendation systems and filter bubbles

- **H12**: A considerable number of young adults actively avoid engaging with news content on social media platforms

- **H13**: The overabundance of information and the nature of infinite scrolling on social media negatively impact young adults' trust in the news content presented on these platforms

- **H14**: Young adults exhibit a higher level of distrust towards news content that is algorithmically curated and presented through social media platforms