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Old Habits, New Platforms: Exploring the Age-group Divide in Romanian News Consumption¹

Abstract

Recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts in Ukraine, and elections have significantly transformed news engagement, often leading to information overload and pushing many individuals to disengage from traditional news channels in favor of algorithm-driven social media platforms. Understanding these shifts is important because of their implications for informed citizenry and its association with democracy. Given the context, the current study explores age-related differences in news consumption patterns among Romanian audiences using focus group discussions. The sample includes two age cohorts: younger adults (aged 20–30), or digital natives, and older adults (aged 55 and above), whose media habits were shaped before the digital era. Thematic analysis and natural language processing techniques revealed clear age-group distinctions. Main findings suggest that younger participants tend to consume news via social media platforms, favoring algorithmically curated, emotionally engaging, short-form content. They strategically avoid distressing or repetitive news content. On the other hand, older adults still rely on traditional media like television, emphasizing source credibility, comprehensive coverage, and civic responsibility. When asked about what a healthy media diet is, there are further generational contrasts. Younger individuals viewed media consumption as an individual responsibility. By contrast, older adults emphasized the collective responsibility of educational and institutional systems to guide news consumption practices. These findings highlight the profound impact of digital platforms on generational news consumption behaviors, emphasizing the need for tailored media literacy initiatives, journalism practices, and policy frameworks to address age-group divides and contribute to the emergence of a healthier information ecosystem.

Keywords: news consumption, age-group divide, selective exposure, information overload, media diet

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Introduction

In recent years, the evolution of the media landscape has generated significant academic interest in understanding news consumption patterns. Due to the proliferation of digital platforms, mobile devices, and social media, audiences now navigate an environment abundant in information (Gui & Büchi, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2021). This study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of news consumption patterns with an emphasis on key aspects such as media usage, news avoidance, selective exposure, and healthy media diet. While previous research has concentrated mainly on quantitative metrics (Brancu & Turcu, 2023; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Lee & Chyi, 2014; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021), such as the time spent on media platforms, frequency of use, and the differences between traditional and digital news sources, less studies focused on qualitative approaches, particularly in Eastern countries (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Buturoiu et al., 2023a; Wolf & Schnauber, 2015).

Thus, this study tries to fill a gap by exploring the qualitative aspects of news consumption. Specifically, the research examines the motivations, perceptions, and emotional responses (i.e., immediate reactions to various questions) that mark generational differences in how news is consumed. These aspects are explored through focus group discussions designed to elicit participants' reflections on their everyday news habits, spontaneous reactions to current events, and trust in different media formats. These spontaneous responses were captured via participants' descriptions of how they feel when consuming news (e.g., informed, anxious, fatigued), while perceptions were investigated through their assessments of media credibility and personal relevance. Thematic analysis was then used to identify generational patterns not only in usage, but also in the underlying psychological and affective dimensions of news engagement.

The majority of existing studies have focused on generational differences in news consumption, providing primarily analysis related to media usage across various age groups (Ghersetti & Westlund, 2018; Loos & Ivan, 2024; Taneja et al., 2018). However, such quantitative approaches may miss the psychological and sociocultural factors that impact these behaviors. For example, metrics like number of views and other usage indicators can indicate how much time is allocated to news consumption, but they do not explain why individuals choose to engage with or avoid news content, nor do they address the emotional aspects of these consumption patterns. As Hopmann et al. (2025) argue, a qualitative examination of media diets across age groups in several countries, including Romania, reveals that the motivations and emotional responses associated with media use vary among different generational groups. This study builds on such insights by exploring concepts such as selective exposure (the tendency of individuals to seek out information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs) and news avoidance, a behavior observed more and more often in today's high-choice media environment.

Furthermore, while studies explore the media habits of different generations, they do not grasp the subjective aspects that influence how news is perceived and consumed (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Klopfenstein et al., 2024; Matsiola et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2022). For example, younger audiences often report a "news finds me" phenomenon, where users are exposed to news through social media feeds, which often generates either overexposure or avoidance (Park & Kaye, 2021; Villi et al., 2022). By contrast, older generations tend to rely more on traditional sources, such as television and print media, often perceiving news consumption as a civic duty (Andersen et al., 2021; Brosius et al., 2022). This difference influences the quantity of news consumed and shapes the emotional responses associated with news exposure. The chapter by Buturoiu et al. (2023b) on patterns of news consumption in a high-

choice media environment underlines these differences, suggesting that people have media diets influenced by their social contexts and historical experiences.

A healthy media diet refers to the selection and consumption of news that are informative yet not overwhelming. (Hopmann et al., 2025, p. 5) This concept goes beyond the quantity of news consumption and revolves around the quality and diversity of information. It suggests that a balanced news diet should allow people to stay informed without being overloaded with information, exposed to emotional distress, or selective exposure that might reinforce echo chambers (Peters et al., 2022; Zhong & Gu, 2024). Despite its significance, the research studies that examine what constitutes a healthy media diet are scarce. Understanding these concepts is particularly important in a media environment where platforms shape content exposure via their algorithms, influencing not only what news is consumed but also how it is interpreted.

In summary, this study tries to bridge the gap in existing research by providing qualitative insights into the generational patterns of news consumption in Romania. Even if a growing number of studies examine generational differences in news consumption, most rely on quantitative survey data, what remains insufficiently explored are the subjective meanings and affective experiences associated with these behaviors. For instance, why do younger users report news fatigue and actively avoid current events? Why do older audiences perceive news consumption as a civic duty, even when expressing skepticism about media accuracy? How do different generations experience algorithmic curation and form emotional bonds, or disconnects with news content? This qualitative exploration is essential for understanding how different generations engage with news and can help drafting policy recommendations that encourage people to adopt healthier diets in order to enable them to be better informed and capable to navigate the challenges of the digital age.

Literature review

The digital, mobile, and platform-driven media landscape has changed the way users engage with news, often leaving them overwhelmed with excessive information (Oh et al., 2021). This news or information overload can lead to several consumption patterns such as *news snacking* (Ohme & Mothes, 2025; Valenzuela et al., 2025), *incidental news exposure* (Schäfer, 2023), *selective exposure to news* (Cardenal et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2024), or *news avoidance* (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Villi et al., 2022). At the same time, many people nowadays disengage from traditional news sources (Goyanes et al., 2023; Van Aelst et al., 2021) and turn to alternative information channels, such as social media platforms, where content is heavily shaped by algorithms and non-professionals (Andersen et al., 2022; Arguedas et al., 2022). Furthermore, especially for individuals with low interest in news, social media platforms significantly influence, by means of the way they curate and distribute information, both news access and exposure to information (Arguedas et al., 2022). In such a context, understanding how individuals navigate today's complex media landscape is essential for analyzing their evolving information consumption habits. Thus, an examination of people's news consumption patterns provides insights into how they engage with the news – a fundamental aspect to a well-functioning democracy –, in which informed citizenry is a key pillar (Valenzuela et al., 2025).

In the following literature review sections, we will explore patterns of news consumption in today's media landscape, focusing on differences across generations. While much of the literature on news consumption adopts a generational lens, framing media habits as shaped by formative experiences and cohort-specific socialization, this study approaches the issue through a comparative age-group perspective. Generational labels such as Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers are employed primarily as heuristic tools to organize and compare behaviors across age cohorts. In our analysis, younger participants refer to individuals aged 20–30 (broadly corresponding to Gen Z and younger Millennials), while older participants are those aged 55 and above, generally representing Gen X and Baby Boomers. Our focus lies in exploring how these age-based groups in Romania differ in their current news consumption practices, emotional responses, and perceptions of media credibility, rather than offering a full sociological account of generational identity formation.

At the same time, we will examine two key tendencies shaping modern news exposure. One of them is selective exposure, referring to people's predisposition to seek out and expose themselves to information that aligns with their prior beliefs (Stroud, 2008). The other one is news avoidance, referring to people's predisposition to resist and reject the news (Villi et al., 2022). Finally, we will conclude with a brief analysis of what a "healthy" media diet looks like (Hopmann et al., 2025), mainly referring to strategies for balanced and informed news consumption.

The literature discussed also aligns with a national stream of research focused on how generational factors intersect with patterns of media consumption, media trust, and digital literacy in an evolving media environment. Brancu and Turcu (2023) demonstrate that media consumption, whether traditional (television, radio, written press) or alternative (social media and online platforms), is strongly correlated with media trust levels, which differ across demographic and social lines. Similarly, Botan (2024) emphasizes the shifting structure of Romania's media system, noting that the transition from centralized broadcasting to commercial, platform-driven ecosystems has redefined both journalistic practices and audience behaviors. In this context, generational divides have become increasingly pronounced. While older generations maintain a stronger attachment to traditional media sources, younger cohorts show a marked preference for digital platforms, often using social media as their main gateway to information (Momoc, 2024). Studies focusing on digital literacy (Fotiade & Popa, 2008) and disinformation resilience (Bargaoanu & Radu, 2018) highlight further generational discrepancies, with younger users being both more exposed to algorithmically curated content and more vulnerable to disinformation despite their frequent use of digital media. Research on Romanian university students (Neghină et al., 2020) and older adults (Răducu, 2023) confirms that media habits are deeply shaped by the technological environment available during formative years. Finally, Dabija et al. (2017) show how Millennials and Gen Z use digital platforms not just for information but also for social navigation and identity expression, while Gen X remains more anchored in hybrid media practices.

News consumption habits across generations in today's media landscape

The 2024 Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025) shows that the current landscape of online news consumption is shifting. Specifically, Facebook usage for news is constantly declining, especially outside Europe and the United States, because people turn to private messaging applications (apps) and video networks. At the same time, the report shows that news consumption is fragmenting across multiple platforms, with YouTube (31%), What-

sApp (21%), and TikTok (13%) gaining traction, surpassing Twitter (X) for the first time. Video content, particularly short-form, is becoming a dominant source for news and is mostly consumed on social media rather than publisher websites. According to the same report, social media, search engines, and news aggregators remain the main sources of news, while less and less people rely on news websites and apps. Additionally, younger audiences are increasingly engaging with partisan commentators, influencers, and independent news creators on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, even though traditional news brands still hold influence on Facebook and X. Furthermore, according to the most recent Global News Report (DATAREPORTAL, 2020), young audiences (18-24 years old) tend to use TikTok for news compared with their elder counterparts (55 and above), who slightly follow the news on this social media app.

These statistics reinforce the idea that news consumption patterns differ across generations. Such differences are mainly influenced by technological advancements and changing societal norms and are more obvious among young audiences (Antunovic et al., 2018). They are often called Millennials or the Internet generation (Antunovic et al., 2018) and refer to those people born after 1980 who grew up with digital media and the Internet (Dimock, 2019). Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are characterized by a heavy reliance on digital platforms for news consumption, primarily through smartphones and social media apps. Antunovic et al. (2018) highlights that young adults often engage in a multi-stage process of news consumption, which includes checking and googling for information. This differs from older generations' behavior, who tend to still rely on traditional news outlets. For example, Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) strongly prefer television and newspapers as a source of news, while Gen X (1965 and 1980) have a more blended approach to news consumption, using both traditional media and digital platforms to seek out new information (Buturoiu et al., 2023c). Furthermore, younger audiences differ from older groups not only in their news consumption habits, but also in their fundamental attitudes toward news. They prioritize content that aligns with their desire for progress and enjoyment in life, shaping their expectations and engagement with news (Galan et al., 2019).

At the same time, in a high-choice media environment, the massive quantity of available news has increased people's tendency to consume specific news topics selectively, thus leaving them selectively informed or sometimes even uninformed (Buturoiu et al., 2022). In this respect, especially in the case of younger audiences, the role of social media as a primary source of news cannot be overstated. This is particularly important because it can be linked to the fact that young people nowadays often adopt a "news finds me" mentality where passive consumption through social media platforms becomes the norm; young people prefer to consume the news that their friends share on social media (Duvekot et al., 2024). This means that, while being online for other reasons, people believe that "they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs – despite not actively following the news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This passive engagement among the younger generation is different from the engagement of older generations, who may still more actively seek news. Such patterns can be explained with reference to the fact that older generations often associate being informed with good citizenship, to the idea of being connected with public life (through traditional forms of public participation, including voting and political trust), and, thus, with higher news consumption from traditional sources such as television and newspapers (Boulianne & Shehata, 2022; Shehata et al., 2016). By contrast, younger individuals may not prioritize news consumption and

engagement as an essential civic duty, thus leading to lower consumption or even avoidance of news altogether. At the same time, social media platforms de-prioritize news over other types of content such as entertaining short-form videos (Robertson, 2025).

Boulianne and Shehata's (2022) study corroborates these findings, highlighting that younger users are not only consuming news differently but are also more likely to engage in political discussions online. This suggests a shift in how news consumption and political participation are connected, in the sense that younger generations are using digital platforms to express opinions, share information, and engage in political discourse. Rather than relying on traditional news sources, they integrate news consumption with interactive and participatory forms of engagement, such as commenting, sharing, or engaging with various issues on social media. This evolving dynamic reflects changing civic norms, where political engagement is increasingly digital and networked rather than following conventional news-following habits.

Furthermore, Valenzuela et al. (2025) suggest that, while an informed citizenry is essential for democracy, in today's high-choice media landscape people are exposed to several types of content from a multitude of sources. The wide variety of available sources enables people – irrespective of age or other individual-level characteristics – to form very different and sometimes even opposing worldviews. This makes studying the mix of news consumption patterns particularly important in understanding several issues such as polarization or uneven political engagement. In such a background, it becomes essential to analyze current patterns of news consumption across generations. Hence, we advance the first research question:

RQ1: What are the distinct patterns of news consumption among younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and older (Gen X and Baby Boomers) generations in Romania?

Understanding news consumption nowadays: selectivity and news avoidance

Essentially, the concept of selective exposure describes how individuals tend to choose information that confirms their existing beliefs and aligns with their social identities (Steppat et al., 2022). This tendency can reinforce pre-existing attitudes and lead to a narrowing of perspectives, which in turn has important implications for the democratic process. Over the years, numerous studies (Steppat et al., 2022; Stroud, 2011; Zhu et al., 2024) have documented how selective consumption of information may contribute to phenomena like polarization and the formation of echo chambers, potentially undermining informed and diverse public discourse. In this respect, scholars argue that selective exposure to news and information needs careful attention, as greater levels of selective exposure are often linked to a higher likelihood of becoming trapped in echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021). Within such restrictive information environments, individuals are less likely to encounter diverse perspectives and counterarguments.

The implications of selective exposure extend beyond individual attitudes to affect public discourse, policymaking, and democratic stability. In an era where digital algorithms often prioritize engagement over accuracy, media consumers may find themselves increasingly surrounded by information that confirms their biases. Therefore, it is essential to understand people's tendency to expose themselves to congruent information, in an attempt to address other pressing issues such as political polarization or radicalization of individuals and facilitate a more balanced public discourse (Buturoiu et al., 2023b).

News avoidance has become a widely discussed issue in today's media landscape, being associated with misperceptions and lower political knowledge and participation (Betakova et

al., 2025). Furthermore, while media organizations lose audiences, democracies risk losing an informed citizenry (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Despite growing research interest in this phenomenon, conceptual ambiguity remains a major challenge mainly regarding the nature and extent of the phenomenon. To address this issue, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020, p. 463) propose a definition in their recent review, describing news avoidance as a sustained period of low news consumption driven either by a dislike of news or a stronger preference for other types of media content.

Specifically, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) categorize news avoidance into intentional and unintentional forms. Intentional news avoidance occurs when individuals deliberately exclude news from their media consumption due to perceived negativity, lack of trust, or overwhelming volume (Mannell & Meese, 2022). Many feel that news is excessively negative, ideologically biased, or simply too abundant, leading them to disengage entirely (Toff & Nielsen, 2022). On the other hand, unintentional news avoidance arises when individuals prioritize other types of content, such as entertainment, often facilitated by digital algorithms that personalize content based on previous engagement (Thorson et al., 2021).

Nowadays, within the high-choice media environment, news avoidance can be even more persistent as audiences are able to filter out unwanted content and expose themselves just to non-political information (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In such a context, studies have explored the psychological and cultural factors leading to news avoidance. Villi et al. (2022) suggest that emotional responses, including distress from repetitive or highly negative news coverage, contribute to avoidance behaviors. News avoidance can be also a coping strategy for emotional fatigue, particularly in response to coverage of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Besides the pandemic, other news topics prone to determine people to avoid the news are political-related issues and soft news. In other words, controversial or crisis-related topics are generally associated with issue fatigue (COVID-19 news), anger and lack of trust (political news), and lack of interest and overload (soft news) (Schäfer et al., 2024). In this context, because of its complexity and significant implications, explanations of what drives people to avoid the news are currently under review. The reason is that, while news avoidance per se is not inherently problematic, it raises serious concerns about uninformed and disengaged citizens – which is definitely detrimental to democracy (Robertson, 2025; Toff et al., 2023).

In terms of the generational divide, age is a key demographic factor in predicting news media use. Generally speaking, younger individuals often have lower levels of news consumption, higher levels of news avoidance, and distrust of traditional news sources (Espeland, 2024). Such differences between people from different age cohorts are generally rooted in shared social locations and historical experiences (Mannheim, 2013). This leads to rather stable news consumption habits, in the sense that media sources that are dominant during adolescence also remain influential later in life (Ghersetti & Westlund, 2018). Moreover, as today's youth grow up with digital and social media, their reliance on newer, networked news formats that favor open communication style is accompanied by increasingly individualized media choices that may weaken traditional news engagement (Edgerly et al., 2018; Espeland, 2024). At the same time, differences in people's tendency to selectively choose which information they expose themselves to is also linked to a multitude of factors that could possibly influence this preference for congruent information. Among them, there are prior political experiences (if any) (Weaver, 2017), political ideology and political interest (Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022), and also other individual and contextual factors that, when combined, lead

people to have this tendency to selectively expose themselves to information and news that confirms their prior beliefs.

Both selective exposure and news avoidance are essential patterns nowadays and the reasons explaining why they occur are important. However, we are not interested in uncovering potential reasons for such patterns, but, instead, focus on discovering if such patterns are recognized as such by people from different age groups. Thus, we advance our second research question:

RQ2: How do younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) and older generations (Gen X and Baby Boomers) in Romania differ in their tendencies toward news avoidance and selective exposure?

Toward a healthy media diet

While several research studies focus on measuring people's media diets and the information they consume (Andersen et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2022), little research has explored public perceptions of a healthy media diet (for an exception, see Hopmann et al., 2025). Thus, based on the famous saying "you are what you read" (Jackson, 2019), which is, in turn, inspired by adapting the proverbial saying "you are what you eat", we are interested in finding out what a healthy media diet should consist of. Our starting point is that the high-choice media environment is associated with information overload (see also Buturoiu et al., 2023a). It is briefly defined as "a kind of subjective perception caused by the continuous influx of massive information to users and the information touched by users beyond their own processing ability" (Li et al., 2024). In turn, this "flood of information" (Xu et al., 2024) (Resilience Lab, n.d.) can cause exhaustion, anxiety, and disengagement at the level of citizens. Information overload is strongly linked to the patterns outlined above, specifically to selective exposure to news and news avoidance (Xu et al., 2024).

As digital advancements allow users to selectively expose themselves to information that confirms their prior beliefs and limit exposure to opposing viewpoints, they also contribute to reinforcing echo chambers that deepen polarization and diminish a shared space for public discourse (Stroud, 2008; Sunstein, 2018). Furthermore, entertainment-driven content can divert attention from political issues, reducing civic awareness and pro-active social behavior (Matthes et al., 2023).

Summing up, to be able to stay informed and competent as citizens, people should carefully select and manage their news intake, ensuring they receive essential information without feeling overwhelmed (Oh et al., 2021). Or, more specifically, as Benton (2021) suggests, a healthy news diet should involve conscious engagement with traditional media, avoiding excessive or selective exposure that distorts reality. Given this background, it becomes essential not only to examine the different patterns of news consumption across age groups, broadly corresponding to generational categories, but to also explore how people from different generations perceive what a healthy media diet should look like. Hence, we formulate our third research question:

RQ3: How do younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and older (Gen X and Baby Boomers) generations in Romania conceptualize a healthy media diet?

As emphasized in this section, the existing literature offers in-depth insights into the evolving media landscape and generational divides in news use, most studies relying heavily on quantitative data or focus on Western contexts. Thus, by conducting a qualitative analysis in

Romania, this study adds depth to current understandings of how age-based groups perceive, negotiate, and emotionally respond to news in a post-communist and algorithmically shaped media environment.

Furthermore, this study is grounded in a media sociology perspective, with an interpretive focus on how individuals' media behaviors are shaped by their social environments, generational identities, and evolving civic norms. The research design is informed by uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), which helps explain the motivations behind media engagement, selective exposure, and avoidance. In addition, we draw from the concept of digital citizenship (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Mossberger, 2008) to interpret how digital habits reflect changing relationships between citizens and public life, particularly among younger audiences. Constructing our arguments based on these theoretical approaches allows us to investigate news consumption not only as a set of media practices but also as an expression of identity, belonging, and civic orientation.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, this study employs a qualitative approach through focus group discussions to investigate generational differences in news consumption patterns among Romanian people. For the purpose of this study, generational categories are defined as follows: Generation Z (born after 1996), Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). The focus groups included participants from both the younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and older (Gen X and Boomers) cohorts, allowing for a comparative analysis of generational perspectives.

Regarding case study selection, Romania provides a particularly relevant case for this exploration. As a post-communist country with rapid digitalization over the past two decades, Romania exhibits a hybrid media landscape where traditional media still plays a role, especially among older generations, while digital and social media dominate the habits of younger users (Newman et al., 2025). According to recent surveys (Eurobarometer, 2024), Romania has one of the highest rates of news consumption via social media in the EU, but also among the lowest levels of trust in news overall.

Participants, sampling and procedure

The study involved two focus groups discussions with a total of 12 participants, divided into two distinct generational groups: young generation and old adults' generation. Both focus groups were conducted in November, 2024, and the participants were selected to represent the targeted age of the generational groups (20-30 for young adults and 55+ for old participants). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, aiming for diversity in terms of age. In the younger cohort, participants included university students, early-career professionals in both the private and public sectors, and individuals with various academic backgrounds (ranging from vocational to master's level education). In the older cohort, participants were a mix of retirees, former educators, and active professionals in administrative or technical roles, most of whom held high school or university-level qualifications.

Both focus groups were conducted via Webex, due to logistical convenience and to the need to accommodate participants from different locations. The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes, and prior to the discussions, all participants provided informed consent.

Codebook, coding, and analysis

All discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Romanian and then translated into English². Three researchers conducted an in-depth review of the transcripts and independently developed initial codes, following a thematic content analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mayring, 2015). The categories for the content analysis were initially derived deductively from existing literature and subsequently expanded inductively based on insights gained from the focus groups (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 200; Mayring, 2015). The themes were then identified both within individual codes and across multiple codes, and representative quotes were selected to illustrate these themes.

After the representative quotes were selected to illustrate the themes designed in the codebook, systematic comparisons were conducted between the two generational groups to identify similarities and differences in their perspectives and behaviors. Additionally, to enhance understanding of the differences and similarities between groups, several visualization techniques were employed using Python-based analytical techniques. Transcripts underwent pre-processing using NLTK and spaCy libraries, including text cleaning, tokenization, and named entity recognition. We then applied comparative lexical analysis through term frequency analysis and TF-IDF vectorization to identify distinctive vocabulary and concepts between generations. We implemented Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic modeling and hierarchical clustering to map conceptual associations, while the behavioral patterns in news consumption were visualized using custom Python functions that extracted temporal references and triggers from participant statements. The final analysis relied on the findings from the automated analysis but used thematic analysis through manual coding.

Therefore, thematic analysis constituted the core interpretive framework of the study. However, computational techniques were integrated to complement and enhance the manual coding process. Specifically, the computational analyses played a triangulating and exploratory role at several stages. First, results from TF-IDF vectorization and term frequency analysis helped identify frequently used generationally distinct vocabulary, which informed the refinement of thematic categories by flagging overlooked patterns in the manual phase. Second, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling supported theme development by surfacing co-occurring conceptual clusters, allowing us to validate and adjust some of the inductively derived themes. Third, hierarchical clustering and custom visualizations of linguistic markers and temporal references helped highlight differences in how the two age groups framed their news consumption routines over time. In this way, the hybrid approach supported both depth (through manual interpretation) and breadth (through lexical and structural comparison), enhancing the overall robustness of the findings.

Findings

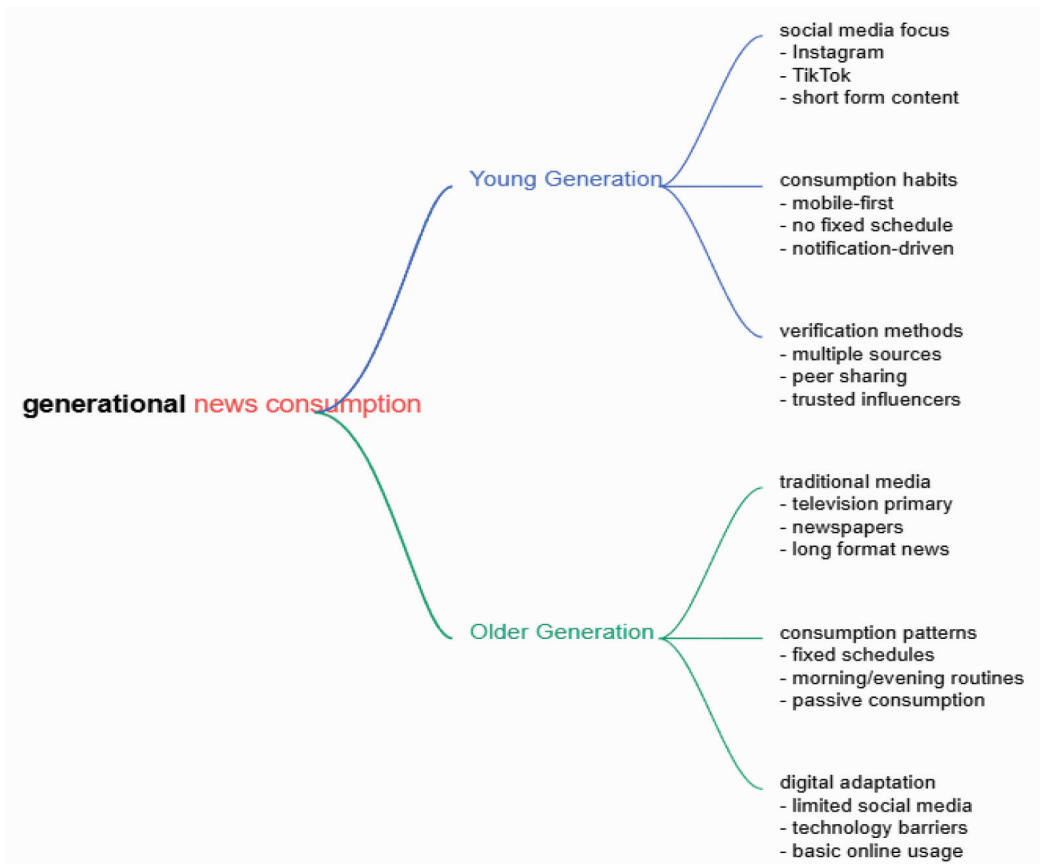
The focus groups provide in-depth information on how different age groups in Romania, broadly aligned with generational categories, consume news with a focus on media usage, news avoidance, selective exposure, and a healthy media diet. Generally speaking, young people

favor algorithmically curated, emotionally engaging digital news, often avoiding distressing or repetitive content, while the old adults rely on traditional media, emphasizing credibility and civic responsibility. Furthermore, on one hand young people experience passive news exposure, while on the other hand the old adults engage with news intentionally.

RQ1: What are the distinct patterns of news consumption among younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and older (Gen X and Baby Boomers) age groups in Romania?

In what concerns people's consumption behaviors, the findings reveal substantial between younger and older age groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Word tree emphasizing the main words associated with news consumption patterns across generations.



Source: Authors' computations based on the focus groups transcripts

Young people predominantly consume news through social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok) through mobile-first, notification-driven approaches with inconsistent schedules, while verifying information through multiple sources and peer networks. The young generation prefers short, emotionally engaging content that is curated by algorithms and tailored to their digital habits. Youth tend to engage with news in a non-linear, fragmented manner, encountering news incidentally while navigating social media feeds rather than actively seek-

ing it. Young people are interested in news that is “shocking” or evokes strong emotional responses:

I think as long as you can laugh at a news story or if it is very serious and then it provokes an emotion, it is definitely going to end up on everyone’s feed. I don’t think there are that many people who necessarily seek out the news, they consume it in a chaotic way depending on what their feed gives them on different social networks (ROY07).

Additionally, participants acknowledged the role of algorithms in filtering content, reflecting a reliance on personalized news feeds that curate content based on user interactions: “I am Gen Z, late Gen Z, and somehow all the news that me and my friends consume comes from sources that are already filtered” (ROY03).

Furthermore, despite being aware of the potential for misinformation, younger participants expressed a preference for shorter news formats, potentially indicating a generational shift towards faster consumption of information, at the expense of accuracy or depth: “Gen Z and Millennials, I think that a very high volume of media consumption is also done through social media, I mean I, for example, get most of my news from Instagram, from @genștiri pages, I mean it’s not necessarily 100% reliable, but I prefer a little shorter information” (ROY02).

By contrast, the old adults predominantly rely on traditional media outlets, particularly television and print news, reflecting a more habitual and structured approach to news consumption. This generation values credibility and expertise, with participants demonstrating a source-oriented filtering strategy rooted in trust for established news institutions:

I think most people are interested in getting information through different channels. I am also convinced that for those of us who are present here, given our professional background, given our age, given the way we are trained, we prefer more information in written format, less in audio format. We also do not neglect, or I think we do not neglect, any kind of information (ROE06).

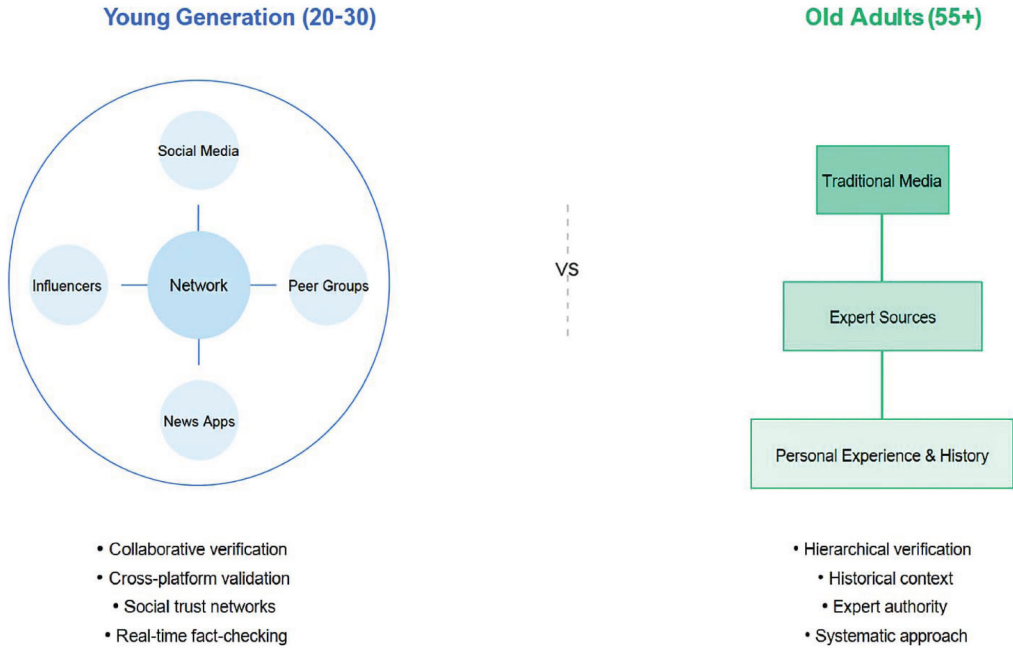
The findings also reveal intergenerational perceptions about news consumption, highlighting a generational gap in how each group views the other’s media habits. When asked about other generations, the old adults think that younger generations have other patterns of news consumption, being more into social media platforms and, therefore, much more exposed to potentially misleading information: “They inform themselves these days on TikTok. It’s here, it’s TikTok, Instagram or I don’t know what these apps or these programs are called. I know, they’re part of various groups, they’re sharing information with each other.” (ROE01).

Interestingly, the perspective of the old adults seems much more different than that of the younger generations who tend to believe there are not so significant differences between generations in terms of news consumption patterns (or at least not so significant as they used to be in the past). In particular on hot topics, the younger generation considers that both generations tend to consume news from both traditional and social media outlets:

With older people, and here I’m thinking 55+, yes, they tend to consume more media from TV, but it shouldn’t be ignored that they also tend to consume quite a lot of media online. It’s just not from the same sources [...] I think a common ground would probably be the hot news area, I think it’s probably consumed by both generations equally (ROY07).

Thus, the young generation relies on networked, collaborative verification through social media, influencers, and news apps, prioritizing real-time fact-checking and social trust networks (see Figure 2). By contrast, the old adults depend on hierarchical verification via traditional media, expert sources, and historical context, favoring systematic evaluation and authoritative perspectives in news consumption.

Figure 2. Perceptual gap in terms of news verification approaches between younger and old adults

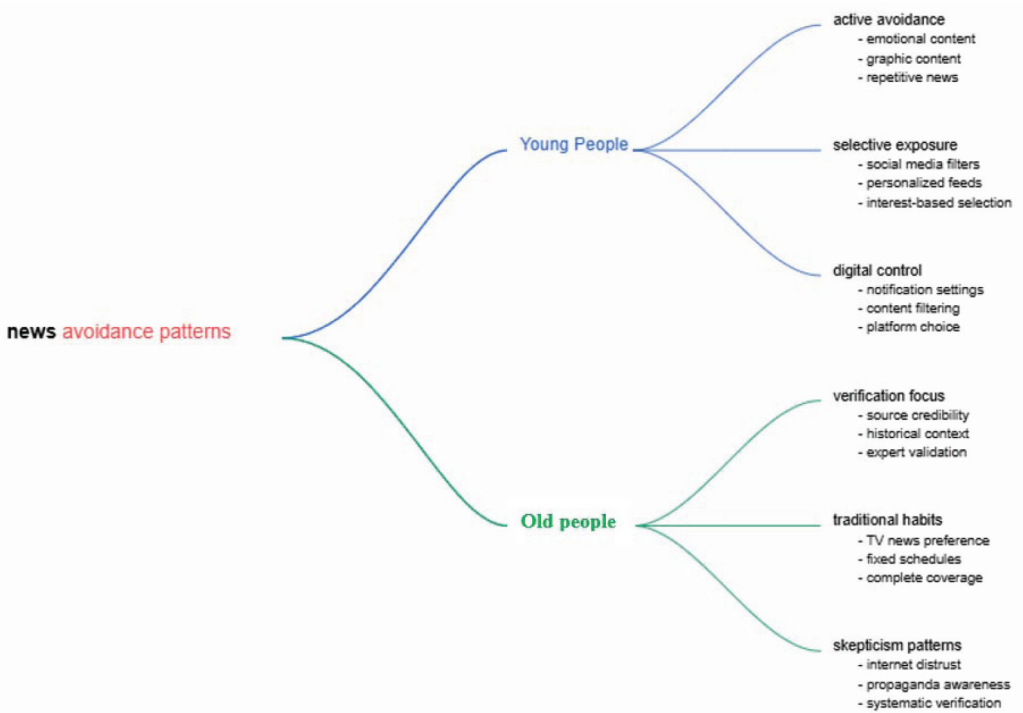


Source: Authors' computations based on the focus groups transcripts

RQ2: How do young people and old adults differ in their tendencies toward news avoidance and selective exposure?

Related with news avoidance and selective exposure, the findings highlight contrasting generational approaches reflecting differing motivations and strategies shaped by emotional responses, cognitive overload, and propaganda awareness (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Word tree emphasizing the main words associated with tendencies towards news avoidance and selective exposure



Source: Authors' computations based on the focus groups transcripts

Young people demonstrate a strategic approach to news avoidance, primarily driven by emotional regulation and cognitive filtering. They actively avoid news content that is perceived as overly negative, repetitive, misleading, or irrelevant, indicating a preference for emotionally manageable and cognitively stimulating information and reflecting an effort to protect emotional well-being from distressing or anxiety-inducing content: “If they’re too sad or graphic ... I prefer not to keep quoting about that thing and focus on something else” (ROY01).

Moreover, young participants tend to disengage from news perceived as repetitive or lacking novelty, illustrating a cognitive filtering mechanism, where news is evaluated not only for its emotional impact but also for its informational value:

I think of news that is excessively repetitive, when there are certain topics that go on for months, every day the same information presented, maybe in different words, but with nothing new, and then, at some point, I feel compelled to ignore them because I don’t have the mental capacity to go through the same news every day (ROY07).

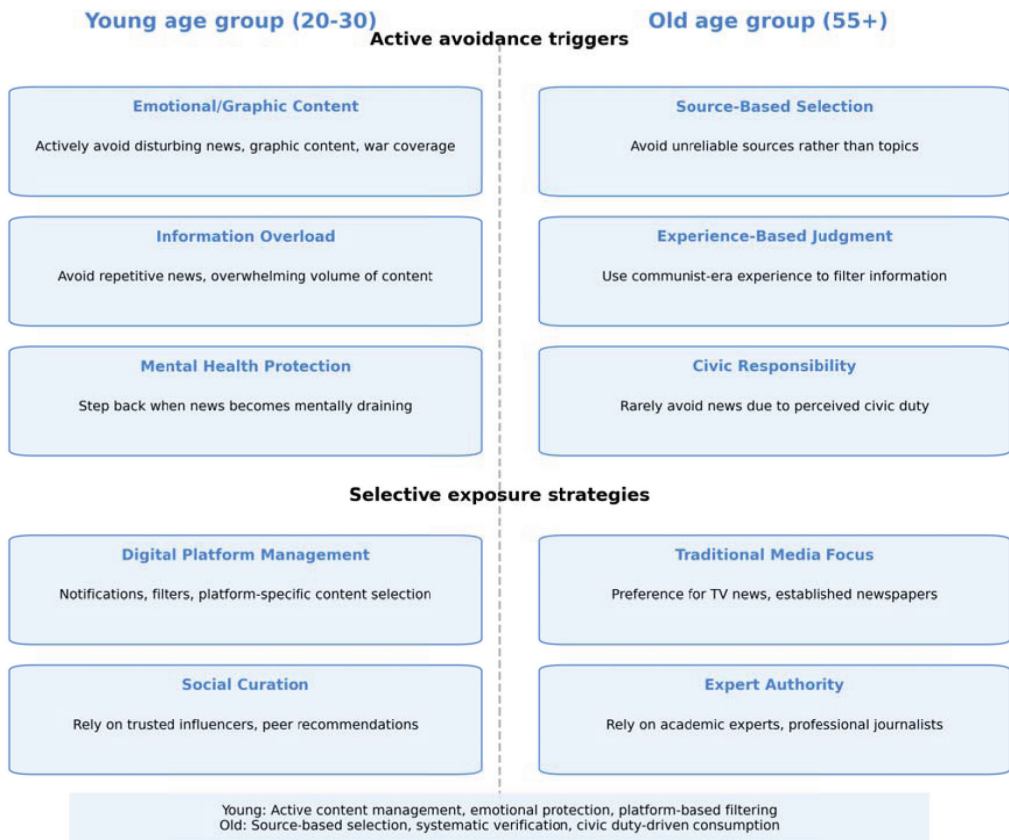
Similarly, misleading or sensationalized news is actively avoided, reflecting an awareness of misinformation risks and a selective exposure strategy to maintain credibility in news consumption. By contrast, news avoidance is not a prevalent behavior among the old adults, who perceive staying informed as a civic duty and a prerequisite for informed decision-making (as can be observed in Figure 3). Old adults’ participants consistently emphasized the importance of knowing “the negative side” of news stories to form well-rounded opinions (ROE06), re-

flecting a commitment to comprehensive news consumption as a means of fulfilling social and civic responsibilities. This generational difference is partly shaped by historical experiences, where the scarcity of reliable information during the communist era cultivated a habit of comprehensive information-seeking.

Additionally, young people experience incidental news exposure primarily through algorithmically curated digital environments (see Figure 4). As digital natives, they frequently encounter news unintentionally while using social media platforms, where news content is seamlessly integrated into their social feeds, highlighting the passive nature of news consumption in algorithm-driven digital ecosystems: “I would say that we inevitably come across news that we’re not looking for, even if it’s on TV, even if it’s on social media or whatever” (ROY05).

This exposure is largely shaped by platform algorithms that curate content based on user interactions, leading to a passive and fragmented news consumption experience.

Figure 4. News avoidance and selective exposure patterns between age groups.



Source: Authors’ computations based on the focus groups transcripts

Moreover, young participants described incidental exposure as a repetitive cycle, where news items resurface across different digital touchpoints, making avoidance difficult. ROY04 observed that news “kept coming back” even when initially ignored, reflecting the persistence of algorithmic curation in reinforcing news visibility, suggesting that incidental news ex-

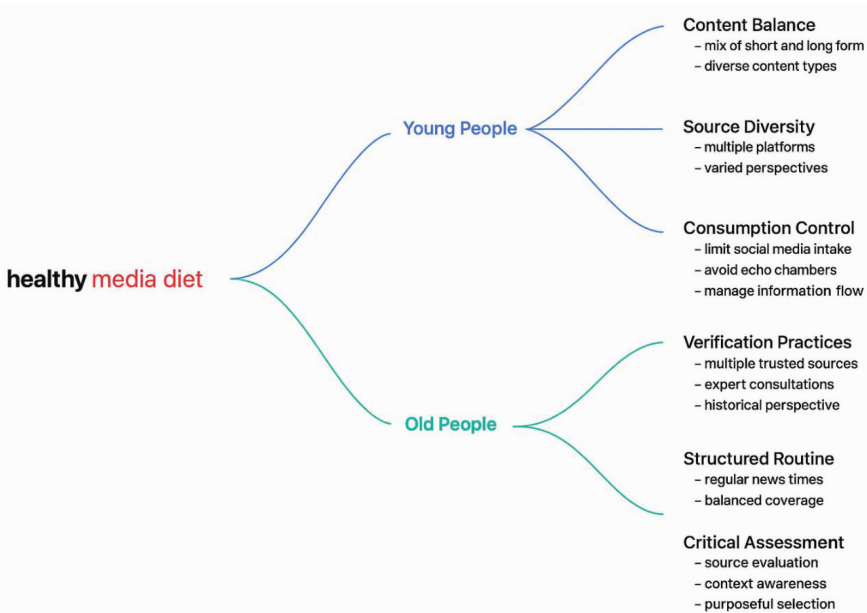
posure among young people is not merely a result of digital habits but a structural outcome of platform design, where engagement metrics dictate content recurrence. This pattern reveals a paradox in digital news consumption: while young people strategically avoid emotionally distressing or repetitive news, algorithmic curation continues to expose them to similar content, challenging their selective exposure strategies. In this context, managing news consumption becomes even more challenging within the algorithm-driven media environment, where user agency and content choices are moderated/curated.

Conversely, incidental news exposure is not a significant phenomenon among the old adults, who perceive themselves as intentional consumers of information. Unlike young people who encounter news passively through social media, the old adults engage with news through traditional channels like television and print, where news exposure is a deliberate choice rather than an incidental outcome. As ROE05 stated, they see themselves as “consumers of information” who actively seek out news, reflecting a more purposeful and habitual news consumption routine. This difference is rooted in the old adults’ structured media habits, shaped by decades of exposure to traditional media formats that emphasize scheduled news bulletins and print editions. Consequently, the old adults do not perceive themselves as victims of incidental news exposure, as their news consumption is characterized by intentional engagement rather than algorithmic curation.

RQ3: What represents a healthy media diet for each generation?

Going further into the analysis, what constitutes a healthy media diet reveals distinct perspectives shaped by individual’s media consumption habits, values, and generational contexts (see Figure 5). As can be observed, the younger generation emphasizes personal management strategies aimed at navigating the overwhelming media landscape, whereas the old adults focus on a more systematic approach rooted in education and institutional support.

Figure 5. Word tree emphasizing the main words associated with a healthy diet.



Source: Authors’ computations based on the focus groups transcripts

Young participants' ideal media diet was represented through a balance scale metaphor, emphasizing content control and mix (see Figure 6). Their primary pinpointed elements are information overload and the need for active content management. By contrast, the old adults pinpoint towards a systemic educational framework, highlighting institutional support, teacher preparation, and educational infrastructure. This stark difference in conceptualization – personal management versus systemic education – suggests fundamentally different approaches to achieving media literacy. These differences highlight the evolving nature of media literacy in the digital age, where the younger generation must adapt to an ever-changing digital environment, while the old adults stress the importance of a stable educational foundation to guide future generations in their media consumption habits.

We observe that younger participants highlight the importance of actively managing media consumption to avoid information overload, a key element in their conceptualization of a healthy media diet. They pointed out that while limiting media consumption is almost impossible in the modern age, it is essential to avoid overexposure to fast-paced, short-form content like TikTok, Reels, and YouTube Shorts:

I would limit the massive consumption of everything fast: TikTok, reels, YouTube Shorts. So at least to me they seem to be disastrous for the brain and there are medical studies to show this. I'd try to diversify the sources so that it doesn't become a kind of routine... (ROY07).

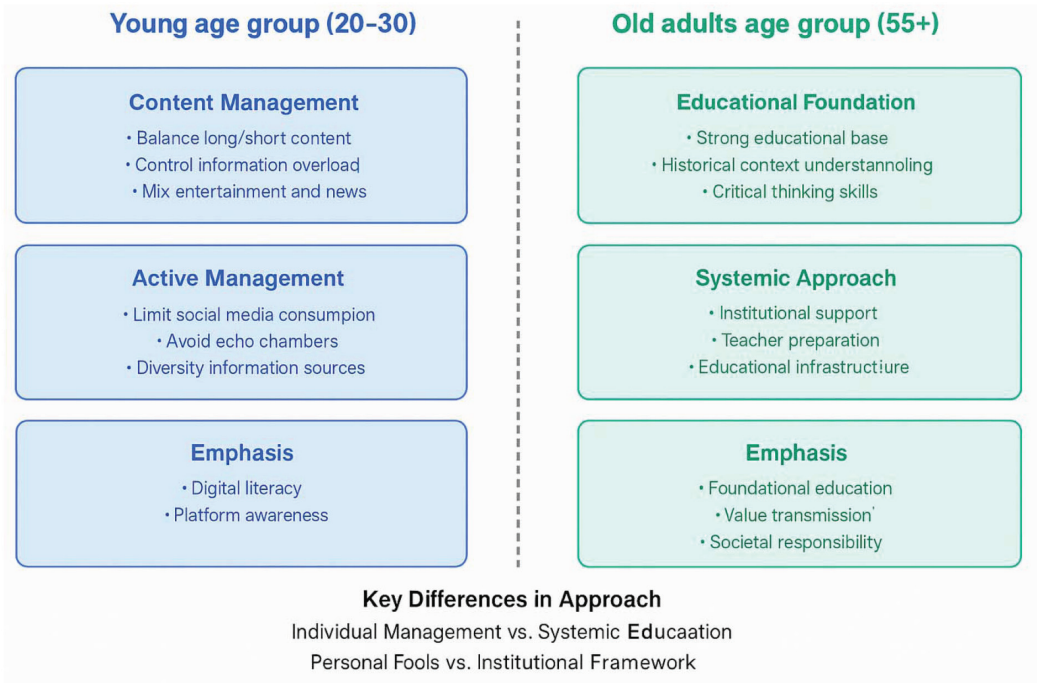
Furthermore, the idea that sources of news should be diverse was also mentioned in connection with the threats associated with a less diverse media source, namely echo chambers and filter bubbles: "I think it would be ideal to inform ourselves also from alternative sources, i.e., to expose ourselves somewhat forcibly and to opinions and ideas with which we don't necessarily agree." (ROY02).

A healthy media diet should also contain information that can be checked on important topics such as elections:

I would also add that I think it would be healthy to be a certain percentage of news on subjects that are important for us as citizens, that is to say, subjects such as elections, where we have to make important decisions and we have to make them based on information that is verified, as true as possible and which shapes our brains and the way we make these decisions (ROY05).

Thus, the ideal media diet should include a balance between long-form, detailed content and short-form, quick updates, particularly to mitigate the risks of misinformation often associated with shorter media formats.

Figure 6. Generational views on healthy media diet



Source: Authors' computations based on the focus groups transcripts

Compared with the younger generations, the old adults avoid giving recipes. They instead point out the idea that each and every person is responsible for their own news media diet. However, they also point to the importance of family education and school education in this entire information context:

I don't know if there's a recipe, I don't think there's a recipe for healthy consumption. It depends on us. We have to sort it. It depends on what interests us. What we enjoy listening to or reading. I say that it's up to each individual person, so to speak, to make this healthy diet of news (ROE05).

Therefore, the old adults' participants approach the concept of a healthy media diet from a more systemic and educational perspective. They argued that healthy media consumption is highly individualistic and depends on personal interests.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to understand and compare the news consumption patterns of different age groups in Romania, broadly corresponding to younger (Gen Z and Millennials) and older (Gen X and Baby Boomers) cohorts, with a particular focus on media usage habits, news avoidance, selective exposure, and perceptions of a healthy media diet. The findings reveal clear contrasts between these groups, highlighting not only distinct media usage patterns but also differing forms of civic engagement, media literacy, and overall health of the public sphere in an environment saturated with information.

Generational contrasts in media usage habits

In line with similar studies, one of the most relevant findings of this research is the difference in media usage habits between young adults (predominantly Millennials and Generation Z) and older generations (primarily Baby Boomers and older Gen X). Younger participants rely primarily on digital and social media platforms, consuming news mainly via mobile channels influenced by the algorithms that enable them (see also Antunovic et al., 2018; Dimock, 2019). Their news consumption is characterized by incidental exposure to content, often encountering news passively through social media feeds rather than through active seeking (Newman et al., 2022). This “news finds me” phenomenon suggests that even if young people are exposed to a high volume of information, their engagement is superficial and influenced by the design of digital platforms (Buturoiu et al., 2023a).

The old adults continue to rely more on traditional forms of media such as television, radio, and print. For them, news consumption is a deliberate, habitual activity that has a sense of civic duty attached and comes along with trust in established institutions (Buturoiu et al., 2023b; Van Aelst et al., 2021). This generation’s preference for traditional media can be explained not only by habit but also by a preference for sources that are perceived as credible and authoritative. Familiarity and historical context shape, therefore, the ways in which each group interacts with news, influencing both the trust in the media channels and the habit to verify information (Goyanes et al., 2023).

News avoidance and selective exposure tendencies

This research further shows different approaches to news avoidance and selective exposure between the generational groups. Younger participants reported deliberately avoiding news that is negative, repetitive or sensationalist. In line with findings from other studies, this avoidance behavior is a coping mechanism for managing emotional well-being in an environment of information overload (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Villi et al., 2022). Young adults expressed a preference for content that is both emotionally manageable and intellectually stimulating. Their selective exposure demonstrates an active effort to regulate the psychological impact of the news overload (Duvekot et al., 2024; Toff & Nielsen, 2022).

By contrast, old adults demonstrate a different attitude toward news exposure. Rather than avoiding the news, they perceive staying informed as a form of responsible citizenship. This group’s approach is characterized by intentional engagement with news even when the content is negative, as they believe that news consumption is necessary for forming informed opinions and for participating in civic life (Buturoiu et al., 2022; Stroud, 2008). The historical experience older people have been exposed to, for instance during periods when they lacked reliable information (i.e. the communist regime), has created the habit of looking for diverse perspectives. The old adults’ commitment to news consumption seems to be consistently contrasting with the more selective exposure observed among younger people.

Moreover, the differences touch upon information credibility as well. Younger generations tend to verify information across multiple sources, relying on algorithmic curation (Antunovic et al., 2018). Older generations value other sources of credibility, such as the reputation of media institutions or journalistic standards, which influence their decisions about which sources to trust (Buturoiu et al., 2023b; Newman et al., 2022). These differences illustrate diverse responses to news content and can have implications for the creation of echo chambers and societal polarization.

This finding connects with the issues raised in the literature by algorithmic curation (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018). While younger participants actively seek to filter emotionally overwhelming or repetitive content, the very platforms they rely on tend to reinforce those exposures through engagement-based algorithms. This creates a cycle where users attempt to regulate their emotional and cognitive input yet remain structurally exposed to the same types of content they wish to avoid. This paradox illustrates a tension between user agencies and platform design, where individual strategies for a healthier information diet are constantly challenged by systemic forces of personalization and content amplification.

Perceptions of a balanced media diet

Another key aspect of this study was to explore what constitutes a “healthy” media diet for each generation. Among younger participants, the notion of balance is closely tied to individual agency and selective exposure. They emphasize the importance of maintaining control over the content they consume and actively seek access to diverse sources. Metaphors such as a “balance scale” were frequently invoked to illustrate the perceived need to alternate between brief news updates and more sustained, in-depth coverage. For digital natives, the ideal media diet is one that prevents overload and counters the risks associated with echo chambers and filter bubbles. They prefer to deliberately expose themselves to alternative viewpoints, even if those opinions differ from their own, as a way to create a more critical understanding of the news.

In contrast, older participants frame a healthy media diet not in terms of control, but in terms of consistency and trust. Their approach emphasizes habitual engagement with institutionally vetted and long-standing sources of information. Rather than curating content from a wide variety of outlets, they rely on the credibility of traditional media to filter and verify news. For this generation, media literacy is viewed less as an individual strategy and more as a societal obligation, something that should be installed through formal education. While younger individuals adopt personalized, adaptive methods to manage the digital news environment, older adults emphasize the collective role of educational institutions in fostering a well-informed public.

Real-world implications

The generational differences highlighted in this study have implications for the broader societal environment. In a high-choice media landscape, where algorithmic personalization and rapid digital transformation are the norm, the different approaches to news consumption can contribute to a fragmented public discourse. For instance, the passive, incidental exposure experienced by younger audiences can lead to a form of civic disengagement (Goyanes et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022). If young people rely too much on digital media that reinforce existing beliefs, there is a risk that they may become isolated within echo chambers, that amplify societal polarization instead of cooperation (Stroud, 2008; Sunstein, 2018).

In contrast, older generations maintain more traditional news habits rooted in intentional consumption, trust in institutions, and a sense of civic responsibility. They emphasize the importance of being well-informed even in the face of distressing content and demonstrate more consistent media verification practices based on institutional credibility and historical experience.

However, this generational gap can be a challenge for media organizations and policymakers. News outlets must balance in-depth reporting for older audiences with accessible digital formats for younger users, without sacrificing journalistic standards. At the same time, tailored media literacy programs should address algorithmic awareness for youth and digital adaptation for older adults. Promoting intergenerational dialogue can further bridge informational gaps and support a more cohesive, civically engaged society (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Villi et al., 2022).

While this study offers valuable insights into generational patterns of news consumption in Romania, it is not without limitations.: The small, non-representative sample size and qualitative focus limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, as the data is based on self-reported reflections within a focus group setting, responses may be subject to social desirability bias or selective recall. The research is also context-specific, grounded in Romania's post-communist and rapidly digitalizing media environment, which may differ from other cultural or political settings. Additionally, although the study uses generational labels, it does not offer a fully developed generational analysis in the sociological sense. These categories are used primarily as age-based groupings, which limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader cohort-based cultural or historical experiences. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, using longitudinal or experimental designs to track evolving habits over time, and exploring cross-national comparisons to better understand how generational news consumption varies across media systems. Integrating qualitative insights with survey or digital trace data would also enhance the robustness and depth of this line of inquiry.

Despite its limitations, this study offers valuable insights for media practitioners seeking to navigate generational differences in news consumption. Understanding these divergent habits can help guide content strategies that maintain journalistic standards while engaging a broad audience. News outlets should consider offering in-depth analysis for older, more traditional media users, alongside shorter, visually dynamic formats tailored to the preferences of digital-native audiences. For policymakers and educators, the study emphasizes the need for media literacy initiatives. Media literacy programs should be updated to include digital competencies to help young people evaluate news enabled by algorithms and enable them to better verify information from diverse sources (Antunovic et al., 2018). There is also a need to support older people to understand the digital environment as news platforms evolve, which could be accomplished by targeted media literacy programs.

Last but not least, such generational differences in news consumption have implications for the broader context of the societies we live in. Polarized news fragment public discourse: this phenomenon can be limited by encouraging a dialogue between different generations. By promoting initiatives that enable cross-generational understanding our societies can build a more cohesive and resilient informational ecosystem. Efforts to build more cohesive and resilient information ecosystems are essential not only for reducing polarization but also for ensuring that all age groups citizens understand news and address their content in a critical manner (Sunstein, 2018). As digital platforms continue to reshape the way we consume information, researchers and policymakers must monitor and address these generational differences to prevent this evolution of the media landscape from undermining public discourse and civic participation.

Notes

¹ This study has been developed by researchers involved in the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media (BROD) and has received funding from the European Union under Contract number: 101083730 – BROD.

² The transcripts were anonymized using coding identifiers: ROY## for young participants and ROE## for old adults' participants.

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Appendix

Table A1. Participants' profile

Respondent code	Gender	Age	Residency
<i>18–25 years cohort</i>			
ROY01	F	24	Urban
ROY02	F	23	Urban
ROY03	F	23	Urban
RoY04	F	24	Urban
ROY05	F	23	Urban
ROY06	F	24	Urban
<i>55+ years cohort</i>			
ROE01	F	56	Urban
ROE02	M	75	Urban
ROE03	F	60	Urban
ROE04	F	66	Urban
ROE05	F	57	Urban
ROE06	M	56	Urban