Paradoxes in Generation Z's Media Consumption and Fake News Perception: An International Comparative Study

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Abstract

Information consumption by young audiences in the internet of algorithms has become a timely issue in the public sphere. This comparative study examines media consumption among generation Z and their perceptions of news and misinformation from an international perspective. More precisely, this article explores the types of information young people consume, the media outlets they prefer for information, whether they prefer receiving information selected by algorithms, the credibility they grant different outlets, and their reception and perception of fake news. The methodological design was based on a quantitative approach focusing on descriptive and correlational analysis. Using a questionnaire, data were collected from a total sample of 405 university students from three countries: Spain, the United States, and Portugal. The results show that, across the three counties, the sample is predominantly informed by digital media and consumes mainly information on leisure and entertainment, humor and memes, music, and news. Reportedly, fake news does not appear to be a significant factor in their information consumption. This study reveals new, paradoxical findings about media credibility and the perception of fake news among generation Z. In the three countries, subjects report that their most used media outlets for information are also the least trusted: social media and websites. There are significant differences by country regarding the extent do young people like to receive information chosen by algorithms. Overall, while the study detects significant differences across countries, it also hints at a degree of homogenization in media consumption habits worldwide.

Paradoxos da Geração Z no Consumo de Média e na Perceção de Notícias Falsas: Um Estudo Comparativo Internacional

Resumo

O consumo de informação por públicos jovens na era da internet dos algoritmos tornou-se uma questão relevante na esfera pública. Este estudo comparativo analisa o consumo de média da geração Z e a sua perceção sobre notícias e desinformação numa perspetiva internacional. Mais concretamente, o artigo explora os tipos de informação consumidos pelos jovens, os órgãos de

comunicação social que preferem para obter informação, a sua preferência por receber informação selecionada por algoritmos, a credibilidade atribuída a diferentes média e a receção e perceção de notícias falsas. O desenho metodológico baseou-se numa abordagem quantitativa centrada na análise descritiva e correlacional. Por meio de um questionário, foram recolhidos dados de uma amostra total de 405 estudantes universitários de três países: Espanha, Estados Unidos e Portugal. Os resultados demonstram que, nos três países, a amostra é predominantemente informada por média digitais e consome principalmente informação sobre lazer e entretenimento, humor e *memes*, música e notícias. Reporta-se que as notícias falsas não parecem constituir um fator significativo no seu consumo de informação. O estudo revela novos resultados paradoxais sobre a credibilidade dos média e a perceção de notícias falsas entre a geração Z. Nos três países, os sujeitos indicam que os média mais utilizados para obter informação são também os menos confiáveis: redes sociais e websites. Existem diferenças significativas entre países quanto à preferência dos jovens por receber informação selecionada por algoritmos. De forma geral, apesar das diferenças entre países, o estudo sugere também um certo grau de homogeneização nos hábitos de consumo de média a nível mundial.

Palavras-chave
geração Z, consumo de informação, média digitais, novos *gatekeepers*, algoritmos

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The consumption of media by young audiences is one of the main current concerns in the public sphere. This is the case both in digital media, which try to design their algorithms to capture their attention as much as possible through the model of the "economics of attention" (Davenport & Beck, 2001), but also in conventional media, which aim to capture the attention of young audiences to remain legitimized in their role as the most credible source of information (Galan et al., 2023). With this in mind, young people's information consumption, habits, and perceptions in the age of hyper-connectivity constitute a topical issue worldwide that is widely found in recent research, not only by researchers (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014; Selnes, 2024; Villi et al., 2022) but also by foundations and institutions: Childwise (2023), Reuters Institute (Newman, 2022; RISJ Admin, 2017), Pew Research Center (Raine, 2017) or Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2024).

In a context in which media trust has become problematic in Western democracies, as various studies have shown (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Villi et al., 2022), it is essential to understand the consumption profile of generation Z to develop strategies to ensure that reliable information and content reach younger audiences. Previous works show that young audiences have a positive predisposition towards digital media (Andriany & Triwardhani, 2025; Laor & Galily, 2022). As digital natives (Prensky, 2001), they are used to the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) enhanced by digital technologies and their interactive features. In this context, digital media users behave as active participants and content creators, rather than passive audience members receiving unidirectional messages. Contrary to traditional media vis-à-vis the political landscape, generation Z

perceives digital media as agents of change (Lorenz, 2018), partly because they enable the democratization of discourse on the internet (Pedrero-Esteban & Pérez-Escoda, 2021) and encourage greater interactivity with the public sphere.

Recent reports show that younger generations are the age group with a greater tendency to distrust traditional media. In Spain and Portugal, people aged 25 to 34 are the age group that least trusts the media (Pardal & Hernández Escayola, 2024). In the United States, young adults aged 19 to 29 are experiencing a decrease in trust in traditional media and a parallel increase in trust in social media as news sources (Eddy & Shearer, 2025). According to these works, young audiences seem to perceive that digital media do not respond to a set agenda as strongly as traditional ones, as the interactivity and accessibility that they grant challenge gatekeeping figures controlling discourses about the news and allow users to become "produsers" (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2019), behaving as gatekeepers themselves to a certain extent. In fact, scholars have found a positive correlation between media trust and the frequency of social media use among generation Z (Pepe & McCollum, 2025), suggesting that younger audiences perceive social media as a more diverse source of information.

The positive predisposition of younger generations towards digital media also stems from the convergence they facilitate, as proposed by Henry Jenkins (2006). In other words, digital media allow for the consumption of different types of content simultaneously and on demand, without the clear boundaries of traditional media, and with the convenience facilitated by the immediacy and ubiquity of cellphones. Described as a streaming generation, these digital natives are the demographic cohort that systematically spends their leisure, entertainment, and socializing connected through a digital device, consuming a constant flow of digital content and interacting with and creating digital content themselves (Sádaba & Pérez-Escoda, 2020). Combined with the aforementioned economics of attention, smartphones and similar digital devices become attractive gateways to a plethora of content, allowing access to it quickly and almost simultaneously.

According to communication studies, it is widely accepted that during the second half of the 20th century, an established paradigm of news consumption emerged, conditioned by mass media: radio, press, and television. The advent of the internet dramatically altered this state of affairs, and the rise of social media ushered in a new era (Castells, 2001; Jenkins, 2004). Significantly, 96.5% of the world's adult population already uses cell phones to use the internet, while only 61% use computers (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). These numbers illustrate how devices reflect the prevalence of convergent content, the immediacy, and ubiquity of digital media consumption worldwide. The global proliferation of digital devices, the digital transformation, and the possibility of 24-hour access to information anytime and anywhere have enticed a "snack culture" of information consumption (Scolari, 2021), defined as fast, superficial, and continuous, in which the news and fair information become indistinguishable from the rest of the massive information circulating online.

Yet, despite the democratizing qualities that younger audiences confer on digital media, in environments such as the automatically determined social media or news platforms, algorithms seem to operate as a new gatekeeper, even though young users may not be aware of it (Powers, 2017). Scholars warn about the pervasive and often invisible power of algorithms in digital media use, and more particularly in access to the news. Gabelas et al. (2023) claim that algorithms configure what one sees, consumes, and thinks through logics of automatization and prediction. Beyond concerns about privacy and data sharing, they warn that algorithms reinforce biases and can reproduce inequalities in representation, access to information, or opportunities. This phenomenon can be dangerous for democracies, as audiences become more fragmented and misinformation can spread more easily, catering to existing biases.

The issue of echo chambers on social media has been widely discussed, and recent scholars refer to information cocoons when discussing exposure to repetitive content catered by algorithms (Yang et al., 2024). Combined with algorithmic opacity and lack of literacy of the users in how the algorithm offers recommendations, algorithmic technologies can lead to negative experiences for digital media users, especially because of algorithm fatigue: the "mental and emotional exhaustion that users experience due to prolonged interaction with algorithmic systems" (Yang et al., 2024, p. 1). Other scholars refer to the "algorithmic rabbit hole effect", in which users consume a loop of harmful content (Helberger, 2020; Roose, 2019). In addition, other scholars note the imperfections of algorithmic performance, which is designed to encourage user interaction and higher engagement levels, as well as to recommend like-minded content (Makady, 2023). In turn, social media platforms may feature triggering content or facilitate its spread. Ultimately, despite the positive perception that generation Z has of digital media as more democratizing, algorithmic media consumption is more problematic than they realize and operates as a new opaque form of gatekeeping.

Moreover, the introduction of artificial intelligence into traditional media newsrooms paves the way for a new journalism based on computational systems and emerging narratives from chatbots, recommender systems, artificial intelligence, and atomized journalism (Brennen et al., 2022). With this in mind, the media consumption of young audiences is an important and urgent matter, given that access to the news is an essential means for all societies to define social participation and engagement in the cultural and political spheres. In other words, information consumption is closely related to citizen power and constitutes a basic pillar of democratic life, seriously endangered by misinformation (Pérez-Escoda & Carabias-Herrero, 2025).

Together, new journalism and the internet of algorithms are shaping both news consumption and the audience's perception of it. In turn, it is particularly important to analyze the case of the youngest audiences. In this context, fake news and misinformation have emerged as a massive and serious phenomenon affecting societies worldwide and diminishing the healthy functioning of democracies. According to the World Economic Forum's (2024) *Global Risk Report*, misinformation generated by artificial intelligence is

considered the second greatest global risk, closely followed by the socio-political polarization that fake news often fosters. Along these lines, misinformation is expected to be the top global risk in the next two years, according to the same report. This perception stems from the intense presence of fake news in the public sphere. According to the Iberifier 2024 report (Pardal & Hernández Escayola, 2024), 69% of the European Union population often encounter fake or misrepresented news. In Spain, 84% of the population considers that false or altered information was a problem for democracy, while in Portugal, 70% of citizens are worried about misinformation online. This issue seems even more acute in the United States, where nine in 10 Americans report sometimes encountering inaccurate news, and 51% of adults state that they find it difficult to determine what is true and what is false when consuming news (Wang & Haner, 2025). Importantly, most American voters consider that the spread of misinformation on social media negatively impacts democracy in the United States (Gubbala & Austin, 2024), while there are local differences, misinformation and fake news are a global problem that challenges democracies.

Despite a positive predisposition towards digital media among young audiences, young adults have critical awareness of misinformation, but lack the media literacy to combat it effectively. While accustomed to digital hyperconnectivity, studies show that members of generation Z have a nuanced relationship with digital media: many embrace it enthusiastically (Marín et al., 2020), while others engage with it with critical awareness. In fact, there is an emerging resignation toward digital media among members of generation Z who aim to reduce their consumption of it (Casas-Mas & Homont, 2024). Regarding misinformation, recent studies show that generation Z is well aware of the existence of fake news and expresses significant concern about it (Mendiguren et al., 2020).

However, despite being aware of the existence of fake news and suspecting the credibility of the information they encounter, young adults overestimate their ability to discern real news from misinformation and do not always fact-check (Vicente Domínguez et al., 2021). The cultivation of media literacy and critical awareness of communication technologies, especially among younger generations, is thus an urgent matter that many scholars have highlighted (Establés & Ruiz-Poveda, 2025; Purington Drake et al., 2023; Scolari et al., 2018; Tamboer et al., 2023; Wendt et al., 2023). These recent studies suggest that generation Z's media consumption habits do not always reflect their preferences. As a result, this article aims to address both the practices and the perceptions of generation Z vis-à-vis traditional and digital media.

With this in mind, this article aims to understand the specific media consumption habits of generation Z and their perceptions of it, using a comparative international approach across three countries: Spain, Portugal, and the United States. The state of affairs gives rise to the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: what kind of information do young people consume the most?
- RQ2: to what extent do young people like to receive information chosen by algorithms?
- RQ3: does the medium of getting informed determine the reception of fake news?

- RQ4: is the country a determining factor in the reception of fake news?
- RQ5: what type of content is most often associated with fake news across the countries included in the study?

According to these research questions, two main research objectives arise in this study:

- Objective 1: to analyze the situation in three different countries in terms of media, information, and social media consumption to show a general overview and analyze significant differences among countries.
- Objective 2: to explore the existing correlation between the media used to get informed and the reception of fake news, besides the country as a determining factor in receiving fake news.

2. Materials and Methods

To address the proposed research questions and objectives, this study was designed using a quantitative methodological approach. To provide a meaningful and in-depth view of the findings (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024), a descriptive and correlational method was used. A convenience sample strategy was used (N = 405) to ensure that all three countries received a sufficient number of responses. Sample description was as follows in each country, where all subjects were undergraduate university students: Spain (N = 150: male = 86, female = 51, other = 13); United States (N = 151: male = 105, female = 42, other = 4); Portugal (N = 104: male = 49, female = 51; other = 4).

The questionnaire was considered the most appropriate method for data collection (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). The design of the tool was based on previous existing models: *Media Use in the European Union* (European Commission, 2019) and *Digital News Report.es 2020* (Negredo et al., 2020), adapted for the purposes of this study. The questionnaire was structured in three sectional areas: (a) socio-demographical variables; (b) media, information, and social media consumption; and (c) consumption, reception, and perception of fake news. A total of 30 variables were analyzed, comprising 105 items. For the purposes of this paper, only 10 variables and 31 items were used, as shown in Table 1.

Variable	Items		Responses
Country of origin	1 = Spain; 2 = United States; 3 = Portugal		
V1_Medium to get informed	Radio Online radio Press Digital press	Television Online television Websites Social media	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
V2_ Most consumed media to get informed	Radio Online radio Press Digital press	Television Online television Websites Social media	
V3_Degree of credibility in...	Radio Online radio Press Digital press	Television Online television Websites Social media	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Very frequently
V4_To what extent do you consume information/content on these topics...	Leisure and entertainment Fashion and beauty Information and news Memes and humor Food and diet Sports Trending topics	Music Cars and motor Video games and gamers Politics Challenges Health and personal care Technology Others	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
V5_ Preferences to reach information	1 = Search it according to your interests 2 = Be sent to you by friends/family 3 = Find it by surfing the internet 4 = Get an alert on my smartphone 5 = Find it randomly in social networks		
V6_Preferred social media platform	1 = Facebook 2 = Instagram 3 = TikTok 4 = X 5 = WhatsApp 6 = YouTube 7 = Twitch 8 = Other		
V7_ Fake news reception	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always		
V8_Distinguishing fake news	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always		
V9_From your perception, fake news is related to...	Humor Danger Entertainment Mistrust Manipulation		1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always
V10_Which channels do you think spread fake news the most?	Traditional media outlets Webpages X Instagram	Facebook TikTok WhatsApp Word-of-mouth	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always

Table 1. *Variables, items, number of items, and type of responses analyzed*

For data collection, an online questionnaire was designed in Google Forms. As the sample was international, the information-gathering period was from November 2024 to May 2025. Alongside this, the researchers allowed for seven months to ensure enough flexibility, bearing in mind the different holiday periods. Data were collected online in accordance with the university institute's ethics research procedures, which met the ethical requirements of the American Psychological Association. In this situation, because all participants in the sample were of legal age, each participant provided affirmative

consent before answering the questionnaire. Database design and data analysis were performed with SPSS v.29. It is worth noting that the analysis was first conducted using descriptive statistics to achieve the first research objective; in this case, differences were examined using bivariate statistics, including contingency tables and the chi-square statistic. Secondly, to reach the second research objective, correlational statistics were used with the one-factor ANOVA statistic (F) as the most appropriate for exploring correlations among variables.

3. Results

Results are presented in two sections: the first focusing on media, information, and social media consumption to achieve the first research objective; and the second focusing on perceptions and reception of fake news to achieve the second research objective.

3.1. Information Consumption Habits, Perceptions, and Preferences

This first section of the results provides answers to RQ1 (what kinds of information do young people consume most?) and RQ2 (to what extent do young people prefer to receive information selected by algorithms?). Throughout this process, Objective 1 is achieved, supported by data from the first six variables of the study (V1–V6) as shown in Table 1, allowing the analysis of the situation across the three countries regarding media, information, and social media consumption.

The medium for getting informed (V1) is one of the first key aspects for understanding the data in greater depth. Despite recent claims in literature that younger generations are unaware of news (Huang, 2009; Villi et al., 2022; Yanardağoğlu, 2021), the fact is that they are. As pointed in the report *How Young People Consume News and The Implications for Mainstream Media,* "the role of news—in its widest possible sense (i.e. knowing about what's going on in The World)—in young people's lives seems much greater than expected and at times felt even more pronounced than with past generations" (Galan et al., 2023, p. 16). In this regard, four variables were analyzed to determine the sample's information consumption habits. Figure 1 shows the percentages of the total sample who were informed "frequently" or "always" through different media resources. Results show that 75% of the sample get informed from social media, which is not the only source of news: 64% report using websites, 47% consume digital press, 37% get informed through television, and two out of 10 declare using online television.
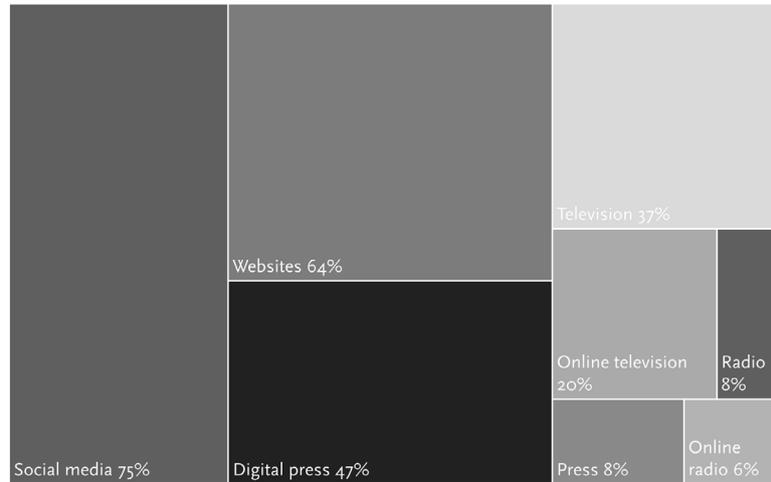
Figure 1. *Percentages on how the total sample gets informed*

Results show that online scenarios (social media, websites, digital press) are the preferred spaces for getting informed. An analysis across the three countries reveals statistically significant variation (p < .05) as shown in Table 2.

V1_Medium to get informed	Country	Percentages of consumption frequencies					N	P
		Never	Almost	Occasionally	Frequently	Always		
Radio	Spain	49.3%	26.0%	16.0%	7.3%	1.3%	150	
	United States	47.7%	39.1%	7.3%	4.0%	2.0%	151	.01
	Portugal	34.6%	33.7%	20.2%	9.6%	1.9%	104	
Online radio	Spain	70.0%	15.3%	8.0%	4.0%	2.7%	150	
	United States	65.6%	24.5%	5.3%	4.0%	0.7%	151	.63
	Portugal	66.3%	20.2%	7.7%	3.8%	1.9%	104	
Press	Spain	60.0%	22.0%	12.7%	4.7%	0.7%	150	
	United States	36.4%	39.7%	13.9%	6.0%	4.0%	151	.00
	Portugal	48.1%	25.0%	19.2%	7.7%	0.0%	104	
Digital press	Spain	14.0%	15.3%	34.7%	27.3%	8.7%	150	
	United States	5.3%	10.6%	35.8%	33.1%	15.2%	151	.10
	Portugal	8.7%	16.3%	27.9%	33.7%	13.5%	104	
Television	Spain	8.7%	25.3%	28.7%	26.0%	11.3%	150	
	United States	15.9%	17.9%	35.8%	26.5%	4.0%	151	.01
	Portugal	12.5%	17.3%	25.0%	28.8%	16.3%	104	
Online television	Spain	49.3%	2.7%	13.3%	13.3%	3.3%	150	
	United States	27.2%	20.5%	27.8%	21.2%	3.3%	151	.00
	Portugal	48.1%	22.1%	12.5%	13.5%	3.8%	104	
Websites	Spain	2.0%	12.7%	23.3%	36.7%	25.3%	150	
	United States	2.6%	4.0%	18.5%	57.0%	17.9%	151	.02
	Portugal	3.8%	15.4%	27.9%	33.7%	19.2%	104	
Social media	Spain	0.7%	4.0%	16.7%	30.7%	48.0%	150	
	United States	4.0%	4.6%	15.9%	33.8%	41.7%	151	.40
	Portugal	4.8%	6.7%	13.5%	37.5%	37.5%	104	

Table 2. *Basic statistics for the total sample and for groups according to the country of origin*

The chi-square test (*p*) results confirm differences among countries in radio as medium to get informed (χ^2 (8) = 18.858, *p* < .05). In this case Portugal seems to be the country where most participants still get informed occasionally (20.2%), with a big difference from the United States (7.3%) and Spain (16%). The use of press also shows statistically significant differences (χ^2 (8) = 27.706, *p* < .05); once again, Portuguese participants in the study reflect a higher percentage, almost 27% get informed by press occasionally and frequently, far from the 17.4% from Spain, and the 19.6% from the United States. Television is used as a source of information by 70.1% of the Portuguese participants, a proportion that differs significantly from those observed in Spain and the United States, with corresponding figures of 66.1% and 66.6% (χ^2 (8) = 18.753, *p* < .05). Online television also shows a different use for the United States which is the country where this medium is most used with a 52.3% using it gradually from "occasionally" to "always", whereas only a 29.8% in Portugal and a 29.9% in Spain. (χ^2 (8) = 25.883 *p* < .05). Finally, although websites are massively used to get informed in all three countries, results show statistically significant difference (χ^2 (8) = 25.042 *p* < .05), being the United States the country where participants declare most intensive use with a 93.4% gradually from "occasionally" to "always", with lower percentages from Portugal (82.8%) and Spain (85.3%).

The study of information consumption habits, preferences, and perceptions should be conducted alongside an examination of the credibility that audiences attribute to the media they prefer for getting information. Results for V3 (degree of credibility in the media), studied in correlation with V2 (the most consumed media for getting informed), provide interesting data as shown in Figure 2.
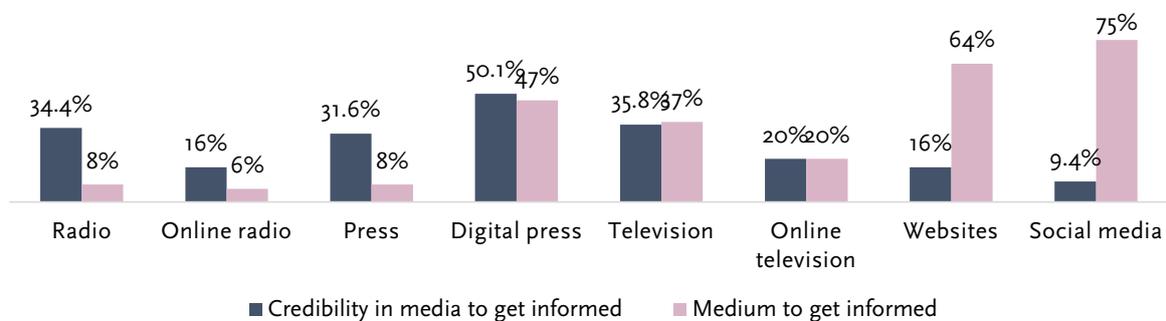

Figure 2. *Percentages on V1: medium to get informed, and V3: credibility in media*

Paradoxically, according to the data, the most used media outlets for information are also the least trusted, while the least used media outlets are the most credible. A more in-depth analysis of correlations reveals statistically significant differences between the degree of credibility and country across several media: radio (χ^2 (8) = 31.113, *p* < .05); online radio (χ^2 (8) = 24.804, *p* < .05); and television (χ^2 (8) = 23.406, *p* < .05).

The research presented also reveals the most consumed news topics, as indicated by V4, and provides a better understanding of the information consumption habits and preferences. As shown in Figure 3, "leisure and entertainment" (73%) is the most consumed content, followed by "humor and memes" (64%) and "music" (52%). "News" is the fourth-most-consumed topic of the sample. Analysis of the correlation between

the variables "topic most consumed" and "country" reveals statistically significant differences in "food and diet" (χ^2 (8) = 21.628, $p <$ .05); "music" (χ^2 (8) = 31.886, $p <$ .05); "games" (χ^2 (8) = 53.456, $p <$ .05); "politics" (χ^2 (8) = 16.187, $p <$ .05); and, "technology" (χ^2 (8) = 16.441, $p <$ .05).
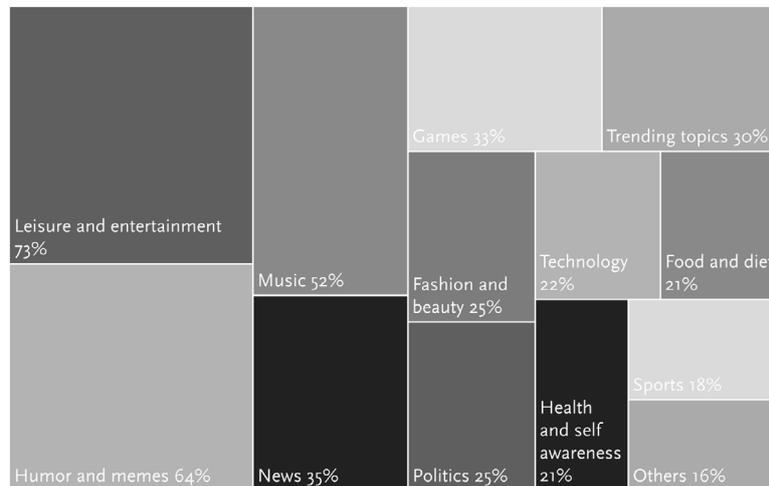

Figure 3. *Percentages on the topics of information consumed by the youngest*

Preferences for receiving information are the V5, analyzed to obtain a complete picture of how young people consume information, and they respond to RQ2: to what extent do young people prefer to receive information selected by algorithms? To explore this variable, five items were used to describe the degree of algorithm action; Level 1 corresponds to the least dependent on algorithm selection and the most dependent on everyone's selection, and Level 5 corresponds to the most dependent on the algorithms' decision. As shown in Figure 4, results reveal differences among the three studied countries (χ^2 (8) = 18.164, $p <$ .05). Spain obtains the highest percentage, with almost 60% of the sample analyzed declaring preference for Level 1, followed by Portugal (52.9%), showing a relevant difference with the American sample (38.4%).
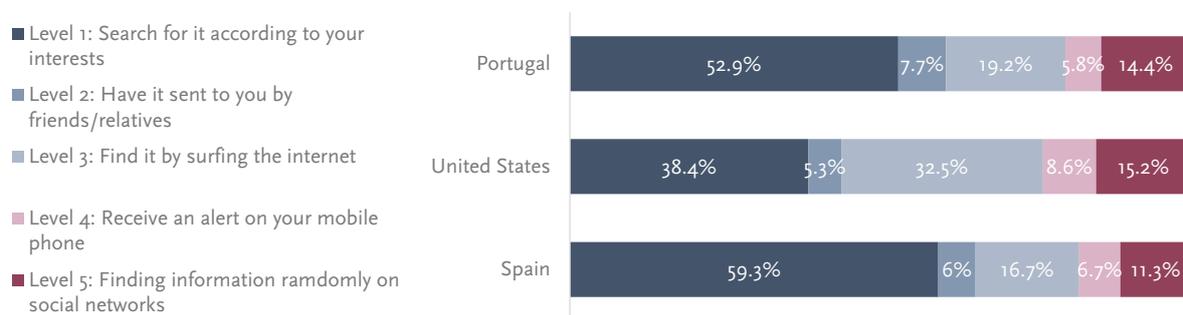

Figure 4. *Percentages by country in the preferences to reach information*

Level 3 also shows significant differences; in this case, the American sample prefers this level at 32.5%, a higher average than the Spanish (16.7%) and Portuguese (19.2%) samples. Levels 2, 4, and 5 do not present big differences among the three countries studied.

3.2. Fake News Reception, Perception, and Management by Young People

Recent literature connects information consumption in digital contexts, especially news consumption via social media, with the spread of fake news (Newman, 2022; Powers, 2017; Selnes, 2024). These studies emphasize that the likelihood of encountering fake news increases further when the focus is on younger audiences, as they spend a lot of time online, particularly on social media. In this regard, the question arises as to whether the sample of this study is aware of the reception of fake news. This section addresses Objetive 2 and analyses V7 to V10 variables. It is worth noting, from the results given by V7 (see Table 1), that 27.2% report never having received fake news, 33.1% report receiving barely any, while only a 20% report receiving fake news frequently or always.

As the data illustrated in the previous section, the sample gets informed predominantly through social media (75%), so this block describes social media use and its relation to fake news reception to answer RQ3 (does the medium to get informed determine the reception of fake news?) and RQ4 (is the country a determining factor in the reception of fake news?).

Preferred social media reveals statistically significant differences among countries (χ^2 (14) = 37.179, $p < .05$) and constitutes itself a variable to describe information consumption in the sample studied because, according to previously obtained data, it can be inferred that the sample will be mostly informed by their preferred social media. Table 3 shows which social media platform is most used in each country.

	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	WhatsApp	YouTube	Twitch	Others
Spain	0.0%	18.7%	11.3%	12.0%	11.3%	40.0%	2.0%	4.7%
United States	6.0%	21.2%	27.2%	11.9%	3.3%	25.8%	0.0%	4,6%
Portugal	2.9%	19.2%	14.4%	10.6%	12.5%	32.7%	1.0%	6.7%
Total sample	3.0%	19.8%	18.0%	11.6%	8.6%	32.8%	1.0%	5.2%

Table 3. *Percentages of social media platforms used per country*

After observing differences among countries in preferred social media outlets, this analysis examines whether there is a correlation between "fake news reception" (dependent variable) and two independent variables: "medium of getting informed" and "country of origin". This analysis allows confirmation or rejection of the null hypothesis (H0) formulated:

- H01: there is no correlation between the reception of fake news and the media consumed to get information.
- H02: there is no correlation between the reception of fake news and the country of origin.

The correlation between both variables was analyzed using the one-factor ANOVA statistic (F). The results are shown in Table 4 (descriptive statistics) and Table 5 (ANOVA statistics).

Variables		N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	95% confidence interval for the mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower limit	Upper limit		
Medium used to get informed	Radio	9	2.78	1.481	.494	1.64	3.92	1	5
	Online radio	10	1.80	.632	.200	1.35	2.25	1	3
	Press	6	3.00	1.673	.683	1.24	4.76	1	5
	Digital press	49	1.96	.935	.134	1.69	2.23	1	4
	Television	24	2.75	1.359	.277	2.18	3.32	1	5
	Websites	29	2.69	1.312	.244	2.19	3.19	1	5
	Social media	278	2.45	1.261	.076	2.30	2.59	1	5
Country of origin	Spain	150	2.45	1.267	.103	2.24	2.65	1	5
	United States	151	2.34	1.238	.101	2.14	2.54	1	5
	Portugal	104	2.51	1.246	.122	2.27	2.75	1	3

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics for the independent variables: "medium to get informed" and "country of origin"*

Fake news reception		Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F	Significance
Medium to get informed	Between groups	22,329	6	3.721	2.434	.025
	Within groups	608,471	398	1.529		
	Total	630,800	404			
Country of origin	Between groups	1,961	2	.981	.627	.535
	Within groups	628,839	402	1.564		
	Total	630,800	404			

Table 5. *ANOVA Statistic to analyze differences among the variance between groups, within groups, and the total*

H01 is rejected, as the results reveal that the reception of fake news shows a significant correlation within the media to get informed ($p < .05$). ANOVA analysis (see Table 5) confirms statistically significant differences in the reception of fake news depending on the media used to obtain information, F = 2.434, Sig. 025, $p < .05$. However, H02 is confirmed, as the results show no correlation between receiving fake news and country of origin.

To conclude the exposition of the results, the remaining variables in the study (V9 and V10) are analyzed to address RQ5: what type of content is most often associated with fake news across the countries included in the study? As shown in Figure 5, results do not indicate significant differences among countries, except for the Sports topic, which reveals significant differences ($p < .05$).
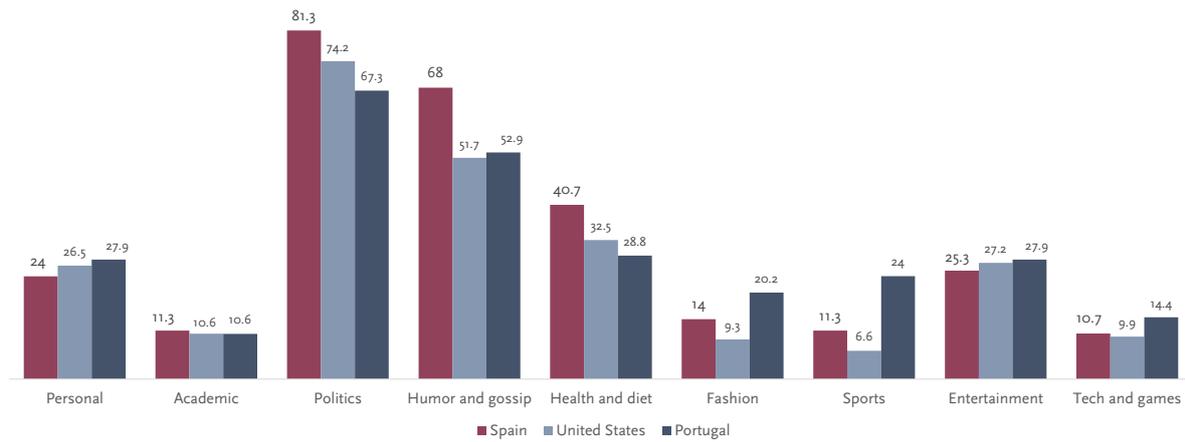
Figure 5. *Contents more associated with fake news (in percentages) by country*

Based on the study of main topics related to fake news, it is worth noting that "politics", "humor and gossip", "health and diet", and "personal issues" are the topics considered by the sample as the most related to fake news. Finally, to conclude the proposed analysis, data for the last variable (V10), "channels or media spreading fake news the most", are examined. As seen in Table 6, the sample analyzed perceives that several channels are more likely to spread fake news. Considering responses of "frequently" and "always", the results expressed as percentages are: websites (57.3%), Twitter (65.7%), Instagram (58.5%), Facebook (78.3%), TikTok (65.4%), WhatsApp (52.6%), and word-of-mouth (61%). Traditional media scores 27.2% on this item, the lowest result among all items analyzed. The chi-square test (*p*) results confirm differences among countries in perceptions of "websites" (χ^2 (8) = 26.013, $p < .05$) regarding the spread of fake news. In this case, Spanish (64%) and Portuguese (63.4%) samples show a stronger association between these places and fake news than the American sample (46.3%).

V9_Content more associated with fake news	Country	Percentages of consumption frequencies					N	P
		Never	Almost	Occasionally	Frequently	Always		
Media outlets	Spain	4.0%	35.3%	38.7%	15.3%	6.7%	150	
	United States	2.0%	31.8%	33.1%	22.5%	10.6%	151	.170
	Portugal	7.7%	35.6%	30.8%	21.2%	4.8%	104	
Websites	Spain	0.0%	8.7%	27.3%	46.7%	17.3%	150	
	United States	0.0%	8.6%	45.0%	38.4%	7.9%	151	.001
	Portugal	2.9%	6.7%	26.9%	51.9%	11.5%	104	
X	Spain	0.7%	3.3%	22.0%	48.0%	26.0%	150	
	United States	0.0%	9.9%	34.4%	35.1%	20.5%	151	.001
	Portugal	4.8%	6.7%	20.2%	40.4%	27.9%	104	
Instagram	Spain	0.7%	6.7%	29.3%	44.7%	18.7%	150	
	United States	0.0%	14.6%	31.8%	35.8%	17.9%	151	.023
	Portugal	4.8%	9.6%	26.9%	43.3%	15.4%	104	

Facebook	Spain	2.0%	6.0%	20.7%	42.7%	28.7%	150	
	United States	0.7%	4.6%	20.5%	37.1%	37.1%	151	.260
	Portugal	2.9%	2.9%	11.5%	48.1%	34.6%	104	
TikTok	Spain	2.0%	8.0%	21.3%	41.3%	27.3%	150	
	United States	1.3%	11.3%	24.5%	44.4%	18.5%	151	.011
	Portugal	8.7%	10.6%	16.3%	33.7%	30.8%	104	
WhatsApp	Spain	3.3%	10.0%	22.7%	38.0%	26.0%	150	
	United States	17.9%	17.9%	22.5%	27.2%	14.6%	151	.001
	Portugal	11.5%	16.3%	20.2%	32.7%	19.2%	104	
Word-of-mouth	Spain	0.7%	5.3%	28.7%	42.0%	23.3%	150	
	United States	0.7%	8.6%	34.4%	37.7%	18.5%	151	.142
	Portugal	2.9%	13.5%	22.1%	39.4%	22.1%	104	

Table 6. *Basic statistics for the total sample and for groups according to the country of origin*

An analysis of X reveals significant differences (χ^2 (8) = 26.614, *p* < .05), with Americans showing lower percentages (55.6%) than Spanish (74%) and Portuguese (68.3%). Equally, Instagram shows statistically significant differences (χ^2 (8) = 17.812, *p* < .05), with the American sample again obtaining lower results (53.7%) than the Spanish (63.4%) and the Portuguese (58.7%). For TikTok, similar results (χ^2 (8) = 19.870, *p* < .05): the country with the lowest percentage is the United States (62.9%), followed by Portugal (64.5%) and Spain (68.6%). Finally, WhatsApp presents similar results (χ^2 (8) = 26.106, *p* < .05), with 56.3% for the United States, 61.5% for Portugal and Spain, with the highest score (65.3%).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented has fulfilled the main objective of describing and exploring the consumption and perception of news and fake news among university students by answering several research questions. As Yanardağoğlu (2021) pointed out, the relationship between young audiences and news consumption is constantly shifting; therefore, interest in new, updated results will persist. This approach yields a consumption and perception profile that provides empirical evidence of the phenomenon and contributes new aspects to previous studies on the topic (Selnes, 2024; Yanardağoğlu, 2021). While this study has the main limitation of being restricted to college students, and other members of generation Z are not represented in the sample, significant overarching trends are evident, leading to the following conclusions and discussion in relation to other studies.

First, generation Z is more digital than ever to get information internationally, which confirms the trend from recent studies and reports (Bustos Díaz & Martin-Vicario, 2024; Childwise, 2023; Galan et al., 2023; Newman, 2022): the results show that 75% of the sample get their information from social media, which are not the only source for consuming news, as 64% report using websites, 47% digital press, 37% get their information from television, and two out of 10 declare using online television. In terms of differences between countries, it is worth noting that no statistically significant differences

were found regarding the most used media to get information: social media, websites, television, and digital press, and the media least used: radio, online radio, press, and online television.

Secondly, it can be inferred that digital media, and more specifically social media, have produced a certain homogenization of media consumption worldwide, at least among young audiences, as shown in recent data (Gubbala & Austin, 2024). In this sense, social media catalyze Marshal McLuhan's (1989) visionary notion of the "global village", as differences in media consumption across countries are very scarce. The use of written press is very low among generation Z overall, especially among Spanish youth. A notable difference is that online television is slightly more commonly consumed in the United States. But in general, the most visible trend is that generation Z is highly informed through social media and values digital media equally for entertainment and information. Exploring the habits and perceptions of younger audiences reveals an information convergence: regardless of country, preferred content focuses on leisure and entertainment, humor and memes, and news. This common trend highlights the convergence theory, which holds that young audiences use digital contexts for multiple actions simultaneously. Results obtained in this research clearly differ from other works previously published, such as the one from Head et al. (2018), Medietilsynet (2022), or Selnes (2024), who conclude that "sports", "politics", "weather", and "finance" were the most consumed topics among young audiences. Changes in young audiences' preferences for accessing content are ongoing in this kind of study, as noted by Kirsten (2022). As a result, a key challenge for further research is to unpack new behaviors in content consumption.

These results clearly align with the idea of "media convergence" and the "snack culture" of information (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2021), but they particularly show that social media serves as the hub that drives this trend. It is possible to infer that the economy of attention, which financially sustains social media, contributes to generation Z's reliance on these platforms for both entertainment and news consumption, as they are designed to encourage users to spend more time consuming enticing content on them, regardless of its type.

In this sense, the convenience of platform usability and attractiveness on social media outweighs news credibility. In this study, a significant correlation was detected between the reception of fake news and the media used for information, with social media standing out amid the increase of misinformation. However, this study also reveals two new trends regarding generation Z and news credibility: first, their underestimation of fake news circulation; and second, the paradox of their distrust of digital media. Regarding the former, the results show that fake news is not that important for young audiences. One of the most interesting results is the common perception of the sample, regardless of country, regarding the reception of fake news: three out of 10 say they never receive it; three out of 10 say they hardly ever receive it, and only two out of 10 say they often or always receive it. The findings suggest that fake news is not a prominent aspect of this generation's content consumption, or at least not perceived as such. This result

could indicate two things: either that the media's efforts to combat fake news are really working, or that young people overestimate their abilities and are not capable of recognizing fake news and therefore do not perceive that they receive it, as anticipated by previous works (Vicente Domínguez et al., 2021). This would be a topic for further inquiry and confirms the urgency of further pondering fake news among younger audiences as well as of cultivating media literacy among *postmillennials*, both in higher education and in the public sphere, in line with recent works such as Purington Drake et al. (2023).

Regarding trust in digital media, this study identified a new paradox among generation Z that complicates their relationship with information and news credibility. Contrary to many previous studies, this study shows that younger audiences paradoxically distrust the media they consume the most. In other words, they claim to give more credibility to the media they consume the least and less credibility to the media they consume the most (websites and social media). Contrary to previous reports, subjects in this study give traditional media more credibility than digital media. This seems to be a change in the relationship between young audiences and news consumption, complicating the aforementioned positive perception that generation Z has of digital media relative to traditional media (Lorenz, 2018). As stated by Nygren and Guath (2019), credibility is a "pivotal democratic and educational challenge to enable citizens to distinguish between credible, biased, and fake information" (p. 24). Applying this concept to the media that younger audiences use the most to get informed offers an innovative perspective and gives the audience an active role, allowing researchers to implement digital literacy approaches in further research. Although previous findings suggest that generation Z underestimates the prevalence and power of misinformation, this generation is also aware of the issues associated with it. It can be deduced that young audiences internationally have an increasingly vigilant attitude towards misinformation as a theoretical and abstract issue and are now more aware of how news feeds operate as gatekeepers than they were in the past (Powers, 2017). However, their preference for digital media, especially social media, still prevails. More research is needed to further explore the most relevant findings of this study. A deeper examination is needed to explore the causes of differences across countries, with each country properly contextualized. Furthermore, more work is needed explore the paradox of credibility and to understand its underlying causes more clearly. The relationship between generation Z, media trust, credibility, and fake news seems complex and inconclusive; as Selnes (2024) argues, "the effect of fake news on teens' participation in news remains unclear" (p. 377). It behooves deeper academic inquiry to find solutions to the spread of misinformation, to engage younger audiences in news consumption, and to address the challenges posed by fake news to Western democracies.

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