NAVIGATING NEWS CREDIBILITY AND MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF YOUNG ADULTS' INFORMATION VERIFICATION BEHAVIORS

Muhammad Usman

Gomal University, D I Khan

usmanjaffar2229@gmail.com

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Muhammad Usman

Abstract

The use of social media as a main news source among young adults is causing concern regarding the ability of individuals to handle misinformation in the environment that is controlled by algorithms. The current qualitative research is aimed at investigating the information verification behaviour of young adults (18-26) using semi-structured interviews and think-aloud protocols, the strategy that they use, the cues that they place trust in, and the difficulties encountered in determining the credibility of the news. The thematic analysis enabled identification of four key findings guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory. First, there was a rise of a so-called vigilance paradox whereby the participants indicated that they were very confident of identifying fake news but showed a generalized cynicism that was further applied to honest journalism, which compromised the ability to differentiate sources. Secondly, verification was a social practice in itself, the participants needed to use peer networks, comment sections, and trusted influencers as distributed verification systems. Third, platform interactions, such as fact-check labels, community notes and algorithmic recommendations, were defined by ambivalence and explanatory community notes were appreciated, whereas binary labels were viewed with skepticism or curiosity-driven resentment. Fourth, personal verification toolkits were largely shallow/account checks, comment scanners, and cross-referencing with big platforms and focused on efficiency over depth in a manner that corresponds to the platform logics of quick consumption. The results show that young adults are not naive consumers but they are active agents that move in structurally complex information environments that are constructed by platform architectures, algorithm logics, and social relations. The verification practices used are decent adaptations to an environment that is meant to be engaged but not accurate. That highlights the importance of multi-level interventions: media literacy education that would touch on algorithm awareness and source triangulation, journalism transparency in practices that show that they are trustworthy, platform design changes that would help in certifying credibility, and regulatory measures that would promote accuracy over engagement. To combat the misinformation crisis, the individual capabilities and the information environments in which those capabilities are undertaken need to be converted.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Shifting News Landscape

The manner in which individuals receive news has been radically changed in the last 10 years. The old gatekeepers of information such as professional editors, journalists as well as news organizations are no longer in exclusive positions in what the populace would hear or see. Rather, social media have become one of the main channels of distributing news, radically changing the way the information is passed on to consumers by producers (Newman et al., 2023). Such platforms function based on algorithmic curation whereby machine learning algorithms dictate what is displayed in the feeds of users and is not driven by editorial decisions or journalistic quality but instead by the engagement patterns, browser history, and social connections (Thorson and Wells, 2016).

This change has a special implication among the young adults. The studies always show that Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have become the main news sources of people aged between 18 and 26. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2023) claims that half of 18-24 years of age now use social media as their primary news source increasing in number and in the news consumption of TikTok, the fastest growing news source among young people, is going up (44 to 52 percent in a single year). Young adults are exposed to the news accidentally when they browse through entertainment materials, unlike their parents and grandparents who used to turn on TV or read a morning newspaper when they wanted to know the news (Boczkowski et al., 2018). This accidental exposure implies that news is delivered in a flow of lifestyle information, memes, personal updates, and the lines between information and entertainment are obscured.

There are implications of this change that go beyond convenience. When algorithms get in place of editors as observers of economic order, the rationale of news distribution takes a different form. Traditionally, news has been chosen by editors according to the criteria of the newsworthiness which is the relevance, the significance of the audience, and correctness. In contrast, algorithms emphasize engagement, i.e. the content that produces clicks, remarks, shares, and a longer duration of watching (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Such a participatory paradigm builds structural incentives of sensationalism, emotional provocation, and simplification of information as this type of content always does better than detailed, intricate reporting. To young adults working in this environment, the very structure of how they get their news works against the careful, critical involvement of citizenship demands.

1.2 The Misinformation Menace.

The algorithmic news environment has been matched with what academics currently refer to as the itis the so-called misinformation crisis, a time when fake or misguided information propagates rapidly via the digital networks (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Misinformation is a continuum of problematic content, including completely-made-up stories on one end, and manipulated media on the opposite end, to misleading headlines and out of context quotes. Intended to mislead, it is disinformation, yet the impacts to the general perception are not good in spite of good intentions.

The social consequences of the misinformation that has been rife in society have been well researched in various fields. Research in politics has also found exposure to fake news to reduce trust in democratic institutions, polarize politics, and delegate the legitimacy of the electoral process (Tucker et al., 2018). The U.S. presidential election of 2016 and the Brexit referendum led the world to focus on how organized disinformation campaigns have the potential to affect democratic outcomes, but there is still no consensus among scholars over the extent of such effects (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Another important battlefield has become public health. The COVID-19 pandemic showed in shocking terms the extent to which misinformation may be life or death. The spread of rumors concerning the nature of the virus, ways to prevent it, and available treatments spread at a higher rate than the virus does, with

the problems of vaccine hesitancy, opposition to governmental health guidance, and avoidable fatalities (World Health Organization, 2020). The WHO Director-General termed the situation as an infodemic - excess information, true and false, that left people mostly unable to get reliable advice at the time when it was needed the most.

On top of these acute crises, misinformation is arming the basis of the trust on which democratic societies rely. The citizens are not able to agree over simple facts where meaningful deliberation over the population cannot take place. In Western democracies, the level of trust in institutions, including government, media, science, and education, has decreased over the past decades, and the spread of fake news only increases and propagates it (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). The challenges of making the critical capacities of informed citizenship are especially daunting to the young adults as they establish their political identities and civic habits in an era of diminished trust.

1.3 The Digital Native Paradox.

The stereotype has saturated not only the popular discourse but also certain educational practices: the idea that young people, who have been raised in the environment of digital technology, have some natural benefits in their ability to operate in online information sources. Popularized by Prensky (2001), this "digital native" model posits that people born in the digital age naturally have a feeling of what is going on in the digital world and can manage it well, in ways that people born prior to the digital age find impossible.

This assumption is getting more and more challenged by empirical research. Though young adults are exceptionally fluent in the technical code of digital platforms finding their way around interfaces, producing content, and maintaining online social presence, this technical ability does not necessarily extend into critical assessment capabilities (boyd, 2014). According to a massive research conducted by Stanford University History Education Group, students in middle school, high school, and college showed horrific and shocking lack of skills in evaluating online

information (Wineburg et al., 2016). Exposed to the information of unreliable sources, students could not make the difference between sponsored content and news articles, could not verify claims by using a lateral reading tool, and placed the unreasonable trust in websites that look professionally but superficially.

A more recent study gives us a more complicated picture. According to McGrew et al. (2020), although college students believed that they were capable of identifying fake news, the level of their confidence was frequently higher than their real abilities. Young people were more likely to judge information by the surface characteristics (the inclusion of a photo, the number of likes, a recognizable logo) instead of applying more firm verification procedures like checking sources, checking claims with other accounts, or learning about organizational membership. This lack of connection between confidence and competence is what researchers call the so-called digital native paradox: the most immersed in digital space can be the most prone to their traps due to the overconfidence (Nygren and Guath, 2019).

Particular attention should be paid to the complexity of verification behavior of young adults. Instead of being characterized by homogeneous abilities to perform, they use a toolkit of strategies, some of which are efficient and others not as efficient. It has been reported in studies that users are turning to peer networks to verify, use multiple platforms to cross-reference information, and have a differing level of awareness about algorithmic curation (Vraga et al., 2020).

1.4 Research Gap

The current body of research on the topic of misinformation and young adults has taken a number of fruitful directions. A large amount of research is done to determine the effectiveness of media literacy interventions and whether classroom-based instruction can enhance students in assessing online information (Guess et al., 2020). There is also an issue of psychological and cognitive reasons why people are prone to believing false information, such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and

cognitive reflection (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). A third thread investigates the misinformation itself spreading, taking a network analysis approach to track the flow of fake content across digital ecosystems (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

What has relative not been studied is the experience of young adults through credibility choices in their daily information contexts. The current literature tends to use experimental designs, in which the subjects are presented with single news stories and their reaction is evaluated in controlled conditions. Although useful in determining causality, the reality of how the youths perceive, interpret, and respond to news in the context of daily consumption of social media is too messy to be reflected by such methods.

The main questions are not properly answered. What exactly are the behaviors young adults utilize when they access a news post and cannot determine its reliability? What do they make of and utilize the different functionality of the platforms that help assess the credibility, such as context labels, community notes, algorithm-based suggestions, comment boxes? How are social elements used to verify them, whether it is by asking friends about a story or seeing how trusted influencers interact with information? The above questions indicate the following gap in the research: verification behaviors have to be investigated in greater detail and in a more qualitative way, as they naturally manifest, as they are framed in the social and technological contexts that frame them.

It is important to address this gap both theoretically and practically. In theory, the interpretation of verification as a practice and not an abstract skills can enhance the models of information processing and credibility evaluation. In practice, to create interventions and features that benefit but do not disorient young people, educators and platform designers must have access to specific information about how they go about determining credibility.

1.5 Research Questions and Purpose of the Study.

This research has the potential to fill the research gap mentioned since it will deeply examine the qualitative examination of the way in which young adults seek news credibility and misinformation in social media. Instead of evaluating the ability of participants to detect the false information properly, the given research is dedicated to the comprehension of the processes, strategies, and social interaction involved in the everyday verification practices of the participants. The study was based on qualitative approach based on the interpretative tradition, as it aims to comprehend the experiences of the participants based on their own views. The method is specifically most appropriate to research questions which are about meaning-making, context and process, the how and why of human behavior as opposed to the what or how many (Lindlof and Taylor, 2017). This study will produce rich detailed narratives of young adults and their news seeking and verification behaviors by involving them in lengthy discussions about their news seeking and verification behaviors in the modern media world.

This study is conducted on the basis of three research questions:

RQ1: What specific verification behaviors do young adults employ when encountering news on social media?

RQ2: How do young adults interpret and utilize platform features (e.g., context labels, comments, algorithmic recommendations) to assess credibility?

RQ3: What role do social factors (peers, family, influencers) play in their verification process?

Through concentrating on these questions, my study will not only help advance the theoretical understanding of how young adults negotiate the current information settings but also offer practical advice to educators, journalists, and platform designers who wish to contribute to the more efficient verification practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Key Concepts

It is important to have a clear understanding of the underlying concepts first before delving into how credibility works in social media by young adults. Misinformation, disinformation, news credibility and verification behaviors are terms that have a certain meaning in the academic literature on the subject, and their definition to the dot determines the conceptual limits of this study.

False Data and Fake News. Although in the popular language these terms are used interchangeably, they can be described as different phenomena that manifest themselves in various ways to the content producers and consumers. Misinformation is the misinformation that is disseminated with no intent to lie and without any intent to do so purposefully (Moscadelli et al., 2020, as cited in). The act of spreading misinformation is carried out by a person having a false news story whose health belief is that it is a true news. Disinformation, in its turn, refers to superficial information that is actively misguided and drafted with the intention to cause damage to an individual, social group, organization, or even nation. This difference is important in that the motivations of false information influence its content features as well as the measures that may be applied to combat it. The production qualities of disinformation tend to be more sophisticated and aimed at a particular vulnerability in information ecosystems, whereas misinformation can be transferred via the ill-intentioned but inadequately critical sharing habits.

The broad-based concept of fake news has become widely used but lacks conceptual clarity and is politically usurped. The more detailed terms used by scholars are becoming more popular, and they draw a distinction between not dissimilar types of misleading media, including manipulated media, out-of-context quotes, fake relationships, and impersonated content (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). According to Jahng (2021), such similar terms as alternative facts, media manipulation, and propaganda capture various sides of the information disorder in its greater sense.

News Credibility. Credibility is a perceptional variable and not an objective feature of information. It is how much people feel that a bit of information can be believed as true, truthful, and reliable. The issue of credibility measurement is exacerbated in the context of social media since some of the conventional indicators of journalistic authority that include bylines, institutional reputations, editorial oversight, etc., may be lost or hidden. The user is required to consider the content as well as the source, the medium and the social context whereby the information is presented.

Credibility has many dimensions and they include source credibility (the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the person presenting the information), message credibility (the perceived plausibility and internal consistency of the information presented) and medium credibility (the perceived reliability of the medium through which the Information is presented). It has been shown that these dimensions are complexly interacting with weaknesses in one dimension being compensated by strengths in the other dimension in some cases, but the compensatory processes are not well understood in terms of social media where all the three dimensions may be impaired at the same time.

Verification Behaviors. Verification behaviors involve the activities that people engage in to determine the accuracy and reliability of the information they are exposed to. These vary in complexity, with the simplest techniques being to check the username of the source, inspection of profile pictures, commenting on their content, and others being more complex, like cross-checking information of multiple sources, using reverse image search, using fact-checking websites, or discussing the information with reliable people.

Verification behaviors are of study interest as they move the analysis focus away, as to outcomes (whether or not a person believes false information) to processes (how an individual

comes to the judgments of credibility). Taking into consideration verification as practices within daily social media usage, one can see the cognitive, social and technological, determinants of whether and how young people are critical users of news content.

2.2 News Consumers in the Young Adults category.

To comprehend young adult news consumption, the discussion has to go past the generational stereotypes to the more empirically based descriptions of their real practices. The studies always show that the young people do read news, but their consumption habits differ greatly as compared to the consumption habits of the older generations .

Platform Preferences. Young adults are the main news consumers in the social media. Recent data indicates that 91 percent of the Gen Z use social media as their news source and 88 percent use video platforms like YouTube to consume news. These numbers are small compared to the percentage of people who visit news directly on the websites or applications of the traditional media. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2023) Tik Tok experienced the greatest growth in news consumption among 18-24 year olds with the number of those who consume it rising between 44% and 52% in only one year. This change of visual and platform-based consumption is a radical restructuring of the news environment.

These patterns are treated in the more detailed way in the Google-Kantar survey "Bridging the Gap: Reimagining News for Gen Z" which ascertained that 65% of young adults find news by accident as they scroll social media or watch online videos, not by active searching. This incidental exposure model implies news is delivered as part of entertainment flow, personal updates, and interpersonal interaction, erasing the lines between the genres of news information and making the classical conceptual frameworks of engaging the news a lot more complex.

The Youth News Consumption Three-Stage Model. A sophisticated model of news consumption among the youth that was created by the FT Strategies and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University explained that there are three phases of news consumption in young people. The preliminacy is curation of news by scrolling, which is the passive consumption of news as one scrolls through their social media feeds and other feeds. At this phase, young users are exposed to the news by chance but can also seek out information on matters of interest to themselves and subscribe to push announcements on their preferred sources.

The second phase focuses on active read and check. Young adults are more concerned when the content they receive captivates their attention and use news to confirm facts, enhance knowledge in certain fields, and learn various sides of the issue that is of interest to them. This phase demonstrates the existence of passive consumption and the episodes of intensive engagement, which cannot be described using homogenous concepts of superficial information processors of young people.

The third stage entails sharing and discussion socially. It is during these interactions that young adults are exposed to other news material, they share the news with peers, talk about the happenings of the day with peers and in the process they get exposed to more news content. This social aspect of news consumption has far-reaching consequences on the aspect of verification because the judgments of credibility become embedded within relationships and within community norms.

News Avoidance and Paradoxes. The young adults are also selective avoiders despite their interest with the news. The sheer volume of available information creates what one American respondent described as overwhelming choice: "When I want to look at the news, one of the biggest challenges is that there's just so much stuff out there, and I don't really know where to begin sometimes" .

2.3 Credibility Assessment Online.

What makes users conclude that information they have been exposed to in the social media can be trusted? Literature on this question has come up with advanced models that encapsulate the cognitive processes in making credibility judgments.

Heuristic and Systematic Processing. Dual process accounts of information processing furnish a theoretical background that can guide one in understanding the credibility evaluation. According to the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), there exist two types of information processing: systematic processing, which is thought of as careful, effortful analysis of message content as well as logic; and heuristic processing, which is based on mental shortcuts or rules of thumb to make judgments using minimal cognitive effort (Chaiken, 1980).

Heuristic processing is the majority of the times among the users of social media environment. The volume of information, which is a feature of the platform-based news consumption cannot be systematized so that all items encountered become a feasible and sensible processing. Users thus end up using cognitive shortcuts, which are indications of credibility but they do not involve attentive reading in response.

Recent studies that utilize the Heuristic-Systematic Model have found particular textual characteristics of perceived validity of online news. The similarity of the content and loaded language are heuristic characteristics, and they have a direct impact on the way users perceive news credibility. The idea of language intensity and conflicting sentiment is a systematic aspect that can be processed more profoundly where condition right at the right time with motivation and ability with limited capacity and this in a way that the aspects of loaded language moderate perceptions of credibility.

The commonly used heuristics when assessing social media news are familiarity with the source, such as believing information that account users have read or heard previously; popularity, where likes, shares, and number of comments are seen as indicators of various levels of credibility; visual appeal where information presented professionally is assumed to be more reliable, and social support where information posted by friends or respected peers is believed to be true. Any of these heuristics may cause misjudgments when systematically used by the sellers of fake information.

The meaning to the young adults is critical. Studies have proposed that the effects of the filter bubbles with the echo chambers can make users less critical of information because of the synergies between the two phenomena that lower their exposure to a broader range of opinions and also provides feedback loops that solidify beliefs, thereby reinforcing them by making them more normalized (Grenier et al., 2018).

Credibility Indicators and Indicators Mixed Effectiveness. Platforms have introduced a number of features that can assist users to evaluate credibility such as fact-check labels, warning notes and community notes. The effectiveness of these interventions depends on the research results, which demonstrate a multifaceted image.

Labels on social media content that do fact-checking have yielded uneven results as to their user and benefit. Experimental studies of credibility perceptions concerning labels of fact-checking of news memes showed that the label was not found advantageous in credibility judgment. There are however various labeling strategies that have different results. Rated False tags were also better than Disputed Tags in lowering the rate of belief in misinformation on Facebook (Clayton et al., 2020, as cited in).

The format and presentation of interventions of fact-checking is of significance. The use of visuals in fact-checking messages surprisingly led to the reduced effectiveness in comparison to the text-only format (Walter et al., 2020, as cited in). This unintuitive result is an indication that visual features can interfere with substantive corrections or cause defensive processing.

There is potential in community-based fact-checking methods. A recent study involving 1,810 American participants identified the reactions of various interventions of the fact-checking to misleading and non-misleading posts

on social media. The participants were randomly assigned to the conditions in which misleading content is presented with simple misinformation flags (labeled as expert flags or community flags) or textual community notes describing why the post that was fact-checked was misleading. Community notes were viewed as much more reliable on the political spectrum compared to mere flags. The increased credibility was found to be mainly a factor of the contextual explanations that had been offered than the increased credibility towards community fact-checkers in general. Community notes additionally boosted the capacity to detect misleading posts among the participants, indicating that the explanatory context can be more important than labeling.

Although these are positive results, there are still great challenges. Reliability on fact-checking organizations is still an issue. Studies have shown that the general public still has a poor opinion of fact-checking websites such as Snopes, FactCheck.org, and even StopFake, and the users show a degree of ambivalence or even open mistrust towards them. The interviews with journalists bring out some more restrained views, they find such services to be possibly useful without trusting one of them blindly. Such a trend is generalized to all users of social media, who might be aware of the usefulness of fact-checking services and are suspicious of their intentions or techniques.

Scale is one of the complicating factors. The human fact-checkers are finding it difficult to match the amount and speed of misinformation disseminated, which puts a strain on automated systems. Nevertheless, fact-checking technology is an area where the automated solution is outpaced by demand, and none of the existing programs does sufficiently accurate automated fact-checking on scale (). Fact-checking by professional fact-checkers has remained a craft, with investigative journalism traditions and practices that are difficult to automate.

2.4 The Influence of Algorithms

It is important to understand how young adults manage the issue of news credibility with references to the technological infrastructure which influences what is observed and how it is observed. Algorithms do not sit passively as carriers of information but they are actors in the gatekeeping process.

Algorithmic Gatekeeping. The idea of gatekeeping, which has been historically applied to human editors and journalists in terms of the choice of stories to be dispatched to the populace, has been expanded to explain the role of algorithms in the dissemination of information. The new gatekeepers like Facebook, Google and YouTube are online information intermediaries, which are slowly taking the place of the traditional media channels.

Nevertheless, algorithmic gatekeeping has some fundamental differences with its human counterpart. Such systems, as studies on bias in algorithmic filtering show, are not just algorithms but sophisticated sociotechnical assemblies consisting of people and technology. Algorithms are affected by humans in several ways: during design, training data selection, optimization objective choice and occasionally are even subject to human intervention, even when algorithms are running. Algorithms have replaced human biases but did not abolish them but changed their functioning.

Online services carry a more complicated gatekeeping process than mere human to algorithmic selection. The same factors that led to bias in the traditional media are also applicable when it comes to the information selection in the online space which is mediated through the technical systems that can further exaggerate such biases or cover up these biases in different forms. The means of information diffusion by online intermediaries are such that they are likely to be biased at various points.

The mechanics are simple: algorithms monitor the user behavior, e.g. clicks, dwell time, shares, searches, etc. and utilize the indicators to determine the future preferences. The content that is expected to attract the user gets an upgrade in the feed rankings; the content that is expected to not interest or alienate the user gets demoted or concealed. With time, users will be faced with increasingly customized information

environments with less chance of serendipity about differing points of view.

The discrimination in algorithmic filtering may happen at several stages. During source selection phase, not all digital data can be accessed by all services, and algorithms can be made to give preference to certain form of information as compared to others. Bias may also be created by technical constraints, popularity measures, and third-party manipulation. Also, editorial decisions are made by human operators with a certain effect on the algorithmic results, and these stipulate the appearance of the bias, which became common with traditional media.

The Illusion of Control. One of the most important results deals with the attitude of young users towards algorithmic curation. It has been argued that the illusion that they command their algorithms can be mostly a myth among young people. Users can control the production of an algorithm by shaping their usage behavior likes, follow, mute, search, but the systems themselves stay hidden and work on the basis of the logic that is not fully transparent to the users.

This illusion of control bears significant consequences on the issue of credibility. Once users feel they have created their information environment by making conscious decisions, they will be less attentive to the information that is presented to them in that environment as they consider algorithmic filtration as a kind of unintentional approval. It is a personalized content, which is provided by the algorithm, and as such, it may evade critical examination that otherwise may be present.

Ethical dilemmas surround autonomy of users, transparency and diversity of information in algorithmically curated space. When users are unable to discern why they are being put in their feeds, be it as a result of their own historical actions or because of the commercial interests of the platform, or even because third parties influence this view, this may negatively impact their capacity to form credible judgments. The upcoming studies should focus on the awareness of the users towards the algorithm and the effects of filtering algorithms on user confidence and self-determination.

2.5 Verification as a Social Dimension.

Verification is not a solitary cognitive process but a socially constituted practice that is dictated by relations and social standards and is influenced by the other people. To comprehend the ways that young adults negotiate credibility, it is important to consider the following social dimensions.

The Two-Step Flow of Information. Classic theory of communication conceptualised information flow as a two stage process by which media to ideas to opinion leaders, and opinion leaders to less active sections of the population (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). The same model still applies in the situation of social media albeit the character of opinion leaders has changed.

Modern studies affirm that opinion leaders (social media influencers, political leaders, journalists, teachers, and family elders) are prominent in influencing the way the youths interact with information. An online survey (N=200) of teenage social media users demonstrated that teenagers do not have much intrinsic interest in political information; however, they get interested when such information is distributed by opinion leaders they follow or trust.

The researchers discovered that there was a positive relationship between information that is shared by opinion leaders and unverified sharing: the teens do not pay particular attention to the verification when the information is shared by trusted opinion leaders. This observation supports the strength of social ties in the determination of verification behaviors. When the information is received with a trusted sender, it may be received and spread without a lot of critical evaluation: a trend that was observed in the title of the study: "Look at the Sender, Ignore the Information."

Peer Networks and Authentication. In addition to the formal opinion leaders, peer networks are important verification resources. Social networks

are used as distributed verification systems where young adults consult friends when they are not sure about the information they are going to believe. Comments areas serve as communal sense-making environments that allow users to see how other people have been served and assessed content.

There are weaknesses and strengths of this social verification. On the one hand, it capitalizes on group wisdom and can open up the users to the views that they may not have thought of. Conversely, it may escalate the level of community prejudices and lead to the situation when misinformation disseminates quickly as it is shared within the trusting circles, and latest members of the group support each other and strengthen their opinion.

Depending on the emotional tone of the comments they leave, credibility perceptions may be a more powerful influence than the content of a post. In cases where a comment is made containing feelings of outrage, suspicion, or passionate approval, these affective cues could be used as credibility heuristics, influencing the ultimate judgment by the next viewers of the content.

Families and Intergenerational Processes. Though the influence may not be as traditional, family members, and especially parents and older adults are still involved in the formation of information practices of young adults. Although in past the literacy of news was passed on to the younger family members by the older generation, the same may happen in the modern media setting where the youth have more fluency in digital media.

Studies of intergenerational processes in the context of verification are not very numerous but the existing data indicate complicated trends. Young people can become informational sources to the older members of the family who are oriented in the digital world, and at the same time get advice on how to assess the sources and accept reliable and authoritative material and disregard the doubtful one. Such mutual relations are worth of more academic interest.

The Trust Paradox. Verification has a trust paradox in its social aspects. Young adults indicate greater trust of institutional news producers compared to individual creators, but their consumption habits put them in more direct contact with peer-shared and influencer-shared content. They can be aware, intellectually, that mainstream news organizations are operating by professional standard of verification and yet their day-to-day information wastage is made up mainly of the material that has been sieved through social networks, where the various credibility indicators are active.

This contradiction has some effect on media literacy interventions. Educating youths on the importance of checking the source and cross-reference information might not be adequate when their real information contexts are organized using social relations and platform designs that dishearten them. The most effective interventions should be directed at both individual competencies and social contexts of verification presence or absence.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

In this research, I rely on two contrasting theoretical approaches to contextualize the research of the verification practices of young adults, Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory. These frames offer a variety of compatible perspectives in explaining why and how young populations use news in social media and how their use causes susceptibility to misinformation.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Uses and Gratifications Theory is one of the most persistent theories in the communication studies where the geographical focus of analysis is altered by people not on what media do but on what people do with media (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1973). According to the theory, media users are not victims of media influence as they are active consumers who choose the type of media and content according to their unique needs and objectives.

Modern uses of UGT to social media news use have found various gratifications that motivate

interaction. The need to seek information in real-time to determine social trends and understand them is information seeking, which is at the centre of motivation. Users resort to the news on social media due to the fact that they readily access information that is timely and therefore keeps them oriented in their social world.

The motives of socializing demonstrate the wish to preserve the relations and interact with other people through media consumption. News is social money, it is a way to talk and be connected. Young adults who are exposed to news on social media do so in an environment where information sharing, commenting, and discussing are the norms of the platform. This social aspect of news use implies that the verification behaviors can not be viewed as a matter of individual thinking only; the verification behaviors are influenced by the social roles that news plays.

Status seeking defines motivation to improve social reputation and self esteem by sharing information. Posting on matters that are valuable or interest to others can enhance the sense of competence and social status in peer networks. This motivation can combine with verification behavior in some complicated ways: the user motivated by status might want to be first among their friends to share content because they want to share quickly, and thus, they may not be verified, or they may verify thoroughly to avoid social costs of sharing falsified information.

Pass-time gratifications and entertainment is recognizing the fact that a lot of social media utilization is an act of relaxation, alleviating boredom and amusing themselves. The processing of news seen in such situations may differ with the active search of news to obtain information. Where entertainment interests take precedence, users do not have much incentive to do intensive verification and absorb news content like any other entertaining content.

The latest studies that combine UGT with other models have discovered that the majority of gratification-based motivations, with the exception of pass-time, have a significant impact on news sharing intent among Gen Z users . Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) was also found in the study to moderate the results of information seeking and status seeking on sharing intentions . Such results emphasize the role of motivational aspects in the perception of young individuals when accessing news material.

In the case of this research, UGT will offer a framework in explaining why young adults are resorting to the social media as a source of news and what gratifications do they find in the practice. This is because these motivations define the contexts within which verification behaviors are present and whether and how users exert effort in evaluating credibility.

Media Dependency Theory. Media Dependency Theory is another theory of the relationships between the media and social systems, audiences and the media, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). According to the theory, people rely on the media to satisfy three categories of needs, namely understanding their social world (social understanding), acting productively in that world (action orientation) and escaping or playing (solitary or social play). The extent of dependency depends on the stability of the social environment and other sources of information avenues.

Social media platforms have emerged as the main source of knowledge and experience in the world of young adults in the modern media settings. Dependency gets worse when the platforms are used as the main source of news on matters related to politics, health, culture and social issues. This dependence has its consequences on the strength of the media as well as the susceptibility of the users.

Studies using the media dependency theory to online rumors discovered that media dependency of users influences their credibility rating of messages that are not verifiable and the further sharing of the information. An experiment looking at the factors that affect the credibility and spread of rumors online (N=551) showed that reliance on social networking services mediated the perceptions of the recipients regarding the credibility of unverified messages and further distribution of rumors by the recipient. The more active users of social media

as a source of information might have a higher tendency to accept and disseminate unverified information due to the fact that their information environment does not offer them much exposure to other sources of information or information verification systems.

Structural vulnerabilities are also shed light by the theory. The dependency of young adults on platforms where the algorithms are designed to favor engagement over factuality, where the business models are designed to encourage sensationalism, and structural encourages them to share content quickly without critical verification rather than critically verifying. This does not concern personal failure but structural relationship between the users and the information systems they depend on.

To conduct this research, Media Dependency Theory offers an explanation of how the dependency of young adults on the social media platforms can impact their information spaces and determine their susceptibility to misinformation. It stipulates the focus not on individual mental activities but on the systems of interrelations that organize the access of information and evaluate credibility.

Integrating the Frameworks. Although distinct in their priorities, the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory complement one another because both are useful in this study. UGT enlightens the motivational aspect of news interaction whats drives young adults to use social media and what rewards they need. Media Dependency Theory clarifies the structural aspects, i.e. how dependency on specific platforms influence the information space and precondition the state of vulnerability. Both frameworks help to pursue a research method that simultaneously addresses agency and structure, personal motivations and systemic limitations. Young adults adopt the media and the content actively in accordance with their needs and goals, as UGT underlines. Yet such choices are made in contexts influenced by platform architectures, algorithmic logics and dependency relationships which constrain choices and affect performance as Media Dependency Theory underlines. Verification behaviors are formed at the meeting of both motivated action and structured environment and they can only be understood by having theoretical resources that can take care of both aspects.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design

The proposed research applies the qualitative research design to examine the ways of how young adults manage the credibility and fake news on social media. The qualitative method is especially appropriate to the objectives of the research since it focuses less on breadth but more on depth and aims to study phenomena through the lens of their experience by those who undergo it (Lindlof and Taylor, 2017). In contrast to the quantitative methods that may explain the number of young people who have checked information or how frequently they heard the misinformation, the qualitative methods can help to investigate those processes, meanings and circumstances that define the verification behaviours.

Qualitative methods have been chosen based on the nature of research questions that would guide this study. RQ1 involves particular verifying behaviors in young adults- a question that needs a description of practices in the natural environment. RQ2 investigates the nature of the meaning-making processes and subjective experience of the participants in terms of interpreting and using features of the platform- a question of meaning-making and subjective experience. RQ3 examines the contribution of social aspects- a question of association and setting. All of these questions require approaches that can reflect nuances, complexity, and the views of participants in general (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

In the qualitative tradition, the proposed study approach is interpretive based on the realization that a social reality is a construction of meaning-making processes. The environments of information do not just affect young adults but are actively construed using cultural resources, social relations, and personal experiences to

make sense of the information they are exposed to. The study aims to learn about these interpretive processes in the inner world, that is, reaching the inner understanding of verification practices by its participants.

The research questions were deemed to have three particular qualitative methods that have varied benefits in answering the research question.

Semi-Structured Interviews. The main method to be used in this study is semi-structured interviews. The method involves the application of an interview guide containing preset questions and flexibility to explore new themes and tap into the participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The semi-structured format provides consistency between the participants and openness to uncover unexpected themes.

Interviews are especially the most appropriate when it comes to understanding verification behaviors as it will enable the researcher to have subjects recount the particular experiences in detail. Upon being requested to recount a recent experience with a suspicious news, participants are able to recreate the scenario, thoughts and emotions, their behavior, and the result. These stories are valuable sources of information on the issue of verification as an experience and not as an abstract code of skills.

The one-on-one format also provides the room where respondents can talk about possibly sensitive issues like occasions when they were duped into believing false information without standing the social pressure against them which may paralyze them into telling the truth under group situations. The interview environment when operating privately may encourage candor and self-reflection which would not have been revealed under other forms.

Focus Groups. The additional strategy that may help to shed light on the social aspects of verification that RQ3 emphasizes is the focus groups. Focus groups provide information on how young people discuss news with others, what rules they have to follow, and how they reach consensus or dissent on the issue of credibility by

bringing small groups of respondents together to discuss news consumption and verification (Morgan, 2019).

Focus groups are interactive in nature, and this is their main strength. Participants not only answer the questions of the moderator, but also address one another, developing, criticizing, and perfecting the ideas in the process of a group discussion. It can also expose common insights, areas of dispute and social processes that inform the discussion and practice of verification in peer groups.

The problems that could be discussed in focus groups related to this research include: How do youths discuss the credibility of news with their friends? What do you consider as normal or excessive verification practices? What is the effect of group and individual judgments regarding specific news stories? The information that would be created would work hand in hand with the interview information by demonstrating verification as a socially situated activity as opposed to an individual cognitive process.

Think-Aloud Protocol. Think-aloud protocol is a unique way of gaining access to real time cognitive processes. The subjects are shown real posts on social media and then expected to speak out their minds in the process of evaluating credibility effectively thinking aloud as they go about doing the exercise (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). Such a procedure records verification behaviors in their dynamic processes, which may entail strategies and heuristics that participants may not be capable of describing in hindsight descriptions.

Think-aloud procedures in this case may include showing the participants a row of screenshots of news-related social media posts, some real, some misleading, some in-between, and asking participants to describe their process of evaluation. The researcher may encourage them with queries such as; What are you looking at now? or "What you thinking about this source? to maintain verbalization.

The advantage of this approach is that it is close to real action. Instead of using the recollection and reconstructions of the participants, it records

mental processes in action. The task is, however, unnatural — the assessment of posts during the non-flow of the typical use of the social media which restricts ecological validity. Respondents may not seem the same when they are consciously working on a task to a researcher as they would in normal scrolling.

Methodological Triangulation. Since verification behaviors are complicated and the research questions cover several dimensions, in this study, the methodological triangulation method will be used through the integration of semi-structured interviews and think-aloud protocols. Interviews are also a way of accessing the lived experiences and reflective experiences of the participants on their verification practices. Think-aloud protocols offer observational evidence regarding the way the participants solve the task of credibility evaluation in practice. These approaches have a complementary nature and can complement and cross-verify the results. Although useful, focus groups will not be used in the study because of the lack of resources and the tendency of group dynamics to discourage the development of verification failures. Nonetheless, the study design will be open to the use of focus groups in future studies based on the results of the interviews and think-aloud protocol.

3.2 Participant Sampling

Population Definition. The study population will consist of young adults aged between 18 and 26 years who use social media sites to access news. This age bracket includes both the classic college-age group and also students in their early career life-span, where many are still at the stage of development of independent news habits and identification to the civic realm. The minimum age of 18 is a reasonable age such that the participants are able to make independent consent and 26 is the maximum because it is a reasonable age range of youth in media research and includes the post-college experience.

The inclusion criteria involve that the participants have to consume news using at least one social media platform (Tik Tok, Instagram,

YouTube, X, Facebook or Snapchat) at least a few times a week. The term news consumption is broadly used to encompass active procurement of news information as well as incidental access to news information by platforms used otherwise. This very general meaning corresponds to the fact that a lot of news use among young adults takes place incidentally (Boczkowski et al., 2018).

The exclusion criteria will be persons who are below 18 years, those not using social media to get news, and those who cannot engage in English-based interviews to the researcher or his language. There is no discrimination along gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and educational level since diversity in these aspects will add richness to the data.

Sampling Method. The sampling used in this study is the purposive sampling and the snowball sampling. Purposive sampling implies the selection of individuals at will, meaning purposive participants that have characteristics of interest to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). The purposive selection of respondents is used to achieve diversification in the study because of major dimensions: platform preference (TikTok users, Instagram users, etc.), social media frequency of use, education level, and demographics.

Purposive sampling will make sure that there are individuals in the sample who can address the phenomena of interest in diverse ways. Unlike the statistical representative sample that is not the goal of qualitative research, purposive sampling tries to obtain information-relevant cases that will answer the research questions in many different ways (Patton, 2015).

Snowball sampling is an effective complement of purposive sampling because it aims at utilizing the social network of the participants to find more potential participants. At the conclusion of every interview, the participants are questioned concerning whether they are aware of other young people who may be interested in participating and who qualify as inclusion criteria. It is especially valuable in reaching out to the population that may not be reachable via

formal recruitment methods and gaining credibility by establishing personal relations.

Recruitment will be done on several platforms: advertised at the university campuses (where applicable), postings on social media in the local community groups, email listservs, and word of mouth. The purpose of the study, eligibility, and expectations of participation will be made clear in the recruitment materials.

Sample Size. In qualitative research, depth is more valued than breadth and the concept of saturation is applied in determining the sample size as that point is where the researcher can no longer obtain new knowledge based on the research questions (Guest et al., 2006). In semi-structured interviews, research has proposed that saturation tends to take place with 15-25 interviews based on the homogeneity of the sample and specificity of questions in the research.

In this research, the total amount of participants to be recruited will be 20-25 individuals to be interviewed in detail. The sample size is adequate, and it allows the researcher to learn the variety of experiences and point of view and be manageable to be carefully analyzed in an intensive work of qualitative research. When using a subgroup of the sample in conducting the think-aloud protocols, it will be suitable to use a smaller number (8-12) of participants in this more labor-intensive approach.

The final size of sample will be provided by the iterative approach and recruitment will result in recruiting a final sample size until saturation of the themes is provided i.e. till new interviews can substantially add to the current theme without providing significantly new information. The level of saturation will be measured by continuous analysis that will be performed at the same time as the data collection process.

3.3 Data Collection

Instruments. The semi-structured interview protocol that will be used to collect data will be based on the research questions, but it will be flexible to allow the researcher to take up leads by the participants. The protocol will shift to open-ended questions general questions to narrow questions where the participant will be asked to tell about what he or she experienced using his or her own words, and then the participant would be guided to discuss certain topics of interest.

The interview guide will start with generic questions concerning social media and news use patterns of participants establishing rapport and creating a context. Sample questions include:

• Would you mind telling me how you generally use social media in your everyday life? Question: What is the role of news on your social media experience? What is your normal way of encountering news stories?

• What is the most frequented platforms across which you stay updated with what is happening in the world?

The manual then shifts to questions dealing with certain verification behaviors (RQ1):

• Please, step me through the last time you have encountered something on social media that you were not certain that it was true? What has happened, and what have you done?

• What sorts of things do you consider when you encounter a news post that looks interesting but that may not be trustworthy?

• Do you have specific tactics that you have developed when it comes to determining what is real or fake?

The questions related to platform features (RQ2) are:

• Have you also seen labels such as fact-checked or community notes on posts? What do you think about those? Do they affect your views on the content?

• Thinking of the comments on a news post, what sort of things do you listen to? What are the effects of comments on your perception of the post?

• What do you think about the amount of time you spend thinking about why specific posts appear in your feed? Have you ever wondered why you are reading some news material and not different material?

Questions dealing with social dimensions (RQ3) involve:

• Do you discuss news that you have seen on social media with friends or family? What are these talks of them?

• Have you ever questioned another person on whether they believed a post to be true or not? Who did you ask, and why?"

• To what degree do you believe information posted by your followers on the news, as opposed to news companies?

In the case of think-aloud protocols, the participants will be shown a set of 8-10 screenshots with real social media posts (with identifying information being removed). The content of the posts will be diverse: there will be credible news, obviously false information, ambiguous posts, and posts with a fact-check flag or community notes. The participants will be asked to explain their mental process as they observe every posted post, and they will be prompted to say things like what they are noticing. and What hast thou in thy mind now? utilized to sustain verbalization.

Procedure. The process of data collection will be carried out in a number of phases. To begin with, the individuals who will be interested will undergo a short screening questionnaire as a measure to ensure that they are eligible and basic demographic data are gathered. It will provide the details about the study to the eligible persons and invite them to book an interview.

The interviews will be held either in the face-to-face mode or through the video conferencing tool (e.g., Zoom) according to the choice of participants and any practical limitations. Video conferencing has the benefits of being convenient and geographically expansive and at the same time having visual contact that facilitates rapport. Studies indicate that in most subjects, data collected through video-mediated interviews may be the same as those obtained through live interviews (Gray et al., 2020).

The interviews will take about 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be audio-taped with the permission of the participants in case of capturing words of participants accurately. The researcher will also make notes during the interviews to make some brief notes about the observations, impressions and follow up questions that may come up.

In the case of individuals who take part in the think-aloud subset, the protocol will be enacted right after the interview or at a later meeting depending on the preference and energy of the participants. The duration of the think-aloud sessions will be around 30-45 minutes and will be recorded through audio and screen capture in case they are over video conferencing.

Each of the participants will be given a small honorarium (e.g., gift cards of 20 dollars) as an expression of gratitude to their participation and involvement in the research. This compensation is meant to recognize the worth of their contribution without being excessive to the extent undue inducement is created.

Pilot Testing. Pilot testing will be conducted using the interview guide and the think-aloud protocol to 2-3 people belonging to the target population prior to the actual data collection. Pilot testing can fulfill various functions: the need to detect misleading or unphrased questions, how much time it will take to complete, the use of probing skills, and the general flow of the protocol can be refined. The pilot participants will provide feedback that will be used to make adjustments to the instruments prior to their application in official data collection.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analytic Approach. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze data as a qualitative method since it is a flexible and accessible process to identify, analyse and report the patterns (themes) in the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has been a suitable approach to this study since it can be utilized in any theoretical framework and it can generate detailed descriptions of complex phenomena that are rich.

The six-phase approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) will be used to analyze the data in a recursive way: starting with understanding the data, then proceeding to the next stage of comprehension, and so on.

Phase 1: Introducing oneself with the data. All the audio recordings will be transcribed word-to-word by the researcher and the transcripts will be read and re-read as the researcher listens to original recordings to create accuracy and gain intimate familiarity with data. Analytic memos will capture initial thoughts, observations and possible patterns.

Phase 2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes. The researcher will proceed in a systematic manner until all the data is analyzed and interesting features identified and coded with the help of qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA). Coding is the process of assigning labels to data portions that are connected to the research questions or seem to be potentially important. Inductive codes (codes that come out because of the data) and deductive codes (codes derived out of the existing theory and the questions of the research) will be used.

Phase 3: Searching for themes. Codes will be grouped and coded into possible themes and all the data pertaining to each candidate theme will be collected. This stage means transitioning of particular codes into larger patterns, in the light of which various codes could possibly interrelate to produce overall themes that convey something substantial about the data in regard to the research questions.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. The themes of candidates will be checked on two levels. To verify the coherence and internal consistency of the themes, first, each one will be compared to the coded extracts. Second, the themes will be taken in the context of the whole dataset so that they can effectively represent the meaning that is reflected in all interviews. During this phase, there is a possibility to refine the themes, break them down, merge them, or abandon them.

Phase 5: Themes- definition and naming. After getting the thematic map satisfactory, every theme will be defined and narrowed down to locate its essence, scope and boundaries of the theme. It will come up with clear definitions and names that describe the essence of each theme.

Phase 6: Producing the report. The last step is to draft the analysis: one has to pick clear, interesting examples
of extracts and correlate this analysis with the research questions and the current literature. The report ought to introduce a logical and compelling narrative on the information without being too far away in the words of the participants.

Software Support. MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software will be used in data analysis. The MAXQDA supports a systematic coding process, aided retrieval of coded segments, relationship visualization between codes and memo writing during the analysis process. The software is simply a facilitator of the analytic work of the researcher as it clearly organizes and presents the data in an easily accessible way.

Ensuring Rigor. A number of methods will be adopted to assure the rigor and credibility of results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Through lengthy working on the data, peer debriefing with peers, and member checking, which involves introducing early findings to a few of the participants to seek whether the interpretations make sense to their experiences, the credibility (internal validity) will be improved.
Transferability (external validity) will be considered using thick description-fortunately giving the readers a rich detailed description of the participants, situations, and results so that the readers are able to evaluate the applicability of the results to other situations. Although in the statistical sense qualitative results cannot be generalized, the idea of qualitative thick description can be used to make informed verdicts regarding transferability.
Reliability (dependability) will be improved by having an extensive audit trail that will record every decision made during a research, data collection process and analysis. Such transparency enables other people to trace the research process and evaluate its consistency.

Reflexivity will be used to confirm the aspect of confirmability (objectivity); the researcher will continuously reflect on his or her assumed, experienced, and positionality that could influence the data collection and interpretation. These reflections will be recorded in a reflexive journal during the research process.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent. In ethical research, it is mandatory that the participants engage in research on a free free will with full knowledge of what is entailed in participating in research. Every potential participant will be provided with specific information on the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, benefits, and his/her rights, and then will be asked to make their choice regarding participation or not. This information shall be presented in paper format and also discussed orally with provision of questions.

The consent form will explicitly indicate that participation will be voluntary, participants will not be punished in case they drop out, and participants will not be required to respond to any question. Consent will be registered by means of signed forms in case of in-person participation or by means of verified electronic consent in case of remote participation. The respondents will be provided with copies of the consent materials as a reference.

In the case of think- aloud protocols where the posts on the social media are presented, the participants will be made aware that the postings are authentic but that any identifying information is eliminated. They will not be requested to provide their individual social media accounts and content.

Anonymity and Confidentiality. Ethical research is based on protecting the identity of the participants. No transcripts will contain any personal identifying information that will be substituted with pseudonyms. The master list with the names and the real identities of those pseudonyms will be kept in a different password-secured file that will be available to the researcher only.

When reporting findings, the care will be observed not to present information that could help identify particular participants, despite the use of pseudonyms. The quotes will be cited with the pseudonyms and general demographic information (e.g., Sarah, 22, a university student) that will allow preserving their context without breaking the anonymity.

Audio files will be saved on encrypted files on secure university-based servers, and will be destroyed when transcription has been done, and validated. All transcripts will be stored indefinitely in de-identified form in case they can be used later in supporting research and validating outcomes.

IRB Approval. This study will undergo a review and approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher respective institution before any form of data collection can be done. The IRB review also makes sure that the research with human subjects is ethical and complies with the regulatory requirements. Data collection shall only be done upon the IRB approval.

Minimizing Harm. There is a low level of risk of participation in the study, which is not more than those that are met in normal daily discussion on media use. Nevertheless, a number of precautions will be considered in order to reduce any possible discomfort. During the interviews, participants will also be reminded that they may skip or discontinue participation at any given moment. The researcher will observe the participants to be in distress and give breaks or discontinue in case of distress.

Misinformation issues may at times be sensitive i.e. touching on the political beliefs or personal experiences of being fooled. The researcher will treat such subjects with sensitivity without judgment and in an attitude of support without being confrontational.

Data Security. Any information related to the research will be managed according to the institutional data security policies and any privacy regulations. The storage of digital data will be done in passworded university servers where there will be back up. The storage of identifiable data will be in different locations as opposed to

the de-identified data. No information will be saved on the personal machines without encryption.

Beneficence. Although the study does not provide any direct benefit to the participants, it is expected to produce knowledge, which will finally be beneficial to young adults as it will enhance the insight of how they manage news credibility and inform more effective media literacy interventions. This is a possible social good, along with the small risk that will be undertaken justifying the research.

Researcher Positionality. The researcher recognizes his/her role as an academic researcher that has certain assumptions and experiences that could influence the research process. Being a researcher who, however, does not belong to the same age bracket of participants of 18-26, the researcher is placed in an outsider position by the participants. This stance will be recognized openly and attempts will be made all through to focus on the views of the participants instead of foisting the researcher assumptions on them. Ongoing awareness of the potential impact that positionality can have on data collection and interpretation will be supported by reflexive journaling.

4. Findings / Results

4.1 Theme 1: The Vigilance Paradox-Confidence and Cynicism.

The initial significant theme that can be drawn based on the data is a complicated and, to some extent, conflicting orientation towards the news on social media. Participants were very much confident in their capacities to identify fake news at the same time very cynical about the credibility of practically all sources of news. This scenario is known as a vigilance paradox, and it outlines the state of increased vigilance, but instead of discrimination in the accurate and inaccurate information, it becomes generalized distrust that extends to both valid journalism and fake news.

Belief in Personal Detection Abilities. In interviews, the respondents were always confident in their ability to identify fake news. This self-belief was typically informed by a natural expansion of years of social media exposure- a sort of street-wise knowhow that grew due to years of maneuvering through the space of platform experiences. As one of the girls, Maya, a 21-year-old student of the university, explained:

I feel like I can always make a fairly fast judgment on whether something is off. It is just because you get a feel of it after spending a long time on the Internet. The too dramatic headlines, the accounts with their odd usernames, the posts that are attempting to get you angry I know those now at least a mile away.

This was reflected in the sentiments of many respondents who referred to their verification skills as being intuitive or gut feeling instead of acting in a systematic manner. The trust seemed to be based on cumulative exposure and not on formal training and development of skills consciously. Respondents discussed experience as a way of learning, and how they constructed a kind of internal alarm system, so they would not need to analyze anything suspicious.

Trust was given to the evaluation of the participants on the colleagues. A lot of people were worried about their relatives of older age who succumbed to misinformation, but posed themselves as less vulnerable. Daniel, 24, a new graduate in the marketing field described this generational difference:

My mom posts stuff on Facebook all the time which is obviously not true and I have to remind her that she should validate before she post. But people my age? We grew up with this. We know how it works. We are not the ones who are falling into the obvious.

This generational storytelling, which places young adults in the position of digitally native and thus safeguarded was widespread even though studies indicated that the practical verification skills do not always correspond to this self-view.

Cynicism Toward All Sources. This was accompanied by a strong level of cynicism on the credibility of news sources in general, as well as confidence in personal ability to detect. Instead of being perceived as agents of consistency,

traditional media entities were usually held with skepticism. A quote that best captures this feeling was quoted in a person who was involved in the previous research a student in Barcelona who said, "Traditional media are however bought and paid... this was echoed in the present study.

Generalized distrust Jason at 23, an engineering graduate student, described the distrust as follows:

I do not really trust any of them, frankly. Their agendas are carried by the traditional news channels, the posts made on the social media are full of false information, the independent journalists are attempting to build a following. Everybody is selling something or pushing something. I simply suppose that there is some bias of some kind.

This cynicism also applied to fact-checking organizations which could be considered the logical partners in the struggle against misinformation but were perceived with ambivalence. Chloe is an undergraduate (20) majoring in communications, who explained:

I have read fact-checks that appear to be rather partisan as well, you see? Similar to how they are checking the facts about things but not of things, or they are calling the things false which appear to be fundamentally true. Who fact-checks the fact-checkers I do not know.

The Paradox in Practice. This high confidence and great cynicism were a paradox. Respondents placed themselves as watchful critics of media, however, this watchfulness tended to be in the form of wholesaling denunciation instead of discrimination. The skill on distinguishing more reliable sources against less is lost when all the sources are considered as unreliable.

The practical implication was that sometimes participants would reject legitimate news on the basis of the same reasoning that they used to reject blatant misinformation. A story in a large newspaper could be written off as an opinion or partisan without an investigation into its supporting facts or sources. This unspecialized doubt subverted the veryability of sense which the participants thought they had.

This discovery upsets easy formulations of how the youth have to be more doubtful. Most of them are already doubtful--aggravatedly so. It is not the lack of skepticism but rather the absence of the means of drawing meaningful differences between sources of different qualifications. One of the participants replied to this by saying that I do not know who to believe and hence, I would not trust anyone. This is somewhat a psychologically protective position, but it provides young adults with no foundations through which they can maneuver in the information environment.

4.2 Theme 2: Verification Working.

The second significant theme is that of the social essence of verification. Quite on the contrary, as a distinct cognitive act, an individual user with his or her skills of critical thinking applied to solitary content, verification was found to be present in the narration of participants as an aspect of social relations, local conventions, and shared sense-making. The participants of the study always resorted to other individuals instead of subjecting themselves to impersonal verification methods or source-based research when in doubt about information.

Consulting Peer Networks. The most utilized verification practice as outlined by the participants was to verify with friends or family members. In situations where they had to meet content that appeared dubious, the participants would share with their trusted colleagues and request their evaluation. This practice had several purposes: it shared the cognitive work of verification, offered the knowledge and views of other people, and gave a social confirmation of the judgments of credibility.

This tendency was reported by Emma, 22, a university student:

When I see something that looks crazy or too good to be true, I will tend to forward it to my close friends in the group chat and ask them whether it was a real thing or not. One tends to know or can determine it. It is as though we were all fact-checking on each other.

Such a group system of verification also implied that credibility decisions were frequently reached by discussing and arriving at a conclusion, instead of personal consideration. The group chat was

considered as a distributed verification system and various members have different pieces of knowledge and skills. There are friends who are especially political savvy, some others science savvy, others internet culture savvy. By sharing this pool of intelligence, a greater degree of verification than one person alone could have verified.

The Primacy of Comments. Along with direct consultation with familiar peers, comment sections were also an important source of credibility used by the participants. Comments acted as a portal into the wider community in terms of content intake and assessment, providing social validation to support or nullify the originally formed opinions.

The tone of emotional comments was found to be a powerful one. Whenever there were remarks that were skeptical, outrageous or mocking, the participants tended to doubt the credibility of the original post. On the other hand, in cases where comments were widely positive or accepting, there was a possibility that participants can accept content although they may have had doubts. This dependence on shared affective reaction implied that initial remarks on a post might greatly influence the judgments that other viewers made of it.

Marcus, 25, a freelance designer explained:

"I always check the comments. When all people are saying that this is fake or that it has issues, then I know something. However when everyone is saying wow amazing and no one is even doubting it, I would go with it even though I may have initially been suspicious. It is, as though, social proof, you see?"

This comment-checking is a distributed verification, albeit with significant weaknesses. The coordinated campaigns can be used to sway comments, and the emotional tone of the initial comments can cause bandwagon effects, drowning out more careful analysis. Participants did not often discuss the credibility of commenters themselves, whether they were a bot, a troll, or a real user, implying that the perceived social evidence may be fake at times.

Credible Influencers as Shortcuts to Verification. Social media influencers took a unique position in the verification practice of the participants in addition to personal networks and anonymous commenters. Although influencers were not perceived as sources of authority in the same way that the traditional journalists could be, they were shortcuts to the credibility, as their authority or lack of it was significant due to the parasocial relationship that the followers established.

Some of the participants reported that they use fact-checkers who they trusted, which are influencers. When a controversial statement was made by an influencer that they followed, the participants would tend to go with what the influencer framed without further clarification. This dependency was not naive, as the participants the participants knew that the influencers were biased and driven, but because of the continued dependency it created a back of trust which made it easier to make decisions on credibility.

A young woman aged 21 called Aisha explained such a dynamic:

There are some creators whom I trust with the highest level as they have proven to be consistent over the years and appear to be true. When they discuss something as fake or misleading then I tend to believe them. It is not that I believe they are always right but they have my trust over the years.

This result brings out the extent to which verification, although it might seem to be an individual exercise, has a social component. Relationships dictate the credibility judgments that young adults make, relationships with friends, relationships with family, relationships with anonymous commenters, relationships with influencers. The relationships help to offer shortcuts to potentially overwhelming information landscapes, but also create weaknesses when the very sources of trust are undermined or erroneous.

4.3 Theme 3: Intrigued with Platform Cues and Algorithms.

The third theme is related to the interaction of the participants with the particular features and affordances of the social media platforms. Platforms do not present neutral conduits of the

content they carry but rather active regulators of the information environment, giving out signs that they can be interpreted by users as indicators of credibility and implementing algorithms that frame the content users agree to view. Their descriptions of these features of the platforms showed complicated and even contradictory relations with the participants.

Labels and Warnings. Labels that have been proven by platforms, such as fact-checks, community notes, misinformation warnings, etc., got mixed reactions. They proved useful to some participants, especially when they were used to explain the context of their judgments instead of making binary judgments. Community-notes with a reasoning about the reason why the content is misleading in particular were valued. The recent graduate, Olivia, 22, stated:

What I like about the community notes on X is that they provide the reason why something is wrong. It is not merely a false label it is people demonstrating the evidences. That would be better, as I will be able to observe it myself.

Nonetheless, other participants were rather doubtful about labels, which they considered as possibly biased or politically inclined. This distrust went as far as doubting the intentions of labelling, whether there was a consistent application of labels or they were driven by a platform agenda and not a fact-check.

Tyler, 24, in the retail field, projected this ambivalence:

I do not know, I sometimes come across things marked as misleading and it does not feel bad to me. Makes you question upon what is deciding what is misleading and what is not. I do not necessarily believe the platforms to be truthful about it.

The labels may also work against the expected. Some of the participants said that an appearance of a challenged or a false tag occasionally made them more curious about the material, which made them go to find it elsewhere. It is an effect of this forbidden fruit that labeling strategies need to take into account not only the question of whether labels cause a reduction in belief, but also the effects that labels have on attention and information-seeking behavior.

Comments as Signals of Credibility. As it has been mentioned in the preceding theme, the comments were instrumental in the assessment of credibility. In addition to a social role, comments were used as platform cues that the participants were actively interpreting. The evaluations of the participants were provided by the number of the comments, their tone, content, and accounts commenting.

Emotional value of comments proved to be quite powerful. Facades that contained angry or outraged posts were treated more skeptically since the participants concluded that the content was created to cause emotional responses, which is a feature of misinformation. On the other hand, calm and substantive discussion posts in comment were considered to be more credible.

Jordan, a 20 year old student explained this trend:

Where the remarks are all fierce and pugnalling one another, that is a red flag. It is as though the post is attempting to create dramatics. However, in case people are not playing buzzers, but are engaging in real conversations, posing questions, exchanging links, that will be more real.

This result indicates that comment section is not only a place where the participants seek to obtain the judgment of others but also to make an inference about the character of the content itself. The affective database of group reaction becomes a judgmental heuristic within the grade of contents, which may be unrelated to what is being mentioned.

Algorithm Awareness. There was a significant difference in the awareness and reflection on algorithmic curation. Others showed advanced cognition that their feeds were not objective and impartial reflections of reality but were constructed by platform algorithms aimed to increase interactions. These participants made critical consideration of the reasons why specific content is shown and what is possibly missing.

Nadia, a 23 year old graduate student expressed this consciousness:

I am aware that my feed is filtered on what I have already interacted with. Therefore, when I am viewing a lot of political content in one direction, it is likely that I have selected similar content

previously. It is not that there are no other points of view, the algorithm simply is not presenting them to me.

The other participants were less aware, and they treated their feeds as rather transparent windows on the content. These respondents provided answers that indicated that they did not give much thought to the mechanisms behind the placement of certain posts when asked about whether they had considered it.

Kevin is an undergraduate at 19 years of age and answered:

No, not really, I just see. I suppose it is founded on what I like and follow? I don't think about it much."

A strain arose between perceived control and actual influence even among those (the algorithm-aware participants) who were cognizant of the algorithm. Some of them have stated that they were confident that they could train their algorithms by consciously engaging with the material, liking some content, muting other content, and following specific accounts. They however also admitted that they did not know whether their work actually had any influence on what they observed or whether algorithms were acting on logics that were out of their control. This illusion of control result is consistent with the existing studies indicating that a user might feel in control of algorithmic curation more than they actually are. The participants who perceived themselves as the one who had filtered their feeds by intentionally doing so may be less judgemental of the materials that they see in those feeds and take algorithmic filtration as an implicit approval of those materials.

4.4 Theme 4: The Surface-Level Verification Toolkit.

The fourth theme explains the type of verification practices that were reported by the participants. Although the participants said they were confident in their skills and shared social ways of verifications, the practices that they reported about were mostly superficial, surface-level checks, as opposed to thorough investigative methods. This shallow toolkit allowed quick evaluation but exposed the participants to advanced misinformation, which could not be spotted easily.

Account and Profile Checks. Checking of basic account information was the widely reported individual verification behavior. The subjects would investigate usernames, profile pictures, number of followers and age of their accounts as credibility signals. Such checks could be conducted within seconds and could present instant information (limited in nature, but immediate).

These checks were guided by a number of heuristics. Suspicious accounts (accounts that have odd usernames (number strings, random characters)) were marked. Profiles with stock photos or with obviously fake profile pictures were not trusted. The accounts that had a small number of followers or those that were made very recently cast doubts on authenticity. Verified badges on the account were generally believed but some participants said that verification badges could be deceiving or even bought.

This method, as described by Sophia, 21:

The first thing I do is to see the person who posted. I will not trust it in case it is a random account with an unusual name and no followers. I will be inclined to believe it more when it is a news organization I have heard about or when it is a person with a blue check.

These are account-based heuristics, and good screens to start with but with great limitations. Advanced fake news dealers are able to open accounts that look authentic, buy followers or steal verified identities. On the contrary, legitimate new accounts or small independent reporters could be dismissed on the basis of superficial aspects only.

Reverse Image Searching. Only a small portion of the respondents said they had used reverse image search engines (like Google images or TinEye) to confirm visual information. This was done by saving or taking a screen shot of an image and posting the same on a search engine to have a look at where the same image had been used previously and in what situations. The participants that employed this method found it very useful in detecting images of objects that

were out of context or images that were recycled to use in other contexts.

Ethan, 25, is a software developer and said:

When there is a dramatic picture, I would tend to do a reverse image search. Every now and then you would not believe the number of times the same photo was used in entirely different stories. As soon as you realize that it was written three years ago in another country, you realize that the present post is nonsense.

Yet, such practice demanded not only knowledge of the tool but also readiness to work on it. The vast majority of them did not report that they do reverse image search frequently, as they cited the inconvenience of leaving the platform and the amount of time. Even those who knew the technique tended to save it especially the content that looked especially important or suspicious.

Cross-Referencing with Big Outlets. The other verification strategy used was to verify the coverage of the same story by major news outlets. When a claim was present in social media and could not be located on the websites of reputable news organizations, the lack of that information was seen as a reason to be suspicious by participants. On the other hand, when several large outlets were reporting on the same story, they had more confidence that it was valid.

This is a reasonable strategy but it has drawbacks on practice. The fact that this story is not covered by any major outlets could indicate the novelty of the story as opposed to its lies. Furthermore, there was a confusion of the definition of major outlets by the participants and some of the participants had doubts concerning the same outlets they utilized in cross-referencing- building a conflict of dependence and distrust.

Liam, 22, described this tension:

I will see whether BBC or CNN or any one has it. If they don't, I'm suspicious. However, in the truth I do not really believe them either. It is more so, as if the story is true, then they will report on it some day. But I do not accept their coverage as true, as a pointer.

Efficiency and Speed as Values. In all the reported verification actions, there was a single common theme which was that the participants gave importance to speed and efficiency. They did not want to waste much time on verification especially when faced with content that they had come across in the process of scrolling. It was not about being sure but having enough assurance to either proceed more, open to share, or leave.

This efficiency orientation determined the verification strategies that the participants used. There was a preference in the use of quick checks; account inspection, comment scanning, and mental shortcuts over time-consuming habits such as cross-referencing a variety of sources or looking into original statements. The platform space, which was created to

consequently be consumed quickly, did not favor the type of prolonged attention that intensive verification demands.

As Jasmine, 20, put it:

I am not going to use twenty minutes to validate each post I come across. I simply do not have time to do so and, frankly, the majority of it does not really matter that much. I would like to know whether it is likely to be true or likely to be fake so that I can continue scrolling.

This is a significant implication on interventions. Strategies that involve a lot of time or effort though efficient, will not be embraced by the majority of users in day-to-day situations. Good support of verification should operate within a temporal limit of using the platform, so that people can access and use the tools fast and integrated into the scrolling experience, not interrupting it.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Two-Sided Sword of Skepticism.

The results of the given research show that there is a basic paradox of how young adults interact with news through social media. The cynicism which media literacy campaigns have effectively trained users to have to ask questions and not believe what they hear is a sword cut both ways. Although such critical attitude safeguards against uninformed consent to obvious falsities, it also undermines confidence in credible journalism, leaving the young people without strong points of reference in an information habitat they have already perceived with suspicion.

The Story and Triumph of Media Literacy. The idea of media literacy interventions was historically believed to develop critical thinking regarding the media messages. The unspoken agenda has been to produce readers and viewers who are skeptical, investigative, and cannot be manipulated. The young adults in this study have been a success story by this measure. They are skeptical about social media content, they do not trust the intentions of information, and they do not accept statements without a certain verification. Similarly to Maya when she says that she has developed a sense to it after spending so much time online, participants consider themselves to be savvy navigators who have developed over time to identify offensive content. However, when such skepticism is used blindly, it will be a weakness. The overall distrust, which is revealed by the participants, namely: I do not really trust all of them, to be honest, is an indication that they fail to draw significant differences between sources of different quality. When it is argued that traditional news companies have been and will continue to be bought and paid to using the same logic that allows the facade of anonymity to the purported social media accounts, the critical thinking that media literacy is meant to instill in individuals has been backfired to the same institutions of media that could offer credible information.

Current studies on the misinformation phenomenon support the fact that this realization was made in recent studies regarding the misinformation paradox, which is called the paradox of vigilance. The interventions that promote skepticism, as Guess et al. (2020) found out, may be accompanied by unintended effects when that skepticism is not supported with discrimination tools. What scholar refer to as meaningless skepticism is the consequence, and is a critical attitude that dismisses all that cannot be grounded to the extent of making a distinction as to what is to be paid attention to.

The Psychosomatic Cost of Perpetual Wareness. In addition to the cognitive implications of the vigilance paradox, there is an emotional implication. Respondents talked about the fatigue of operating in an informational world where nothing is safe. The necessity to continuously appraise, to check, and make decisions gives cognitive load to most of us, which we would rather avoid. The desire to redistribute the work among networks could explain this burden and the appeal of the social verification strategy, and trusted influencers, who could act as credibility shortcuts.

Misinformation research has given minimal attention to the emotional aspect, which has been more inclined on the cognitive processes and behavioural consequences. However, the testimonies by participants indicate that their attitude towards verification is equally important as their knowledge. The exhaustion of being a perpetual skeptic can cause others to tune out completely - a different kind of news avoidance that safeguards affective wellbeing but sacrifices informed citizenship.

Conclusions about Trust Restoration. The two-fold aspect of skepticism presents enormous challenges to the attempts to restore the confidence in journalism. In case young adults have been trained to distrust any source without a differentiating factor, merely stating that certain sources are trustworthy will not help. Not particular to any particular outlets, the distrust is an expression of a generalized disposition toward information which has become habitual and self-protective.

To win back the trust, this generalized cynicism needs to be dealt with, not just individual news outlets. The youths require a structure of making their differentiations, as to why there are sources that have gained trust due to their reliability in terms of accuracy, transparency and manipulability while others have not. This is not about convincing them to believe journalism but providing them with the instruments to be able to know when they find trustworthiness.

5.2 Re-thinking to the Algorithmic Age Verification.

The results of this research propose that existing models of information checking, which were created under the conditions of the previous media, might no longer be relevant in the context of understanding the ways in which youth

evaluate the credibility of the algorithmically-based social worlds. There should be a radical reimagining, which takes into consideration the dynamism, socially ascribed, and mediated nature of present news consumption.

The Weaknesses of Conventional Checking Models. Standard methods of information literacy, like the popularly-used CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose), were designed with the evaluation of static texts within a relatively fixed information situation. These models presuppose a discrete piece of information the article, a site, a report, which can be studied with the help of some criteria used by the very reader.

This model is completely unlike the social media environment. Young adults are not navigating discrete articles, but streams of information where information is delivered with no stated boundaries, entertainment and social content, and influenced by algorithmic processes that do not show themselves to users. This environment is not characterized by the fixity of the information object, but rather by the dynamically constructed information object built up by platform logics that value engagement over accuracy.

Additionally, conventional models presuppose the usage of systematic criteria by an individual evaluator. However, as this paper shows, validation is highly social element distributed over the network, discussed in comment sections, and influenced by the connection with influencers. The individualistic suppositions of traditional information literacy might not be appropriate in settings where collective sense-making is being practiced.

Confirmation as Entangled Practice. The results indicate that verification in an algorithmic environment can be perceived more as being intertwined with platform design, interpersonal relationships, and algorithm actions than as a kind of independent cognitive task that can be applied to content. The act of reviewing comments is not merely the process of obtaining more data because when it is undertaken, participants are using a platform feature that influences the way content is displayed and

perceived. In thinking about the question of why they see the content in their feeds, they are struggling with both technical and social algorithmic processes.

What this entanglement implies is that verification cannot be divorced out of contexts that it takes place. One and the same individual may check differently on Tik Tok than on X not because of their abilities but because of the platforms affording and norms influencing the appearance of verification. Proper support of verification should collaborate with such platform-specific dynamics instead of imposing standard answers to the question.

5.3 The Scopes of Platform-Centric Solutions.

The results of this work present significant issues concerning platform-based interventions to aid in the evaluation of credibility. Although platforms have introduced a series of features that can assist users in recognizing misinformation, like fact-check labels, community notes, warning messages, the reactions of the participants to the features were ambivalent, which displays the potential and limitations of platform-centric strategies.

The Mixed Effectiveness of Labels. In line with the recent study (PNAS Nexus, 2024), the respondents of this study had different reactions to platform labels. Others found them useful, but especially when they included explanatory context as opposed to binary judgments only. The trend towards community notes explaining why some content is misleading corresponds with research that explains labels of the content as more trustworthy and more effective than merely flagging the content.

Nonetheless, other respondents had a negative opinion of labels, which they saw as possibly biased or politically oriented. This cynicism was applied sometimes in doubt about the motive of labeling, in wondering whether the labelling was done consistently or whether it was agenda making on the part of platform or dispassionate checking of facts. The conclusion that labels occasionally have counterproductive effects by making one more curious about flagged content

reminds me of the effects of forbidden fruit, which have been described in earlier studies.

The presence of these contradictory reactions points to the fact that labels are not sufficient to alleviate the issue of misinformation. They rely on the belief in the labeling system, which cannot be presupposed, especially in the environment where everyone is treated with distrust. Trust in labeling can be achieved by being open to the application of labels, who does it, and on what basis.

The Issue of Trust of the Platform. There is a more profound question of whether platforms should be trusted with labeling content. Commercial interests of the companies that run the social media platforms could be against the objective of providing reliable information. Their algorithms put an emphasis on engagement, which frequently implies sensational and emotionally-charged content. Their business model relies on retaining users as long as possible on platforms, and this could be incompatible with referring users off-platform to verification resources.

The ambivalence of the participants regarding platform labels can be an indication of a hasty awareness of these tensions. When platforms gain out of the engagement, and misinformation is used to generate engagement, do they have any reason to be trusted in their effective labeling of content that is beneficial to them? This is not an easy question but has to be raised when it comes to the discussion of platform based interventions. In addition, the prevailing tendency to have a small number of corporations in control of the information labeling raises the issue of accountability and the democratic control. As soon as the private firms succeed in gaining the power to decide on the truth, the public discourse becomes influenced by their decisions that lack transparency and accountability that the public institutions with the same functions would offer.

Outside of Platform-Centric Approaches. Those considerations imply that platform-centric solutions, though useful, are not enough. Good responses to misinformation need multi-level responses which involve:

• Platform-level interventions: Labeling, algorithm modification, and change of design that would facilitate the assessment of credibility but recognize the constraints and trust problems that such interventions have.

• Educational interventions: Media literacy initiatives that transcend individual skills to include platform awareness, algorithm literacy and the social aspect of verification.

• Newsroom interventions: How news outlets can recover credibility by being transparent, involving the youth, and showing their utility within the information ecosystem.

• Policy interventions: Regulatory frameworks that establish incentives to make platforms focus on accuracy over engagement and safeguard free expression and stop state control of information.

This study result justifies the demand of such multi-level approaches. The issue of misinformation on the social media setting is complex and multi-faceted and can not be dealt with by a single intervention. Development should occur on more than one front, and the expectations placed upon the ability of any single strategy should be realistic.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

The results of this investigation have implications on the theoretical frameworks used to research the news consumption and news verification behavior of young adults. The Uses and Gratifications Theory as well as Media Dependency Theory that were presented earlier in this paper contribute to shedding light on various aspects of the findings and are in their turn extended and refined by them.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory Revisited. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) assumes that the users of the media are active consumers, choosing the media according to particular needs and purposes. The results of this study affirm and make the assumption of UGT regarding active audiences more difficult.

On the one hand, the participants showed active involvement in news material rather well and made the conscious decisions of what to believe and what not to believe. Their social verification

techniques of consulting their peers, comments, using trusted influencers, etc. signify the intentionality in an effort to fulfill information requirements at the expense of managing the cognitive load. The satisfactions that were pursued by the participants were not only information but also social connection (the need to share verification labor with a friend), reassurance (the need to get social proof), and efficiency (the need to use heuristics to make fast decisions).

Conversely, the results make UGT focus on user agency difficult as they expose the structural limitations that agency functions under. The verification practices of the participants were predetermined by platform affordances that the participants had no control over, algorithmic and information environments that the participants could see and only influence partially. The position of active audience of UGT is to be construed as working under circumstances beyond their control- an aspect that UGT has occasionally underemphasized.

The discoveries that the confidence of the participants in controlling their algorithms could be rather an illusion (Theme 3) only make the assumptions of UGT more complicated. When the users feel that they are actively constructing their information environment but in reality are being influenced by an array of forces that they do not completely comprehend, the boundary between active and passive consumption is inverted. It implies that UGT should pay more attention to the technological and algorithmic contexts mediating between user intentions and media experiences.

Media Dependency Theory Elongated. The findings of this study have a lot of support in the Media Dependency Theory that emphasizes on the relations between media, audiences, and social systems. The high dependency produced by social media platforms as the primary sources of news to participants leaves them vulnerable to misinformation, particularly because the information environment they live in is heavily dependent on social media.

This is especially true regarding the fact that the theory predicts that dependency increases when the available sources of information are few or are considered unreliable. The generalized distrust of traditional media (Theme 1) would seal off other options, heightening the reliance of the participants on the same media that they happen to distrust. This puts the users in a paradoxical position where they are addicted to and doubtful of their main sources of information.

The results are an extension of Media Dependency Theory in that it sheds light on the manner in which dependency functions out of the theoretical plane and down to the daily practice. Dependency is not merely a macro-level interaction between audiences and media systems but is practiced in the form of particular behaviors of checking comments, consulting peers, relying on influencers, which are designed based on platform affordances. To comprehend dependency, it is important to pay attention to such micro-level practices, with the help of which dependencies relationships are replicated and negotiated.

The paper also indicates that the dependency can be both cognitive as well as emotional. Emotional and cognitive costs of dependency are manifested by participants in their fatigue in keeping up with vigilance (Theme 1) and the social verification upon which the participants base their cognitive labor (Theme 2). These aspects have not been properly investigated in the Media Dependency Theory and are worth considering more.

Integrating the Frameworks. The results justify the importance of combining the UGT and Media Dependency Theory, which is suggested in the theoretical framework. UGT throws light on the motivational aspects of verification why young adults are interested in news in the specific ways and what they need to get. Media Dependency Theory sheds light on the structural aspects - the dependence on platforms influences the nature of information spaces and leaves people vulnerable.

Combined, these frameworks assist in the realization of verification as coalescing at the point of motivated action and structured environment. Young adults are active in negotiating their information environments and make decisions depending on their needs and

objectives. Yet these decisions are made within environments characterized by platform designs, algorithmic logics as well as dependency relationships that limit choices and affect results. Agency is insufficient and so is structure and the two should be regarded.

This combined model has an intervention design implication. The strategies that are focused on only individual capabilities (enhancing agency) can be ineffective unless structural limitations are tackled. Incentives that are based on only platform regulation (changing structure) might not succeed should they not interplay with the motivations and practices of the users. Successful interventions should operate at both scales as they should not only enable active navigation of the users but also transform the spaces in which navigation takes place.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

The present study aimed at examining how young adults search through news credibility and misinformation on social media, the particular ways in which they use verification behaviours, how they perceive the character of platforms, and how social issues contribute to their verification activities. Based on the detailed qualitative research conducted by interviewing young adults between the ages of 18-26, four broad themes were identified that, when put together, give a holistic view of verification as socially situated practice.

To start with, there was a vigilance paradox, as the participants were extremely confident in their capacity to notice fake information and were very cynical about practically any news. This cynical attitude, though useful in terms of insulating against the naive belief, also causes lack of trust in the honest journalism and leaves the youth without compasses in varying the more and the less credible sources.

Second, verification became socially essential practice. Users were always inclined to use peer networks, comment boards and credible influencers in case they were not sure about the validity of information. This decentralized method of checking uses group intelligence, but

also presents weaknesses in cases where the social indications themselves are compromised.

Third, participants did experience platform cues and algorithms complexly. There was even division in relation to fact-check labels, with explanatory community notes being more favorable than mere flags. The comment areas acted as an important element of credibility, and emotional tone determined the perception. The awareness of the algorithm was different, and the participants who thought that they managed their feeds might have overestimated their control.

Fourth, the toolkit of personal verification of participants was rather superficial - frequent checks of account data, periodical reverse image search, comparison with large outlets. Such tactics showed a focus on efficiency which is compatible with platform environments that are aimed at quick consumption as opposed to long attention.

The combination of these themes demonstrates that verification is a pragmatically focused, socially situated practice that is influenced by the affordances of platforms, social networks and the time-based nature of daily media consumption. Young adults are not pitifully weak and naive but exist in complex information landscapes with both strengths and weaknesses in their strategies of coping.

6.2 Practical Implications

The implications toward various stakeholders involved in the context of assisting young adults in navigating news on social media are enclosed in the findings of the given study.

Media Literacy In Primary Education. The results indicate that the existing media literacy teaching strategies, although useful, could be re-oriented. The programs that aim at teaching students to spot the fake by using checklists to individual articles become more and more incompatible with the environments young people live in. A number of guidelines of revised media literacy are obtained:

To start with, media literacy should cover the topic of awareness of algorithms. Young people should learn to comprehend how algorithms construct their information spaces, why specific

content gets shown, and other content does not, and how their own actions affect the use of algorithms to curate content. This knowledge must encompass the boundaries of user control as well as the means of algorithms being trained through purposeful interaction.

Second, the media literacy must be taught to learn source triangulation instead of source evaluation alone. Since the young adults are exposed to news via a series of mixed content, cross-referencing across platforms and comparing different accounts and tracking information back to original sources are important than judging any one post on its own.

Third, media literacy should concern the emotional aspects of news involvement. The emotional work of verification is demonstrated by the tiredness that participants experience as a result of being on guard at all times and due to their tendency to use social shortcuts. This work should be rewarded through education and can be done by ensuring that students are taught to have sustainable methods of handling critical thinking and emotional health.

Fourth, media literacy must be clear on the issue of paradox of skepticism in which students need to know that non-discriminating skepticism is not critical thinking, but cynicism. It is as important as learning to question, to teach students to differentiate between a reasonable and an unreasonable doubt, and to understand what gets the trust of their friends and colleagues over time.

In the case of Journalists and News Organizations. The results include both the challenges as well as the opportunities to journalism that aims at reaching the younger audiences. The distrust that the generalized distrust participants have towards the traditional media cannot be overcome with mere statements of trustworthiness. Rather, news organizations have to prove their worthiness in ways that are consistent with the way the youths move through the information.

Transparency becomes very important. In the situations where young adults are concerned, they would like to know how the news is produced, who produces it, and what principles it is based on. News institutions whose operations are transparentized, appearing to show how they report the story, how they check their sources, how they handle corrections, etc., might gain credibility where mere coercive claims to authority fail.

Involvement among the young audiences is also an issue. Some respondents said that they do not often visit the traditional news outlets but do see them when posted by influencers or acquaintances. News outlets must have a way of existing in these dispersed interactions, making content sharable, commenting on comment sections, having relationships with trusted brokers.

Format matters as well. The tendency to read and consume easy to digest visual content does not indicate laziness but the nature in which news is received in platform environments. The news media that will be able to tailor their content to these settings (via short videos, explainers, visual summaries, etc.) without compromising its accuracy might be more successful among the young people.

Policymakers and Platform Regulators. The results justify the regulation strategies to generate incentives that make platforms focus on accuracy. Structural incentives act against the public interest in the truth when the platform business model serves to reward engagement most of all, and misinformation is the motivator of engagement.

The policy interventions may also incorporate the demand of algorithmic transparency, where researchers and the general population can comprehend the manner content ranking decisions are made. They may contain labeling standards, such as fact-check labels on a regular basis and with an explanatory background. These may involve providing support to alternatives to the public interest, financing non-commercial information services which may play a credible role as alternatives to platform-specific news consumption.

Nonetheless, the results also teach them to be modest regarding the power of regulation. The mistrust of young adults is directed at platforms, and labels made by a platform are subject to distrust, no matter how they are designed.

Regulation measures should not substitute educational and journalistic interventions but to a certain extent complement them.

6.3 Limitations

Although this research has some very valuable insights regarding the verification behavior of young adults, it has a number of limitations that should be considered when analyzing the results. Sample Characteristics. Although the sample of the study is quite representative in number of dimensions, it does not reflect all young adults. The participants were mainly recruited using university networks and social media, which may have led to overrepresenting those people who have more education and like to take part in a research. Its geographic localization in a region (or country) indicates that the results might not be applicable to other cultural settings where the platform ecologies, news environment, and the social norms are different.

The study ought to be expanded in further studies to comprise of more heterogeneous samples such as young individuals not in higher education, of different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural and national backgrounds. A comparison between cross cultures would be instrumental in the derivation of information environments on the differences between verification practices.

Self-Report Data. The authors depended, first of all, on the self-report data about the verification practices of the participants who were interviewed. Although such approach allows access to understandings and reflections of the participants themselves, it is not able to observe what participants should do in practice. There can also be a factor of social desirability (the participants will think they are savvy), limitation of memory or a discrepancy between what the participant thinks they do and what they actually do.

This limitation is partly stipulated by the introduction of the think-aloud protocols with some of the participants, which supplied observational information on the verification in a controlled situation. Nonetheless, this approach cannot be used to record naturalistic behavior in the flow of the platform usage. Future studies need to investigate how verification can be viewed in practice e.g. in the case of diary studies, or tracking of platforms with permission. Pay attention to Individual-Level Factors. The individual-based verification behavior in the study, though highly appropriate in its research questions, inevitably omits bigger structure-based factors that define the information environment. There was no direct discussion on platform governance, political economy of social media, and regulatory contexts, but all these factors certainly shape the circumstances under which individual verification takes place.

The links between individual-level verification practices and structural analysis should be more precisely drawn in future research, and how platform business models, policy choices, and technological architectures determine the opportunities and limitations to user verification. Temporal Limitations. The research is taken to capture the verification behaviors at a specific point in time, yet the environment of the platforms and the habits of the users are changing faster. The results are not likely to be stable due to evolving algorithms and features of the platforms, as well as the pressure of regulation. It would be helpful to conduct longitudinal research of the development and changes in verification practices over time.

6.4 Future Research

Based on the results of this study, there are a number of ways that future research can be continued.

The Comparative Research across cultures. It is likely that the practices of verification are influenced by the cultural settings, such as trust norms, media, platform ecologies, and political settings. The cross-country and cross-cultural comparative research would potentially show the impact of these contextual factors on verification and the transferability of the effective interventions between contexts. This kind of research would also be able to check on the generalizability of the results in the present study which is founded in a particular cultural environment.

Longitudinal Studies. What happens to verification practices in the transition of young adults in various stages of their life? Does it make them more sophisticated with experience, or is it in the cynicism that they grow? Tracking longitudinal studies of the same persons over a period of time could help shed light on the developmental patterns and determine where the intervention will be most effective.

Platform-Specific Investigations. This research used social media platforms as a single group although the experience of the participants was different between the platforms. Tik Tok, Instagram, X and YouTube vary in terms of their affordances, norms, and users and are likely differentially subject to verification. Comparative research studies that involve a detailed study of verification practices on varying platforms have the potential to guide platform-specific interventions.

Intervention Research. Upon the practical implications of the study, the research ought to experiment specific interventions based on the study findings. Do awareness modules of algorithms affect the interaction of the young population with the content on platforms? Are news organization transparency practices advertised to restore trust? Which formats and channels will reach the young audiences with media literacy contents best? Undertaking experimental and quasi experimental research that would test such interventions would be evidence of what to do.

Verification: Political Economy. The paper is alluding to structural processes that form verification but is not systematic about the analysis of them. Individual-level studies would be supplemented with research investigating the role of platform business models, advertising practices, and regulatory frameworks in establishing the circumstances under which the individual verification is possible. This type of research may focus on the following question: What is the role of platform incentives in the information environment that users have to operate in? What are the structural changes which would be most helpful in the user verification?

Checking of Crisis Contexts. This paper explored ordinary verification, although crises such as pandemics, elections, natural disasters, increase the information demands and misinformation threats. A study investigating the methods of young adults to confirm information in the context of a crisis may show that routine is good enough or that being in a crisis context may require other strategies.

Closing Reflection

This paper has discussed the ways in which young adults deal with the confusing, and sometimes conflicting information spaces of social media. The image that comes to mind is neither the dystopian outlook of the generation lost forever in the misinformation nor the utopian outlook of the digital emerging savvies. Young adults are making the best out of the available tools, relationships and environments they are working with. They are logical and purposeful even in failing to meet the expectations the media literacy advocates may have.

The problem in the future is not to attribute the lack of skepticism and lack of verification skills to the youth. It is to acknowledge that the information space they are in has not been made in ways that are accommodating to their good health or to democratic health. It was created to be interactive, profitable, massive. In that setting, the habits that they have acquired are logical adjustments.

To change those practices, it is necessary to change the environmental medium that influences those practices. This implies platform responsibility, regulatory focus, journalistic reinvention and education development - simultaneously. Only one intervention will not be enough. However, when combined, these multi-level strategies may change the circumstances in which young adults process news and therefore, it may happen that their sensible adaptations can also be reasonably successful.

The stakes are high. The way youths go through news nowadays forms not just their personal level of knowledge but the level of the entire discussion and quality of democracy in the future

of their lives. It is not only an academic activity, but a part of the bigger project of maintaining informed citizenship in the ages of algorithms to understand their practices of verification.

7. References

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31*(2), 211-236.

Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2018). "News comes across when I'm in a moment of leisure": Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media. *New Media & Society, 20*(10), 3523-3539.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.

Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 117*(27), 15536-15545.

Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the media. *Journalism, 19*(1), 5-23.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2017). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., Ortega, T., Smith, M., & Wineburg, S. (2020). Can students evaluate online sources? Learning from assessments of civic online reasoning. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 46*(2), 165-193.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nygren, T., & Guath, M. (2019). Swedish teenagers' difficulties and abilities to determine digital news credibility. *Nordicom Review, 40*(1), 23-42.

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). The psychology of fake news. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 25*(5), 388-402.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon, 9*(5), 1-6.

Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2016). Curated flows: A framework for mapping media exposure in the digital age. *Communication Theory, 26*(3), 309-328.

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). *Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature*. Hewlett Foundation.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359*(6380), 1146-1151.

Vraga, E. K., Bode, L., & Tully, M. (2020). Creating news literacy messages to enhance expert corrections of misinformation on Twitter. *Communication Research, 47*(1), 3-23.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.

Wineburg, S., McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., & Ortega, T. (2016). *Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reasoning*. Stanford Digital Repository.

World Health Organization. (2020). *Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*. WHO.

Ball-Rokeach, S. J., & DeFleur, M. L. (1976). A dependency model of mass-media effects. *Communication Research, 3*(1), 3-21.

Chaiken, S. (1980). Heuristic versus systematic information processing and the use of source versus message cues in persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39*(5), 752-766.

Clayton, K., Blair, S., Busam, J. A., Forstner, S., Glance, J., Green, G., ... & Nyhan, B. (2020). Real solutions for fake news? Measuring the effectiveness of general warnings and fact-check tags in reducing belief in false stories on social media. *Political Behavior, 42*, 1073-1095.

Jahng, M. R. (2021). Is fake news the new social media crisis? Examining the public's perception of fake news and its impact on social media engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior, 120*, 106754.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 37*(4), 509-523.

Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Free Press.

Moscadelli, A., Albora, G., Biamonte, M. A., Giorgetti, D., Innocenzi, M., Paoli, S., ... & Bonaccorsi, G. (2020). Fake news and Covid-19 in Italy: Results of a quantitative observational study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(16), 5850.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.

Walter, N., Cohen, J., Holbert, R. L., & Morag, Y. (2020). Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom. *Political Communication, 37*(3), 350-375.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.

Information Verification Practices and Perception of Social Media Users on Fact-Checking Services. *Journal of Information Science Theory and Practice, 11*(1).

Heuristic-Systematic Model in fake news detection. ScholarSpace, University of Hawaii.

Community-based fact-checking and trust in misinformation flags. *PNAS Nexus, 3*(7), 2024.

Bias in algorithmic filtering and personalization. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2013.

Look at the Sender, Ignore the Information: Authenticity and Opinion Leaders in Spreading Fake Information to Teenagers. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 7*(4), 2023.

News-sharing behavior among Generation Z: Integrating Newsworthiness Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Theory of Planned Behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2025.

Exploring the Impact of informational factors on online rumor credibility and spreading. National Sun Yat-sen University Master's Thesis, 2022.

Credibility & Bias. Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University.

Gen Z doesn't search for news, most chance upon it while scrolling: Report. *CNBC TV18*, August 8, 2025.

Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2018). "News comes across when I'm in a moment of leisure": Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media. *New Media & Society, 20*(10), 3523-3539.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Ericsson, K. A., & Simon, H. A. (1993). *Protocol analysis: Verbal reports as data* (2nd ed.). MIT Press.

Gray, L. M., Wong-Wylie, G., Rempel, G. R., & Cook, K. (2020). Expanding qualitative research interviewing strategies: Zoom video communications. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(5), 1292-1301.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59-82.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2017). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (2019). *Basic and advanced focus groups*. SAGE Publications.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 42*(5), 533-544.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 117*(27), 15536-15545.

PNAS Nexus. (2024). Community-based fact-checking and trust in misinformation flags. *PNAS Nexus, 3*(7).