



Young People and Social Networks: News Consumption Habits and Credibility of the News

Jóvenes y Redes Sociales: Hábitos de Consumo Informativo y Credibilidad de las Noticias

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have become extremely effective platforms for the dissemination of up-to-the-minute news among ever wider sectors of the population, particularly among young people, for whom these channels are a preferred means of socialization and of understanding their environment. The main objective of this study is to analyze the news consumption of the Spanish population aged between 15 and 24 years on social networks, with the intention of understanding how they access news, what interactions take place, and what factors engender trust, as per an online questionnaire administered to a national sample representative of the population under study (n=1,067) and five focus groups (n=97). The findings reflect a high daily exposure to the networks, which are the most common means of news consumption for young people, who show little inclination to fact-check. They receive most news items incidentally; usually, they simply read them or, at most, share them with their contacts, and they tend to attribute very little trustworthiness to them. However, the analysis of sociodemographic factors shows that variables such as age, educational level, and ideological positioning influence the credibility that young people give to the current affairs content that the networks disseminate and to the sources from which they come.

RESUMEN

Las redes sociales se han erigido en un soporte de suma eficacia para la difusión de la información de actualidad entre sectores cada vez más amplios de la población, y particularmente, entre los jóvenes, que tienen en estos canales una vía preferente de socialización y conocimiento del entorno. El objetivo fundamental de este trabajo reside en analizar el consumo informativo en redes sociales por parte de la población española de entre 15 y 24 años, con la intención de conocer cómo accede a las noticias, qué interacciones lleva a cabo y qué factores le generan confianza, a partir de un cuestionario "online" suministrado a una muestra de carácter nacional, representativa de la población objeto de estudio (n=1.067) y cinco grupos de discusión (n=97). Los resultados reflejan una alta exposición diaria a las redes, constituidas en el medio más habitual de consumo informativo para los jóvenes, quienes muestran escasa propensión a contrastar las noticias. La mayoría de las informaciones las reciben de manera involuntaria, limitándose por lo general a leerlas o, a lo sumo, compartirlas con sus contactos; y suelen suscitarles poca confianza. No obstante, el análisis de los factores sociodemográficos arroja que variables como la edad, el nivel formativo y el posicionamiento ideológico influyen en la credibilidad que los jóvenes otorgan a los contenidos de actualidad que difunden las redes y a las fuentes de las que estos proceden.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Spain, Social Networks, Youth, Credibility, Media Outlets, Information.
España, Redes Sociales, Jóvenes, Credibilidad, Medios, Información.

1. Introduction

Young people's relationship with technology promotes new forms of interaction and learning that radically break with those practiced by previous generations. Prensky (2001) defined individuals born in the 21st century as digital natives in a land of digital immigrants. They look to the online environment, almost exclusively, to meet their communication needs, and they bring everything, including their personal relationships and their knowledge of current news, into the virtual world (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Those who have grown up in this communication ecosystem are more prone to share, participate, and interact digitally, but their skill in the use of technology stands in contrast to certain gaps in education (Bartau-Rojas et al., 2018).

For young people, social networks have become a principal means of socialization. According to Rideout et al. (2022), in the United States, 62% of teenagers interact daily on social media. While the phenomenon is significant in the 15–18 years age group, its prevalence is also increasing for younger ages (8–12 years), for whom social network exposure has increased by 60% compared with 2019, owing, in particular, to the advent of applications such as Snapchat and TikTok.

Regardless of the country and the level of development of the societies studied, the bulk of scientific literature confirms the widespread use of social networks by young people throughout the world (see Bärtl, 2018; Gray, 2018, among others). On these platforms, interaction takes place mostly through exchanging videos, audio, and images with short text. Meanwhile, other activities such as in-print reading, which is decreasing annually, fall by the wayside (Rideout et al., 2022).

Compulsive consumption of content on networks can have serious learning implications, as this affects a segment of the population still in the process of cognitive maturation. Orben et al. (2022) point out how, while on the one hand social media present young people with a setting that encourages socialization and contact with their environment, on the other they create feelings of dissatisfaction that lead young people to negatively evaluate core aspects of their lives, affecting their day-to-day activities.

1.1. Networks as a Vehicle for News Consumption by Young People

Networks have gained the status of being an indispensable part of the process of disseminating and obtaining news (Mitchell et al., 2013), to the point that they are already the main means by which users around the world access news (Dabbous et al., 2022; Gómez-Calderón et al., 2021, among others).

The phenomenon is even more evident among the 15–34-year-old segment, or young people (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Férdeline, 2021; Lopez-de-Ayala et al., 2020; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021; Zhu & Procter, 2015). Indeed, this group is drifting farther and farther away from traditional media (Thurman & Fletcher, 2019; Vihalemm & Kõuts-Klemm, 2017), and has made networks a substitute for television (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Himma-Kadakas et al., 2018). The most current data for Spain show that the preferred means of staying informed for users aged 18–24 years is social media (47% of responses, compared with 23% for the population as a whole). Among them, Twitter's use as a news channel stands out, given in 38% of cases, still ahead of Instagram (33%), and some distance ahead of WhatsApp (29%) and YouTube (23%). From the aggregate data, it can be deduced that two out of three young people use the networks for the purpose of viewing, commenting on, and sharing news (Vara-Miguel et al., 2022).

International data point in the same direction: In a 2018 study conducted in the United States, 89% of respondents aged 18–29 years said that they obtain the current affairs content they consumed from social media (Head et al., 2018). Similarly, research by the Center for International Media Assistance (Férdeline, 2021) concluded, on the basis of a survey of young people in Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia, Mexico, Ghana, and Nigeria, that this group's main source of news was social networks (51% of cases, ranging from 84% in Thailand to 23.5% in Indonesia).

In contrast, it seems evident that young people, although they trust social media more than any other segment of the population, are concerned about the veracity of the news that they receive through social media. There can be considered to be a certain tension between the convenience with which these channels provide news and apprehension about their tendency to spread hoaxes and increase political polarization (Férdeline, 2021).

Regarding the mode of access, it is common for young people to receive the news they consume without looking for it while checking their personal accounts, a phenomenon known as incidental news exposure

(Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Goyanes et al., 2023; Kaiser et al., 2021). On networks, current affairs content is mixed in with content created by friends or pops up as an alert when an app sends notifications, but it is often not found through a user's deliberate search.

Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) back up this idea with data collected through online surveys in which they examine how audiences in four countries—Italy, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—inform themselves using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The results show that incidental exposure is more pronounced among younger people and among those who show little interest in current affairs.

Boczkowski et al. (2017) also find that audiences aged 15–29 years often lack control over how they consume news through social media, as Facebook's algorithmic logic and Twitter's timeline do not distinguish media content from other types of content, serving it all up indiscriminately.

For young people, the effect of this news exposure—voluntary or incidental—can be particularly powerful, given that this is a niche audience in a stage of intellectual development in which worldviews are still being forged (Bowyer et al., 2017).

1.2. The Credibility of News on Social Networks

Public skepticism toward any type of news—personal, institutional, or from the media—has been growing exponentially over the last two decades (Roses & Gómez-Calderón, 2015). What in principle is a healthy defense mechanism against mass messages can become a stumbling block when applied without the audience's having sufficient media literacy; this is even more true if the audience is confronted with news reporting of dubious quality, which makes it difficult to view the media as a beacon of trust (Marta Lazo & Farias Batlle, 2019).

Skepticism toward news items could be interpreted as a response to increasingly pluralistic news systems (Schudson, 2019). However, Goyanes et al. (2023) consider this distrust to be closely linked to the avalanche of content available and to the fact that an increasingly higher percentage of the population avoids news, either out of disinterest or because they prefer other types of consumption.

It seems unquestionable that the professional media represent, in most cases, a guarantee that the input that the citizen receives from the system is trustworthy. However, there is a part of the public that sees journalists as a source of false or misleading information (Reuters Institute, 2020), because they do not act independently and they allow themselves to be influenced by the editorial line or the interests of the media outlet where they work. With these stances—whether alleged or real—the social contract of journalism as a public service institution is breaking down, a dysfunction already identified at the beginning of the century (cf. Farias-Batlle, 2007) that, after the 2008 financial crisis and the emergence of fake news, has been significantly exacerbated (Mayoral et al., 2019).

Taking as a reference the categorization of credibility proposed by Tseng and Fogg (1999) and applying it to social networks, it can be seen how, among young people, “presumed” credibility—based on the receiver's knowledge of a source—is very limited or nonexistent when it comes to the media and journalists; “reputed” credibility—stemming from experience with and trust afforded to third parties—is compromised by political polarization; “surface” credibility—reliant upon initial reactions to the source and the characteristics of the messages, such as appearance or design—is subject to trends and is easily manipulated to give something a veneer of truthfulness; and, finally, “experienced” credibility—the result of personal interaction with a source over time—is still very limited or is restricted by the paucity of respected sources available to them.

Data show that news presented in the traditional way is more trustworthy than news disseminated in digital format (Besalú & Pont-Sorribes, 2021). Specifically, news on social networks is less credible than that of other media, as has been found by numerous studies (De Frutos Torres et al., 2021; González-Cortés et al., 2020, among others), and this holds even more true for young people (Parejo-Cuéllar et al., 2022). Their trust is mediated by their social environment, such that they afford more credibility to the opinions of other users than to those of corporate sources, be they media, brands, or influencers (De Frutos Torres et al., 2021; Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023). In fact, the same level of credibility is afforded to news from the media on the networks as to nonjournalistic content such as video tutorials by unqualified individuals. This is in spite of the fact that the widespread use of social media affects the perception of its trustworthiness (Basri, 2019; Dabbous et al., 2022; Seo et al., 2020): Unsurprisingly, there is a positive correlation between the use of networks and the degree of trust they engender (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). However, its credibility, in general, remains limited.

2. Materials and Methods

In accordance with the foregoing discussion, this research aimed to understand the behavior of young people in relation to the news they receive through social networks, how they access it, the interactions take place, and what factors engender trust for them. Specifically, two objectives were established:

1. Examine the news consumption habits of the Spanish population aged between 15 and 24 years, paying attention to the frequency with which they check the news using social networks, the type of content received, and their behavior regarding it (forwarding, commenting, fact-checking, or other).
2. Assess the trustworthiness attributed to news received through social networks and determine whether the recipients' sociodemographic factors affect it, taking into account variables such as sex, level of education, or ideological positioning.

To achieve these objectives, it was considered appropriate to apply a mixed methodology, combining nationwide surveys and focus groups. The aim was to bolster or qualify the findings obtained in each of the different ways, making the conclusions more sound.

2.1. Survey

2.1.1. Participants and Procedure

The Spanish population aged between 15 and 24 years, determined to be 4,831,504 people as of January 1, 2021 (INE, 2021), was taken as the universe of the study. Subjects were selected on the basis of sampling proportional to the theoretical values of the group under study in relation to the variables sex, age, and autonomous community, and the estimated weighting coefficients were applied. To obtain a 95% confidence level, the sample was set at 1,066 individuals, with a margin of error of $\pm 3\%$.

The survey, carried out with the support of a survey company, was delivered online to people belonging to a research panel—with defined profiles—by means of a random distribution system. The final sample consisted of 52.2% women and 47.8% men, with a mean age of approximately 22 years (mean [M] = 21.8; standard deviation [SD] = 2.05). In regard to educational level, most of those interviewed (50.2%) were in the second stage of secondary school, in high school, or in the higher levels of vocational training.

In total, 3,050 invitations were sent out, and 1,067 responses were obtained, giving a participation rate of 35% and 100.1% sample coverage. The fieldwork was carried out between October 27 and November 6, 2021.

2.1.2. Tool

The questionnaire, designed ad hoc for this research, included 14 questions. The variables examined were as follows:

- Social networks used regularly: nominal variable
- Social networks used during the last week as a source of current (non-personal) news: nominal variable, multi-response
- Social network most frequently used to stay informed of current (non-personal) news: nominal variable
- Frequency of searching on social networks for current (non-personal) news: ordinal variable, based on a scale from 1 (“never”) to 6 (“several times a day”)
- News topics searched for on networks: nominal variable, multi-response
- Frequency of incidental reception of news through social networks: ordinal variable, based on a scale from 1 (“never”) to 6 (“several times a day”)
- Topics of news received incidentally on networks: nominal variable, multi-response
- Actions taken in response to the incidental reception of news on networks: ordinal variable, with four categories—reading, seeking additional information, sharing, and commenting—based on scales from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”)
- Frequency of dissemination or forwarding of current news through social networks: ordinal variable, based on a scale from 1 (“never”) to 6 (“several times a day”)
- Topics of the news shared on networks: nominal variable, multi-response
- Reason for sharing current news through social networks: nominal variable, with four categories (because of its eye-catching headline, because of its topic, because of its desire for integration, or because it addresses interests shared with the community)

- Assessment of the credibility of news received through social networks: Ordinal variable, based on a scale from 1 (“minimum credibility”) to 5 (“maximum credibility”)
- Trustworthiness attributed to different types of news sources received through the networks: ordinal variable, with four categories based on scales from 1 (“minimum credibility”) to 5 (“maximum credibility”)
- Factor that leads someone to trust in the news received through networks: nominal variable, with six categories (the media that publishes it, the journalist who writes it, the popularity of the person who shares it, whether it comes from a family member or friend, the reach it has, and the social network through which it is circulated)

2.1.3. Data Analysis

With the information obtained, a data matrix was generated using the SPSS (version 25.0) statistical software, with which the pertinent analyses were carried out and the relationships between the study’s dependent variables—those listed in section 2.1.2—and the independent variables—sex, age, level of education, autonomous community of residence, and ideological positioning—were studied. To assess the influence of the latter, the chi-square contrast statistic (χ^2) was calculated, and if significant, the corrected standardized residuals were examined to identify where the differences were located. Finally, the effect size (ES) was evaluated, taking into account the level of measurement of the variables for the selection of the appropriate statistic: phi coefficient, contingency coefficient, Cramér’s V , or eta. The confidence level was set at 95%.

2.2. Focus Groups

Five focus groups were created with young people between 15 and 24 years of age ($n=97$) in three municipalities in southern, central, and eastern Spain (Malaga, Madrid, and Elche, respectively) to delve into the survey data from a qualitative perspective. Three groups were organized in universities (61.9% of subjects) and two in secondary/high schools—one private and one subsidized—(38.1%) on the basis of a non-probabilistic and strategic sample of volunteers. Through this technique, the young people—68% women and 32% men—were able to address opinions and experiences on issues such as news consumption habits and the trust placed in the content disseminated via social networks. The sessions, held in person during the months of April, May, and June 2022, lasted between 50 and 60 minutes each and were recorded for subsequent transcription, coding, and analysis.

3. Analysis and Results

The findings obtained are detailed below, with emphasis on the localized relationships between the variables of the analysis. In keeping with the research objectives, contrasts were only seen in the sections related to trust.

3.1. Young Peoples’ News Sources

The main source of current news for young Spaniards between 15 and 24 years of age was social networks (67.8% of cases), surpassing others such as television (55.6%) and online media (38.5%). Lagging far behind these were traditional options such as radio (14%), personal sources (7.9%), and the printed press (5.3%). A total of 91.8% of those surveyed said that they had consulted news content during the last week, whereas only 8.2% said that they had not received news through any means during that period.

In the focus groups, most of the participants (93.8%) highlighted social media’s immediacy as its main advantage when compared with traditional media, as this 22-year-old university student did: “What’s the point of buying a newspaper? You pay to read news that has already happened when it is also available on their website or I can find it in real time on social networks”. To this, a 24-year-old student added: “If you’re not on social media, you find out the information late”.

3.2. Searching for and Receiving News on Networks

Social media’s relevance is reinforced by examining the frequency with which young people turn to it for their daily dose of news. Although 16% said that they never search for news on networks, the vast majority (70.7%; the sum of values 4, 5, and 6 in Table 1) usually relied on them for this purpose.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
1	171	16.0	16.0
2	79	7.4	23.4
3	63	5.9	29.3
4	198	18.6	47.9
5	241	22.6	69.5
6	315	29.5	100.0
Total	1,067	100.0	

* On a scale of 1 ("never") to 6 ("several times a day")

The content that young people searched for the most was related to the world of video games (23.9%). This was followed by news about sports (15.2%), health (14.3%), the economy (13.7%), events (9.1%), public figures (8.6%), politics (8.5%), and culture (6.6%).

The microblogging network Twitter was the network used most for news purposes (44.3%), followed by Instagram (32.1%) and Facebook (19%). In their shadow were apps such as WhatsApp (12.3%), YouTube (12.1%), TikTok (5.7%), Telegram (5.5%), and Twitch (2.9%). When asked about what motivated them to consume news on one platform or another, Twitter users highlighted the suitability of this network for accessing breaking news, whereas YouTube users valued this application's diversity of content, far removed from the topics covered by traditional media, and Instagram users emphasized the visual nature of the news. In this regard, the focus groups revealed differences when it came to the use of various applications to keep up to date: secondary and high school students use TikTok (75.6%) and Instagram (67.5%) in particular, whereas university students opt mostly for Twitter (85%).

A large number of respondents incidentally accessed the news when checking their personal accounts (Table 2), even though, in some cases, they were not aware of it. This incidental content reached them, above all, through Instagram (26.5%), Twitter (25.8%), and WhatsApp (23.2%). Passivity when it comes to receiving news was a characteristic that the young people themselves accepted as a matter of course, as expressed by a 21-year-old student: "I wait for the notification to arrive, and if I have time and it interests me, I read the entire news items". Another participant, 16 years old, noted: "Most days I don't search out news owing to a lack of time. I find out about news from what I see on social networks".

	1	2	3	4	5	6
YouTube	30.1%	12.6%	13.7%	18.1%	12.5%	12.9%
WhatsApp	30.3%	13.8%	12.2%	10.9%	9.7%	23.2%
Instagram	16.2%	7.9%	13.4%	16.4%	19.6%	26.5%
Twitter	14.3%	7.7%	10.5%	18.6%	23.3%	25.8%
Facebook	32.5%	11.7%	11.6%	14.4%	15.4%	14.4%
Telegram	48.2%	12.4%	11.8%	10.3%	8.8%	8.4%
TikTok	28.2%	10.4%	10.8%	15.1%	16.6%	18.8%

* On a scale of 1 ("never") to 6 ("several times a day").

The news received involuntarily was mainly about video games (20.5%), economics (18%), and society (16.3%). To a lesser extent, it dealt with sports (12.8%), medical (9.7%), political (8.9%), event-related (8.4%), and cultural (6%) issues. Similarities were observed between the subject matter of the content that young people searched for and that which they received incidentally, which is a sign of the efficiency with which the applications' algorithms work.

Generally, respondents simply read the news that reached them through social networks and, less frequently, looked for additional material on the Internet to supplement it or shared it with their contacts. In this regard, the results showed that most of them were reluctant to write comments or express their opinion about current news (only 8.9% did so on a regular basis; Table 3). The focus groups confirmed these findings: 49.5% of the participants confessed to simply reading the

information, and only 6.2% stated that they commented on the content from the networks. As one 15-year-old student emphasized: “The content I share is not news or serious topics, which are of no interest to my contacts”. Another respondent, 22 years old, noted: “I like to see the debate that is generated on social networks, but I don’t usually comment on anything. I only share or like something if I am interested”.

Table 3: When You Happen to Come Across a News Item That You Weren’t Looking For but Are Interested In, You Tend To...*

	1	2	3	4	5
Simply read it	4.4%	7.4%	37.4%	37.7%	13.0%
Look for more information on the Internet	5.4%	13.4%	42.2%	30.3%	8.7%
Share it with your contacts	15.9%	25.1%	42.1%	14.3%	2.5%
Write a comment or opinion	49.5%	24.1%	17.5%	7.6%	1.3%

* On scales from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”).

3.3. Trust in the News Disseminated by the Networks and Factors Affecting it

In general, the news appearing on social networks engendered distrust among the young population. Although the majority of respondents (43.8%) had a lukewarm attitude toward it—3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “minimum trust” and 5 “maximum trust”—for 35.1% it was untrustworthy content (Table 4). This contrasts with the 21.2% who afforded it the highest credibility. The abundance of available content seems to explain the suspicion generated by social media: “With so much information on social media, I don’t know what is true. It seems that what is true is what is published first”, said a 15-year-old student, reflecting the widespread sentiment evident in the focus groups.

Table 4: How Do You Rate the Credibility of News on Social Networks?*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
1	99	9.6	9.6
2	261	25.4	35.1
3	450	43.8	78.9
4	170	16.6	95.4
5	47	4.6	100.0
Total	1,067	100.0	

Mean=2.81; mode = 3; standard deviation=0.97

* On a scale of 1 (“minimum credibility”) to 5 (“maximum credibility”).

According to the chi-squared test of independence, both age ($ES = 0.105$) and ideological positioning of the respondents ($ES = 0.270$) influenced the trustworthiness they attributed to the news circulating on the networks. In this sense, it can be affirmed that minors consider it more reliable than do users between 19 and 24 years of age ($\chi^2[4, N=1,027] = 11.340, p < 0.05$). Young people on the extreme right were the ones who gave the most credibility to the news disseminated by the social media ($\chi^2[40, N=775] = 56.700, p < 0.05$). When this question was raised in the focus groups, it was found that 70.3% of secondary and high school students generally trusted the content posted on social networks, whereas this figure dropped to 13.3% among university students.

Interviewees afforded greater credibility to news from specialized websites and from family and friends (Table 5). At the opposite end of the scale were the generalist media and the youtubers and influencers, with the latter reaping the lowest degree of trust.

Table 5: If You Were to Receive a News Item From Any of the Following Sources Through Social Networks, Please Indicate the Degree of Trust You Would Place in It*.

	1	2	3	4	5
The media	8.4%	17.8%	39.9%	21.8%	4.0%
Specialized websites	2.2%	7.7%	28.4%	37.4%	16.1%
Youtubers or influencers	14.4%	29.1%	32.9%	12.1%	3.3%
Family and friends	3.0%	13.1%	42.5%	25.7%	12.3%

* On scales from 1 (“minimum confidence”) to 5 (“maximum confidence”).

Here, sex ($ES = 0.121$), age ($ES = 0.112$), education level ($ES = 0.255$), and ideological positioning ($ES = 0.248$) are significant indicators. The data show that men afford more credibility to the news disseminated by youtubers and influencers on social networks than women do ($\chi^2[5, N=1,068] = 15.583, p < 0.01$). The chi-squared contrast statistic and the corrected standardized residuals analysis also revealed that age has an impact on the trust placed in the generalist media, which was more marked among those younger than 18 years of age ($\chi^2[5, N=1,068] = 13.395, p < 0.05$). Secondary school students gave more credibility to their family members, as noted by a 16-year-old participant: “The most serious information I learn from my parents, and I look for information about my interests, video games, and soccer”. Another 15-year-old student put it this way: “I know my parents aren’t going to lead me astray, so I trust what they tell me more”.

With regard to the level of education, there were notable differences between those who had a master’s degree or doctorate and those who had no formal education or who had not gone beyond the initial stages of education: Whereas the former were more likely to trust news from specialized websites ($\chi^2[35, N=1,068] = 69.263, p < 0.001$), the less educated gave more credence to news published by youtubers and influencers ($\chi^2[35, N=1,068] = 73.938, p < 0.001, ES = 0.263$). Those who had obtained higher levels of education were more distrustful of the generalist media ($\chi^2[35, N=1,068] = 65.518, p < 0.001$).

In terms of ideological positioning, young people who considered themselves right-leaning generally gave greater credibility to the news disseminated by social networks than did those on the left. In this sense, the degree of trust the most conservative placed in the media ($\chi^2[50, N=789] = 73.920, p < 0.05, ES = 0.306$), in youtubers and influencers ($\chi^2[50, N=789] = 107.804, p < 0.001, ES = 0.370$), and in family and friends ($\chi^2[50, N=789] = 103.399, p < 0.001, ES = 0.362$) was notable.

Young people paid special attention to which media outlet posts the news on networks when evaluating its credibility (Table 6). In this regard, according to the chi-squared test of independence, the factors affecting the credibility of the news varied according to the sex ($ES = 0.123$), educational level ($ES = 0.278$), and ideology of the respondents ($ES = 0.322$). Thus, men paid more attention to whether the news came from a family member or friend, whereas women paid more attention to the media outlet that posted it ($\chi^2[5, N=1,068] = 16.170, p < 0.01$).

Table 6: To the Greatest Extent, What Factor Leads You to Trust the News You Receive?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The media outlet that posts it	607	56.8
The journalist who writes it	111	10.4
The popularity of the sharer	52	4.9
That it comes from a family member or friend	118	11
Its reach	104	9.7
The social network through which I received it	76	7.1
Total	1,067	100.0

The credibility of the news disseminated through the networks was, in turn, conditioned by the respondents’ level of education ($\chi^2[35, N=1,068] = 82.663, p < 0.001$). The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between individuals with little education, for whom the determining factor was the popularity of the person sharing a news item, and those who had reached higher educational stages—high school, bachelor’s degree, and master’s degree—who were guided mainly by the media outlet it came from. The focus groups corroborated these results, as 85.6% of the participants stated that, at the outset, they check who posted the news.

In terms of ideological positioning, the statistical contrast revealed differences between young people who considered themselves on the left and those on the right: The former put more weight on the media outlet and the journalist who wrote the news item, and the latter, the social network that disseminated the news ($\chi^2[50, N=789] = 81.809, p < 0.01$).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In relation to the first objective of the study (O1), which consisted of examining the news consumption habits of young Spaniards aged 15–24 years, the use of social networks as a primary—and in many cases

the only—way of accessing news was confirmed, in line with previous studies (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Férdeline, 2021, among others; García-Jiménez et al., 2018; Thurman & Fletcher, 2019; Zhu & Procter, 2015, among others). The content they consumed was mainly related to entertainment-related topics, at the expense of “hard news,” which was much less in demand.

Most young people received news on a daily basis incidentally—something inherent to the use of social networks (see Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Goyanes et al., 2023)—but very few fact-checked it when they had doubts about it or when it referred to issues they were unfamiliar with, rather simply sharing it automatically, and only occasionally commenting or giving their opinion.

With regard to the second objective (O2, credibility of the news), we must conclude that young Spaniards place very limited trust in the news they receive through social networks, as other authors have already shown (see Pérez-Escoda & Pedrero Esteban 2021). The nearly unchecked proliferation of content and sources fostered by the digital environment might be contributing to fueling this skepticism, according to the responses obtained in the focus groups.

But beyond general observations, the truth is that most of the findings of our study require qualification in light of the sociodemographic variables included in the analysis. Thus, it was observed that young people ideologically positioned on the right afforded greater credibility to the news provided by social media than those on the left. Also, sex was a determining factor when defining the characteristics that uphold the credibility given to a piece of news, since the male public paid more attention to aspects such as the popularity of the person sharing it—it is no surprise then that they trusted youtubers to a greater extent than did women—and whether it came from a family member or friend, whereas young women mainly paid attention to the media outlet that posted it. Additionally, having attained a higher education—a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree—meant that more trustworthiness would be attributed to news coming from specialized sites, whereas the public with a low educational level seemed to see influencers as the most reliable source. In all cases, these findings help to elucidate the influence that sociodemographic factors have on the credibility given to digital news, an aspect that has been little studied so far (see Gómez-Calderón et al., 2023).

Overall, the picture offered by the data collected is, to say the least, troubling: If young people have social networks as their main source of news, but do not trust the current affairs content they receive through them and do not regularly fact-check the news, it seems clear that their knowledge of the world around them will be very unsound, and the odds of being manipulated for ideological or commercial purposes will grow exponentially.

Following this reasoning, it can be said that the time with the most news available to citizens—our century—may also end up being the one with the most disinformation, along with the loss of critical thinking that this implies.

Traditional media—as this analysis confirmed—engender little trust among young people—the same level as youtubers and influencers. However, its role continues to be fundamental; in fact, our records indicate that, for the 15–24-year-old public, it was above all the media outlet from which a news item came that determined the credibility they afforded to said news item, more than the journalist who produced it or the social network that transmitted it.

Consequently, together with media literacy, the media need to make an effort to improve their credibility and, in this way, act as a benchmark in a context such as the current one, characterized by a saturation of content and a plethora of broadcasters, many of whom are of questionable trustworthiness.

Authors’ Contributions

Background: P.F. and B.G. Methodology: P.F. and A.C. Analysis and results: A.C. and B.G. Conclusions: P.F. and B.G. Drafting (original draft): P.F. and A.C. Final drafting and corrections: B.G. and A.C.

Funding

Research developed within the framework of the National R&D Project PID2019-106932RB-I00, “The informative use of social networks by young Spaniards: Incidental news consumption, technological conditioning factors and credibility of journalistic content (USINRED)” [*“El uso informativo de las redes sociales por parte de los jóvenes españoles: consumo incidental de noticias, condicionantes tecnológicos y credibilidad de los contenidos periodísticos (USINRED)”*], funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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