MEDIA HABITS AND DIGITAL INFORMATION: USER PREFERENCES IN THE TIME OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract: In today's digital society, patterns of media consumption are changing faster than ever before, especially under the influence of increasingly accessible technologies, mobile applications, and social networks. Traditional media—such as television, radio, and print—still play a significant role, particularly among older age groups, but their dominance is declining in favor of digital formats. According to a report by the British media regulator Ofcom from September 2024, online platforms have, for the first time, overtaken television as the most popular source of news in the United Kingdom. This has been described as a "generational shift" in the way news is consumed. The aim of this research was to identify generational differences in users' information habits, with a focus on distinguishing between traditional and digital media. The main research question was: How do different generations consume news and other informational content, and which platforms do th prefer? A secondary question addressed the impact of education level on media choice. Methodologically, the study applies a quantitative approach, with data collected through an anonymous online survey conducted in Croatia in 2024. on a sample of 116 respondents. Participants were categorized by generation and education level. Descriptive and comparative statistical methods were used to analyze the frequency of consumption of different types of media. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the Media Practice Model, which emphasizes that users actively shape their own media experiences—not only as consumers, but also as producers and interpreters of content. This highlights the importance of understanding media habits within the context of everyday life, identity, and social position. The results revealed a clear generational divide: younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) predominantly use social networks, online portals, and streaming services as their primary sources of information, while older generations still largely rely on television, radio, and print media. A positive correlation was also observed between higher levels of education and more intensive use of digital media. Interpreting the results within the Media Practice Model further reinforces the idea that media habits are closely linked to identity, everyday routines, and access to technology. The findings confirm earlier international observations about the existence of a significant generational gap in news consumption. This study contributes to the understanding of contemporary information practices and the development of media policies aimed at promoting media literacy. The scientific contribution of this work lies in linking generational patterns with a theoretical model that emphasizes user agency, as well as in offering a current insight into media habits in Croatia. The results may be useful to media professionals, educators, public institutions and researchers as a foundation for further studies and content adaptation for modern users.
Keywords: media habits, digital information, generational differences, media literacy, traditional media

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the media system has undergone fundamental changes resulting from the process of digital transformation, the development of the Internet and the ubiquity of mobile technologies. Traditional mass media – television, radio and print – no longer have primacy in the information space, and the role of primary sources of information is increasingly being taken over by new media – digital platforms, social networks and mobile applications. Media consumption has become personalized and independent of time or space, and users no longer consume content passively, but have become active participants in the media environment. (Livingstone, 2004; Castells, 2011). According to a report by the British media regulator Ofcom (2024), online platforms have surpassed television as the main source of news in the United Kingdom for the first time. This change has been labeled a "generational transition" in the way news is consumed, as younger generations almost exclusively use digital sources of information, while older generations remain faithful to traditional media, such as television (Ofcom, 2024). Changes in media habits and information are closely linked to the age of users, which also raises the issue of a generational gap in the way information is accessed. Research shows that age remains one of the strongest predictors of media preference, along with education and digital skills (Newman et al., 2022). Generation Z, as well as the Millennial generation, shows a higher degree of digital literacy. They prefer fast, mobile and visually oriented information via social networks, while older generations are more inclined to traditional sources of information that offer more structured and verified information (Pew Research Center, 2021; Vozab, 2022). The research problem of the paper relates to understanding differences in media habits between generations, with a special emphasis on the choice between traditional and digital sources of information. In a society where the information infrastructure is rapidly changing, it is crucial to identify patterns of media consumption that are appropriate for individual age

groups. In addition to age, the paper also considers the impact of education on preferences for information platforms, given that educational capital is often linked to the ability to critically evaluate content and digital competence (Buckingham, 2015). The aim is to investigate how different generations use media for information purposes and which media formats they prefer. The main research question is: How do different generations consume news and other information content and which platforms do they prefer? The auxiliary question is aimed at examining the impact of education level on the choice of media channels. The relevance of the research is evident in the local and national context, with a special emphasis on the integration of generational analysis and information habits in the media. The results confirm earlier international observations about the existence of a deep generational gap in the way news is consumed, and it contributes to the understanding of contemporary information habits and the development of strategies and policies aimed at media literacy and generational differences, as well as needs.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Traditional media – television, radio and print – have been the main sources of information for decades and have played a key role in shaping public opinion. Their authority rests on professional standards, editorial hierarchy and linear distribution model (McQuail, 2010). On the other hand, digital media, especially social networks, internet portals and video platforms, enable personalized, interactive and decentralized access to information (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008). The transformation of the media system does not affect all generations equally – digital media redefine the relationship of users to content, allowing them to be not only consumers, but also producers and intermediaries of information (Livingstone, 2004). Age is confirmed as a significant determinant of media preferences. While older generations continue to show high levels of trust and loyalty to traditional media (Eurobarometer, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2021), younger generations – especially Millennials and Generation Z – use digital sources, social networks and streaming platforms significantly more (Newman et al., 2022; Vozab, 2022). These differences reflect deeper cultural and educational patterns, as younger generations grow up in an environment where technology and digital interaction are an integral part of everyday life (Buckingham, 2015). Media literacy includes a range of competencies that enable users to critically understand, interpret and responsibly use media content. In the digital environment, media literacy additionally includes the recognition of disinformation, understanding algorithmic logic, privacy protection and awareness of the ethics of online communication of digital citizens. (Livingstone, 2004; Mihailidis, 2018). Differences in the level of media literacy further deepen the generation gap: older people often have a higher level of critical attitude towards content, while younger people are more technologically competent, but more exposed to information saturation and disinformation (Ofcom, 2024). Blumler & Katz (1974) in the Theory of Uses and Gratifications conclude that media users are active participants in the communication process. They choose media based on personal needs, such as information, entertainment, identity, and social interaction. In the digital context, this approach takes on a new dimension. According to Ruggiero (2000), digital media bring interactivity, personalization and flexibility. They enable users to express themselves personally, but also quickly access information and come into contact with others. Whiting and Williams (2013) confirm that younger generations, such as generation Z, most often use social networks precisely because of the possibility of self-expression, information and social connection, which is in accordance with the principles of the theory of uses and gratifications. Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory assumes that behaviors are learned through observation, imitation, and modeling, with the key role played by so-called models – people whose behavior the observer perceives as relevant, desirable, or rewarded. In the traditional context, these were parents, teachers, or peers, but in the digital age, the media is taking over this role. Influencers, YouTubers, and members of online communities are becoming dominant actors in modeling behavior, especially among young people who follow them daily and often perceive them as authentic and close (Mussadiq, 2024). Bandura (1977) emphasizes four key processes in learning through observation: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Today's digital media, especially social networks, intensify these processes. Users focus their attention on content that engages them emotionally, remember behaviors that are rewarded to them (such as likes or comments), reproduce them in their own online environment, and provide additional motivation through community feedback. (Hammer, 2011; Deaton, 2015). Social learning theory explains how patterns of content consumption are formed, as well as dependence on certain social platforms and types of content. When users perceive that a certain type of content brings popularity and social acceptance, they are more inclined to imitate those patterns and adapt their own media practice (Bandura, 1977). In this way, the media are not only used for education, information or entertainment, but become spaces for social learning, identity formation, and the adoption of norms and values.

The Media Practice Model (Livingstone, 2008; Gauntlett, 2007) starts from the assumption that the media are inextricably linked with the identity of users, their everyday life and available technologies. Users do not access media contents passively, but select, interpret and apply them in accordance with their values, social context and goals (Steele & Brown, 1995). This model enables the interpretation of digital participation through the prism of

identity construction, social interaction and media practice. Identity is at the heart of the Media Practice Model. Markus and Nurius (1986) introduce the concept of "possible selves", which helps to understand how individuals use media to experiment with different versions of themselves. Gauntlett (2007) points out that identity is not formed in isolation, but in dialogue with media representations, social expectations and collective norms. Everyday media practice includes continuous selection, interaction and application of content in everyday situations. Steele and Brown (1995) state that young people choose media that resonate with their interests, use them to regulate emotions, connect with others and construct identities. Brown (2006) adds that media play a key role in the formation of moral and social orientations through the repetition of symbolic narratives. In the digital environment, participation takes on new forms. Couldry (2012) and Juppi (2017) point out that users become active participants in media production – by creating videos, commenting, sharing and reinterpreting content – thereby participating in the construction of meaning. Gauntlett (2008) highlights the transformative potential of creative media practices: users not only express identity, but also question social positions, creating new narratives and strengthening a sense of belonging. Creative expressions achieved through social networks allow users to articulate complex identity positions in visual, textual and symbolic form. Livingstone (2008) connects the Media Practice Model with the concept of media literacy, pointing out the need to develop reflexive, ethical and critical competencies for navigating the digital environment. Jenkins et al. (2016) also speak of a "participatory culture" in which users are invited to active, responsible and creative participation, which requires media literacy as a fundamental civic skill. The research conducted in this paper contributes to current scientific discussions on digital information and generational differences in media information by connecting quantitative insights with relevant theoretical frameworks. By applying a combination of several theories - Uses and Gratifications theory, social learning theory, and the Media Practice Model, a multidimensional understanding of the role of users as active participants in the digital media system is enabled. The aforementioned theoretical models emphasize the importance of individual motivation, social learning, and contextual everyday life as key factors that shape information patterns. Recent and current research confirms that digital media do not operate in isolation, but are deeply rooted in identity processes, especially among young users. Bergström et al. (2021) emphasize that digital platforms enable adolescent self-presentation and social interaction, thereby encouraging the development of personal and collective identity. Kožuh et al. (2022) additionally emphasize that identity statuses are expressed through digital practices. Mascheroni & Ólafsson (2021) indicate the importance of education and digital competences in shaping media habits. This confirms the determination that the combination of theoretical frameworks is essential for understanding contemporary patterns of information and for shaping according to generations and attitudes of media policies that must encourage critical reflection, active participation and development of digital competences of all generations.

3. HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
3.1. HYPOTHESES
H1: There is a negative correlation between the age of the respondents and the use of social networks as a source of information. Theoretical link: This hypothesis builds on the Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000), according to which younger users choose digital media for flexibility, social interaction and identity expression. The Media Practice Model (Livingstone, 2008; Gauntlett, 2007) further explains that younger generations use social networks to shape their identity and daily practice, while older people remain more focused on traditional forms of information. **H2: A higher level of education is associated with greater consumption of digital media.** Theoretical link: Education is associated in the literature with a higher level of digital competence and confidence in using online resources (Buckingham, 2015; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2021). Higher educational level enables users to more effectively identify credible sources, be more critical and better navigate the digital information environment, which is confirmed by the high average value of the perception of the importance of media literacy. This connection is also supported by the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), because academically educated individuals find themselves in an environment where digital information is normative and encouraged, which enhances their motivation and behavioral patterns. **H3: There is a statistically significant difference in the frequency of use of certain media among respondents of different ages.** Theoretical link: According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the importance of models and the environment in the adoption of behavioral patterns is emphasized. The Media Practice Model (Livingstone, 2008) explains how media practices are shaped in accordance with personal values and daily routines, which is crucial for understanding different patterns among age groups.

3.2. METHODOLOGY
A total of 116 correctly completed questionnaires were collected. All major age groups were included in the study, to allow for comparisons across generations. The sample structure by age was as follows: 2.6% of respondents were under 18 years of age, 24.1% aged 18–24, 15.5% aged 25–34, 18.1% aged 35–44, 20.7% aged 45–54, and 19.0%

older than 55 years. The gender ratio was not balanced – 30.2% of men and 69.8% of women participated, which can be explained by the data collection method (the survey was distributed online and via social networks, where women proved to be more participatory in responding). The level of education of the respondents was diverse: 34.5% had completed high school, 22.4% were studying undergraduate studies, 37.9% were studying graduate studies, and 5.2% were attending or had completed postgraduate doctoral studies. This variability in education is also relevant for interpreting the results, since education can affect the level of media literacy and information habits. The questionnaire included several sections: (a) General information about the respondent (age group, gender, education); (b) Consumption of traditional media – a series of questions about whether the respondent regularly follows television, printed newspapers and radio (with answer options "yes regularly", "occasionally", "no", etc.); (c) Use of digital media – including questions about which social networks they use regularly (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, etc.), how much time they spend on online portals and social networks per day (intervals: <1h, 1–3h, 4–6h, >6h); (d) motivation for using social networks, (e) Attitudes about the impact of new technologies. The questionnaire was piloted on a smaller number of respondents before implementation to check the clarity of the questions. The collected data were processed using the SPSS method with descriptive analysis for all variables (frequencies, percentages), and the key part of the analysis was cross-tabular analysis and testing of differences between age groups.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on the conducted quantitative research and statistical analysis of the obtained data, all three hypotheses were confirmed. **Hypothesis H1: There is a negative correlation between the age of the respondents and the use of social networks as a source of information.** The obtained results confirm the hypothesis that younger respondents use social networks significantly more often as a primary source of information compared to older age groups. For example, Instagram is regularly used by 92.9% of respondents aged 18–24, while the same channel is used by 45.5% of respondents aged 55+. Similarly, TikTok records a decline in use with increasing age — it is used by 57.1% of young people (18–24), and only 18.2% of older respondents. **Hypothesis H2: A higher level of education is associated with greater consumption of digital media.** Respondents with a higher level of education show a more pronounced tendency to use digital media. The results show that Facebook is regularly used by 100% of respondents with a doctoral degree, 93.2% with a bachelor's degree, while this share decreases among respondents with high school to 72.5%. In contrast, TikTok is most prevalent among those with undergraduate education (46.2%), while it is used by only 16.7% of doctoral students. These data indicate that educated users are more likely to use established platforms and demonstrate greater critical literacy. **Hypothesis H3: There is a statistically significant difference in the frequency of use of certain media among respondents of different ages.** Statistically significant differences (p < 0.05) were observed in the use of different media formats among age groups. For example, regular television watching is most often reported by respondents 45–54 (62.5%) and 55+ (59.1%), while this share is significantly lower among younger groups (e.g. 18–24: 17.9%). On the other hand, younger respondents use TikTok and Instagram significantly more often.

5. DISCUSSION

The obtained results indicate the existence of a generational difference in the consumption of media content and the importance of education as a factor in shaping digital habits. All three hypotheses confirmed theoretical assumptions about differentiated patterns of media participation shaped by both age and level of education. The first hypothesis (H1) showed that younger users prefer social networks as a dominant channel of information, while older generations rely on traditional media, especially television.

Table 1: Comparison according to the age of the respondents

|		Age group						p*
		< 18	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 >	
		N	N	N	N	N	N	
What social networks do you regularly use: Facebook	Yes	1	20	13	21	21	20	0,007*
	No	2	8	5	0	3	2	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	
What social networks do you regularly use: Instagram	Yes	1	26	15	13	9	10	0,000*
	No	2	2	3	8	15	12	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	
What social networks do you regularly use: YouTube	Yes	2	15	10	11	13	10	0,987*
	No	1	13	8	10	11	12	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	
What social networks do you regularly use: TikTok	Yes	1	16	3	3	2	4	0,001*
	No	2	12	15	18	22	18	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	
What social networks do you regularly use: Twitter	Yes	0	2	1	2	1	1	0,964*
	No	3	26	17	19	23	21	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	
What social networks do you regularly use: Other	Yes	1	2	0	2	3	0	0,136*
	No	2	26	18	19	21	22	
	Total	3	28	18	21	24	22	

Source: Author research

This is in agreement with the concept of the Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), according to which users actively choose media in accordance with their needs, but also with the Media Practice Model (Steele & Brown, 1995; Livingstone, 2008), which emphasizes the role of everyday context and identity in content selection. These findings build on reports such as the Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2022) and Pew Research Center (2021) research, which confirm that younger generations are seeking information through personalized, mobile and visually oriented platforms. Hypothesis H2 further emphasized the influence of educational capital on digital consumption. Users with a higher level of education showed a higher frequency of use of established digital media. This is in line with the theses of Castells's network theory of society (2011) and van Dijk's interpretations of digital participation (2020), according to which education mediates access to digital resources and the development of critical digital competences. The third hypothesis (H3) confirmed that there are statistically significant differences in the use of certain media formats across age groups, with television, radio and print media still being more prevalent among older people, while younger generations favor TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. These data complement the theoretical framework of the Media Practice Model and confirm that media preferences develop within generational cultural and technological environments. In addition, statistical analysis showed that the differences are not the result of chance, but reflect systematic changes in the way information is received.

Table 2. Comparison with respect to the level of education of the respondents

		Education level				p*
		High school	Undergraduate study	Graduate study	Doctoral study	
		N	N	N	N	
What social networks do you regularly use: Facebook	Yes	29	20	41	6	
	No	11	6	3	0	**0,041#**
	Total	40	26	44	6	
What social networks do you regularly use: Instagram	Yes	23	21	27	3	
	No	17	5	17	3	0,185#
	Total	40	26	44	6	
What social networks do you regularly use: YouTube	Yes	17	15	26	3	
	No	23	11	18	3	0,459#
	Total	40	26	44	6	
What social networks do you regularly use: TikTok	Yes	9	12	7	1	
	No	31	14	37	5	**0,042#**
	Total	40	26	44	6	
What social networks do you regularly use: Twitter	Yes	0	4	2	1	
	No	40	22	42	5	**0,023#**
	Total	40	26	44	6	

Source: Author research

Figure 1. Graph comparing traditional media by age group
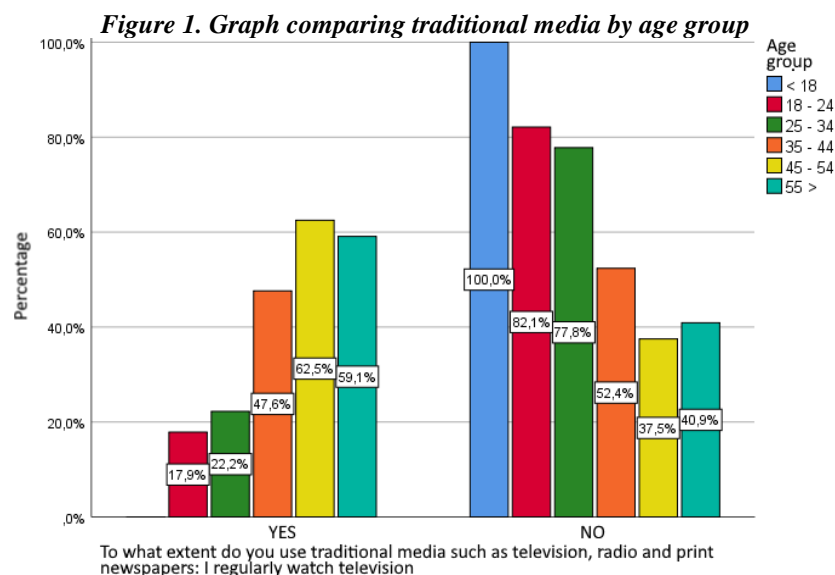
Source: Author research

6. CONCLUSION

This research confirmed that education and generational age have a significant influence on information patterns in the current, digital age. Younger generations, primarily Generation Z, who grow up in a digital media environment and use social networks and interactive digital platforms as their primary source of information. Members of older generations are still most often informed through traditional media. It can also be determined how there are differences in the preference and frequency of using media content according to generations. This is confirmed by hypotheses that build on theoretical models (Uses and Gratifications, Media Practice Model, and Social Learning Theory) proving that there is a need for focused media education towards different generations. Media literacy policies must recognize this generational difference and develop new strategies to encourage critical evaluation of content, responsible use of digital tools, and ultimately advocate for more active participation of all generations in an information society marked by constant change and progress. This also highlights the need for even better inclusion of media literacy programs in the formal education system, as well as the informal education system, with the aim of strengthening digital competences and critical thinking. Cooperation between educational institutions and the media is important in implementing educational campaigns aimed at strengthening digital skills, as well as encouraging responsible participation of all generations in the digital media environment.

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