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## Miscellaneous

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**Submitted**  
October 1, 2024  
**Approved**  
May 13, 2025

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© 2026  
Communication & Society  
ISSN 0214-0039  
E ISSN 2386-7876  
[www.communication-society.com](http://www.communication-society.com)

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2026 – Vol. 39 (1)  
pp. 1-19

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**How to cite this article:**  
González-Pérez, L. A., & Chaparro-Domínguez, M. A. (2026). Generation Z and social media: An analysis of news consumption by Communication students in South Florida (USA). *Communication & Society*, 39 (1), 1-19.  
<https://doi.org/10.15581/003.39.1.001>

## Generation Z and social media: An analysis of news consumption by Communication students in South Florida (USA)

### Abstract

This research examines the news consumption in the context of social network sites by Communication university students in South Florida (United States of America), analyzing their habits, motivations, and perceptions within the context of a rapidly evolving media ecosystem. The research, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, explores how this Generation Z satisfies their informational needs in the digital environment. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines 243 surveys of students, a focus group with nine graduates on Communication, and nine in-depth interviews with legacy media executives. The results reveal that the majority of students prefer to get informed through social network sites, spending several hours a day on these platforms, with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube being the most popular. Paradoxically, although they trust legacy media more and recognize their higher standard of professionalism and ethics compared to other online content, they barely consume them, limiting themselves to incidental or indirect use. Graduates show similar patterns, with predominantly digital consumption, though they demonstrate a more critical attitude toward information on social media. Meanwhile, media professionals acknowledge the technological skills and

digital fluency of Generation Z as valuable assets in modern newsrooms but identify significant deficiencies in traditional journalistic skills, expressing concerns about source verification, depth of research, and the ability to contextualize information. The study concludes that Generation Z is significantly transforming the media landscape, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the journalism industry.

### Keywords

Social media, social network sites, Generation Z, news consumption, legacy media.

## **1. Introduction**

According to the latest Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2024), there is a marked generational gap in the choice of sources and platforms for obtaining news. Since 2013, there has been a growing inclination among the 18–24 age group to turn to social network sites as their main source of information. This sector of the population shows a preference for concise news that is relevant to their individual interests and has a tangible impact on their daily lives. In this scenario, there is no predominant exclusive approach or single path for media to attract younger audiences (Eddy, 2022). As more media and formats compete to capture the time and attention of youth audiences, there is a manifest disinterest and growing distrust in news. A study conducted by Associated Press, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, and the University of Chicago (AP-NORC, 2023) showed that only a quarter of Americans between 16 and 40 years old have a favorable opinion of the press, even though the consumption of informative content remains high.

However, despite the high consumption of content on social network sites and information fatigue, a portion of young people are subscribed to news media. According to the American Press Institute, three out of ten young people between 16 and 24 years old pay or donate money to subscribe to a media outlet (Media Insight Project, 2022). Based on all of the above, and on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study addresses the digital news consumption habits of Communication students in South Florida (United States of America) through a survey. Additionally, it examines whether this informational diet changes when they enter the job market, using a focus group with graduates. Lastly, it analyzes, through in-depth interviews, the perceptions that news media executives have about the online news consumption of Communication students. The combination of these three techniques, quantitative and qualitative, makes it possible to approach the object of study holistically and in-depth.

## **2. Conceptual, theoretical and contextual frameworks**

### *2.1. Conceptual framework: Social network sites and digital natives*

The paradigmatic definition of social network sites, by boyd and Ellison (2007), establishes that they are websites that allow their users to create a public or semi-public profile, have a list of users who are contacts in that digital space, and be able to view the list of connections with other users. They are, therefore, platforms that bring together people who interact with each other and share information and common interests (Morduchowicz et al., 2010). As for the most used in the world, excluding China, they are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X, and Reddit (Dixon, 2024). In the United States of America, the base country for our research, users represent almost 80% of those who use the Internet, and their network preferences reflect global trends. Thus, among the reasons for their use, the main ones are staying in touch with friends and family, killing time, and finding content (We Are Social, 2024).

Young people are one of the groups that use social network sites the most (Newman et al., 2024). Prensky (2001) classifies two categories of digital technology users: digital natives and digital immigrants. The former were born into a completely digital environment. Digital immigrants, on the other hand, have integrated these technologies into their study and work routines, and their social interactions. Cerezo (2016) has developed the concept of “mobile natives”, referring to Generation Z and their extensive use of mobile phones with Internet connection. The smartphone was launched in 2007 and immediately became the most widely spread technology in human history (Alavi & Buttler,

2019), exposing this generation at an early age to the exponential potential of this technology. More recently, Eddy (2023) presents the concepts of “social natives” (those between 18 and 24 years old who grew up in a social and participatory Internet) and “digital natives” (those between 25 and 34 years old, having grown up in the information society, albeit prior to the rise and hegemony of social networks).

Regarding the digital competencies of Generation Z, their limited attention span and concentration have been questioned. Recent studies have shown that the attention span and reading concentration of younger people has been reduced to eight seconds (McSpadden, 2015). As for media access among Generation Z youth, various studies have found that they spend more time on online streaming video services like Netflix or YouTube than watching traditional television (Nielsen, 2023; We Are Social, 2024). In the United States, 61% of their media consumption takes place on streaming websites, while only 34% of young people between 18 and 29 years old watch traditional television (Rainie, 2021). This trend has also led to them being called the “streaming generation” (Sádaba Chalezquer & Pérez-Escoda, 2020).

## **2.2. Uses and Gratifications Theory and social media**

This research takes as its starting point the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which establishes that the audience is active, consciously selecting media to satisfy various psychological and social needs (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). In the 1970s, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) categorized people's needs for media exposure into five classes: cognitive needs, personal integration needs, social integration needs, affective needs, and escapism needs. Almost half a century later, the advent of social network sites required a re-examination of these categories of uses and gratifications in the face of the growth of digital platforms. Whiting and Williams (2013) presented additional gratifications such as expression of opinion, knowledge about others, and convenience as incentives for using social networks sites. These additional gratifications coincide with the behavior of some of the younger generations: millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019).

Various studies have shown that the uses and gratifications of social networks sites vary according to certain psychosocial characteristics of users, such as age, gender, and personality, as well as depending on the characteristics of each social network (Al-Kahlan & Khasawneh, 2024; García-Ruiz, Tirado & Hernando, 2018). In this sense, the UGT helps explain the gratifications that are sought and obtained using social network sites, and that these differ according to individual characteristics (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

Research applying the UGT to the consumption of social network sites and news on the Internet reveals overlapping gratifications, among which entertainment, interpersonal communication, information seeking, learning, surveillance (of close individuals or role models), and socialization stand out (Kong et al., 2021; Tarullo, 2020; Babatunde & Ayanwale, 2023; Alsulaiman, 2022; Samy-Tayie, Tejedor & Pulido, 2023). The motivations of surveillance and socialization are significantly determinant when it comes to reading news, sending activities, and content publishing, while the motivation to obtain social recognition is associated with news publishing activities (Segado-Boj et al., 2020).

## **2.3. State of art and contextual framework**

Several studies have examined the online news consumption of Communication students in Latin American countries and Spain, highlighting a trend towards information overload and oversaturation through the Internet and social network sites (Romero-Rodríguez &

Aguaded, 2016; Giraldo-Luque, Tejedor & Carniel, 2017; García-Ruiz, Tirado & Hernando, 2018). Despite skepticism about the veracity of information on social network sites, students primarily use them for personal communication and maintaining social status, and their consumption leads to a decrease in their interaction with traditional media and a lack of rigor in evaluating information (Gavilán, Martínez Navarro & Fernández Lores, 2017; Soengas Pérez, López-Cepeda & Sixto-García, 2019). Therefore, digital literacy is necessary, meaning that universities should assume a more active role in teaching media competencies to address these issues (Espinár-Ruiz, González-Díaz & Martínez-Gras, 2020; Tejedor et al., 2021).

Regarding the United States, several studies have been conducted on the news consumption of Communication students in the digital context. Kothari and Hickerson (2015) carried out a study on the use of social network sites in journalism students' education, which showed that Twitter was the preferred social network for professors to communicate with their students, while students preferred Facebook for communication and information. Meanwhile, Antunovic, Parsons and Cooke (2018) conducted research focused on the news consumption of communication and journalism students at an American university, which demonstrated a three-stage process in news consumption, including routine searching, incidental consumption, and direct consumption. Furthermore, Ross et al. (2023) analyzed the consumption of political content among communication students via mobile devices and showed how mobile devices are a possible amplifier of confirmation biases. Concerning the news consumption habits on social network sites by university students in the state of Florida, studies are non-existent. Each media outlet conducts its own internal evaluations and studies, generally using traditional audience measurement tools. The Nielsen Company is responsible for measuring audiences for radio and television using data collection with electronic meters known as People Meters (Nielsen, 2020).

Therefore, this study is situated in Florida, which is the third most populous state in the country and stands out for its cultural diversity, in contrast to other states in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). This diversity is represented in its higher education institutions, primarily in South Florida, the area on which our research focuses (State University System of Florida, 2023). In this region, the University of Miami, Florida International University, Nova Southeastern University, and Florida Atlantic University stand out. Given the lack of research focused on this prominent and multicultural region of the United States, this study aims to analyze the consumption of news information in the context of social network sites by Communication university students in South Florida. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ 1. What are the news consumption habits in the context of social network sites among Communication university students in South Florida?
- RQ 2. How do digital news consumption habits evolve when Communication students in South Florida graduate and enter the job market?
- RQ 3. What perception do news media executives in South Florida have about the online news consumption of Communication students?

### **3. Methods<sup>1</sup>**

#### **3.1. Survey of Communication students**

Following the example of recent research on university students and their use of social network sites for news consumption (Alsulaiman, 2022; Pérez-Escoda, 2022), we have selected the survey instrument for the quantitative part of the study. With this tool, we aim to analyze news consumption by Communication university students in South Florida in the context of social network sites. We used a questionnaire of 30 variables, divided into three thematic blocks: demographic information, news consumption and use of social network sites, and perceptions of traditional media versus social network sites. For the demographic section, as well as for some questions about frequency of news consumption, we used items extracted from professional questionnaires on information consumption among young people, from internationally recognized research institutions such as the Pew Research Center and the Reuters Institute (Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Eddy, 2022). The questions related to UGT were based on previous studies (Kong et al., 2021; Tarullo, 2020; Babatunde & Ayanwale, 2023; Alsulaiman, 2022; Samy-Tayie, Tejedor & Pulido, 2023). The rest of the questions were derived from questionnaires used in other studies on social network sites and news consumption of young people in different countries (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021; Gavilán, Martínez Navarro & Fernández Lores, 2017; Pérez-Escoda, 2022; Pertegal, Oliva & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2019; Catalina-García, Sousa & Olivéira, 2019; Espinar-Ruiz, González-Díaz & Martínez-Gras, 2020).

The validity of the instrument was consulted with researchers in the field of study and a pretest was conducted (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2009). After adjusting some variables based on the pretest results, the survey was administered among Communication students at Florida International University (FIU). The FIU School of Communication, located in Miami, has 1,603 undergraduate and graduate students, pursuing degrees in Communication Arts, Mass Communication, Communication Sciences, Journalism, Radio and Television, or Interactive and Multimedia Media. The demographic composition of this public university reflects the demographics of Miami-Dade County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Our non-probabilistic convenience sample, obtained by sending the questionnaire to all enrolled Communication Sciences students at FIU to get the highest number of responses, allowed us to conduct exploratory research. Although not extrapolatable, it does seek a representative approximation of the Generation Z university population in South Florida. The survey, designed using the digital tool Qualtrics, was sent to the 1,603 students in Communication degrees and master's at FIU, through the FIU School of Communication email on October 19, 2023. Two reminders were sent days later. The closing date was December 19, 2023. Finally, 243 people responded to the survey, which represents 15% of the study population, a sufficient figure, similar to that achieved in other research on university students from a single educational center (Herrero Curiel & González Aldea, 2022; Tarullo, 2020).

IBM's SPSS 29 program was used to carry out both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Pearson's chi-square test was performed to observe the existence of any association between the different variables analyzed. Additionally, the reliability

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<sup>1</sup> As this is a research work involving human subjects, before conducting the survey, focus group, and in-depth interviews, authorization was requested from the research ethics committees of the universities where the study authors work: Florida International University and Complutense University of Madrid. Once the two authorizations were received, the survey was initiated, followed by the focus group and in-depth interviews.

index of the instrument was calculated by applying Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.746, a result considered within the acceptable range.

### 3.2. Focus group with Communication graduates

The focus group is a recurring qualitative technique in studies on university students and their news consumption on social network sites (Eger et al., 2020; Giraldo-Luque & Fernández-Rovira, 2020). Nine graduates from the FIU School of Communication participated in this study's focus group. They graduated five years ago, and most are working in media or other companies in the sector (see Table 1). This allows us to understand if the online news consumption habits of graduates have changed since they entered the workforce. For our focus group, we invited 25 FIU alumni via email and the professional social network LinkedIn. Twelve accepted to participate, although in the end, only nine were available on the date and time agreed upon by the majority. The focus group was conducted on November 6, 2023. The session lasted 90 minutes and was conducted using the digital tool Zoom. The session was also recorded and transcribed in Zoom.

**Table 1.** Focus group participants

<b>Names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Highest level of education completed</b>	<b>Current job</b>
Sherrilyn	27 years	Bachelor's degree in Journalism	Radio news producer at WLRN
Grethel	30 years	Master's degree in Mass Communication	Writer in <i>Diario Las Américas</i>
Constanza	30 years	Bachelor's in Journalism	Podcast and audiobooks producer
Ingrid	27 years	Double major in Journalism and Marketing	Marketing specialist at Sentinel publishing company
Andreina	29 years	Master's degree in Mass Communication	Communication consultant
Christian	27 years	Bachelor's in Broadcast Journalism	Marketing Project Manager at Nicklaus Children's Hospital Foundation
Vicky	26 years	Master's degree in Global Strategic Communications	Social media manager at Univision and podcast producer
Leo	27 years	Bachelor's in Journalism	Chief of Staff for a City Manager in Miami
Sylvia	29 years	Master's in Marketing	Creative Director for a beauty company

Source: own elaboration.

The group discussion was moderated by one of the research authors. Warm-up questions were implemented at the beginning to break the ice and establish a cordial and participative environment. Then, based on the results observed in the survey, the following major topics were addressed: news consumption habits, reasons for consuming information on social network sites, the role legacy news media play in the general diet of information, and information consumption habits when entering the job market. All participants verbally consented to both participate and be recorded, and to use their real names in publications derived from the research.

### 3.3. In-depth interviews with media executives

To complete the perspective on social media news consumption by Communication university students in South Florida, we conducted in-depth interviews with executives from legacy media outlets in South Florida. Several researchers have used this qualitative technique to address studies on news consumption among university students on social network sites (Yanardağoğlu, 2021; Dennen & He, 2024; Lan & Tung, 2024). Our goal through the interviews was to obtain from journalism professionals their vision of Generation Z, both as an audience and as future employees of media outlets.

We interviewed nine executives from legacy media outlets in South Florida: three from radio, three from television, and three from newspapers. Thirty-six professionals were invited, and ultimately, the first nine who were available were interviewed. The interviewees have at least 10 years of experience as staff supervisors in their respective newsrooms. Five women and four men were interviewed (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Media executives interviewed

<b>Professional</b>	<b>Position and media outlet where they work</b>
Miguelangel López	News Vice-president at Telemundo
Sergio Bustos	News Vice-president at WLRN radio
Caitie Muñoz	News Director at WLRN radio
Bonnie Laden	Executive producer at CBS Miami
Dana Banker	Chief Editor at <i>The Miami Herald</i>
David Schutz	Deputy Editor at the <i>Sun Sentinel</i>
Emily Cárdenas	Executive Editor at the <i>Miami Times</i>
Erika Draper	News Executive Producer at NBC Miami
Iscar Blanco	Radio and TV Marketing Director at Voice of America

Source: own elaboration.

The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom, depending on the interviewee's preference. Each interview lasted between 25 and 45 minutes and was conducted between April 16 and May 31, 2024. The interviews were based on a script of twelve questions grouped into two main thematic blocks: Generation Z's news consumption and Generation Z as journalists in newsrooms.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. News consumption of students in the context of social network sites (RQ1)

A total of 243 students from the FIU School of Communication participated in the survey. Regarding gender, 68.9% identified as female, 28.9% as male, 1.7% as non-binary, and 0.4% as other. The majority age of respondents ranged between 18 and 24 years, comprising 85% of participants. Concerning their ethnicity, the students largely reflected the racial composition of South Florida. 69% of students identified as Hispanic/Latino, while only 14% responded as non-Hispanic white. Black students make up 11% of the sample, while Asians reached 3% of participants. The remaining 3% identified as others. The presence of digital journalism students dominates the survey results, with more than half pursuing studies in Digital Journalism, Interactive Media, and Multimedia Production (61%), followed by Communication Arts students (19%).

#### 4.1.1. News consumption habits on social network sites

The survey results show a high preference among students for social network sites over legacy media for news consumption, as two-thirds of respondents indicated that they get their news through social network sites “always” or “almost always”. If we add those who answered “half the time”, the figure rises to 88% (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Chosen medium for news consumption and frequency of use

<b>Where I get my information</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Half the time</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always</b>
I get my news from the radio	48.9%	38.9%	6.1%	4.3%	1.7%
I get my news from television	12.8%	42.6%	23.0%	13.5%	8.7%
I read newspapers to get informed	63.6%	23.8%	6.9%	4.8%	0.9%
I use search engines to find news (Google, Google News, Bing, DuckDuckGo, etc.)	3.5%	24.1%	17.2%	36.6%	18.5%
I seek information from online news media or their apps	10.8%	21.7%	15.6%	29.4%	22.5%
I get my news through social network sites	1.7%	9.1%	20.4%	32.5%	36.4%
I get my news through podcasts	32.9%	35.5%	15.2%	9.5%	6.9%

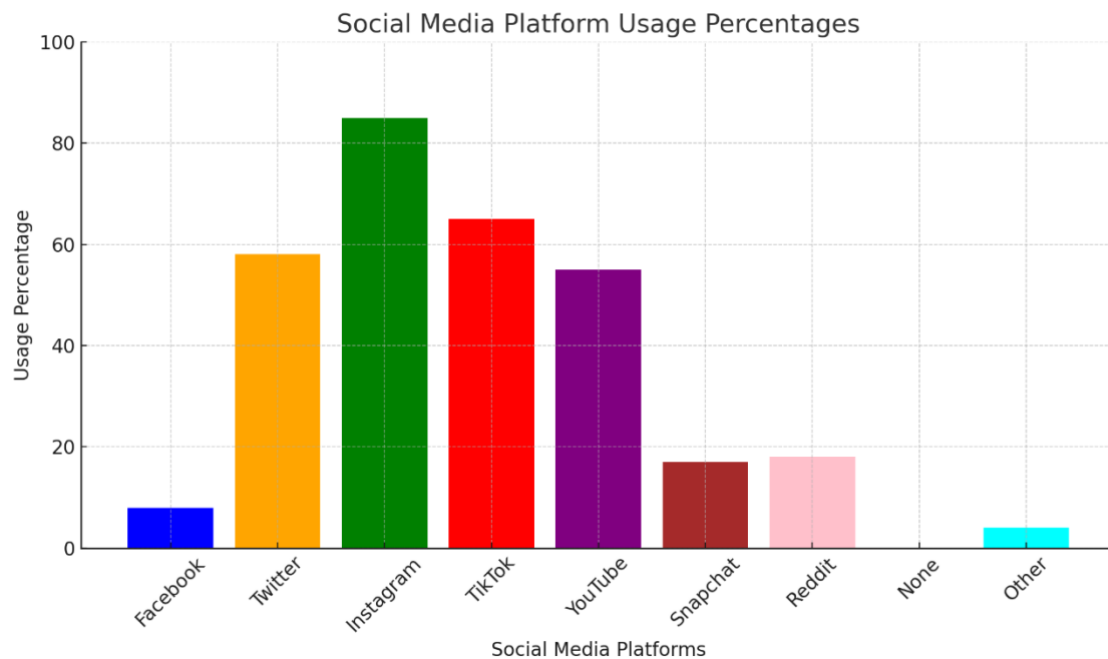
Source: own elaboration.

When inquiring about the frequency of social network sites use, almost three out of four students show high consumption, as they are connected to them between 2 and 6 hours daily. 41% reported being connected between 2 and 4 hours, followed by 32% indicating they are connected between 4 and 6 hours a day. On the other hand, among those who use social network sites as their sources of information, more than 9 out of 10 acknowledge using them to stay updated between 1 hour daily and constantly. Of the total hours connected to social network sites, almost half of the participants indicated dedicating between 1 and 2 hours to searching for current information on them. When we cross-reference the frequency with which surveyed students get informed on social network sites with the time they spend on them, we find a directly proportional relationship: the more total time on social network sites, the more time spent consuming news within that total.

After applying the chi-square test, it is observed that the frequency of social network sites use conditions the time spent getting informed on them. With an estimation error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, the p-value = 0.01, according to which the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between the frequency of social network sites use and the time spent getting informed on them.

Participants showed a preference for certain social network sites to stay informed about current events and news (see Figure 1). Instagram turned out to be the preferred one, followed by TikTok, X, and YouTube, with these four platforms representing 85% of the preferred networks for news consumption.

**Figure 1.** Which social network site keeps you informed about current events?



Source: own elaboration.

Regarding whether the consumption of news content on social network sites is premeditated or incidental, only 5.5% of participants responded that they do it in a premeditated manner, while more than a third of respondents (37.2%) indicated that they come across news content incidentally. Slightly more than half of the respondents (57.2%) stated that they consume news content on social network sites in both ways.

#### 4.1.2. Motivations for news consumption on social network sites

Based on the UGT, respondents were asked about their main motivations for connecting to social network sites: information, entertainment, socialization, surveillance, and leisure. The results reveal that social connection is the most prominent factor, with 83% of respondents indicating that they use these platforms to socialize. Very close to this motivation are the desire for entertainment, with 81%, and the search for information, with 78% of respondents stating that they use social network sites to stay informed. 68% of participants turn to social network sites as a method to kill time during waiting periods. Lastly, 60% of respondents use social network sites for surveillance motivation, that is, to keep track of the activities of friends and influencers<sup>2</sup>.

When asked about their reasons for preferring social network sites over legacy media, respondents prioritized social network sites for their immediacy, with 6 out of 10 respondents being “in agreement” (39.9%) or “totally in agreement” (21.2%) with this reason. Another aspect of preference for social network sites is that this group perceives them as an alternative that offers a variety of perspectives when compared to legacy media. For this question, 6 out of 10 respondents answered that they “agree” or “completely agree”. On the other hand, 31% of Communication students “agree” with the belief that social network sites are a reliable source of news content. The group that

<sup>2</sup> The sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because participants could select multiple options, indicating that most people have more than one motivation for using social network sites.

answered “neutral” turned out to be the majority with 39% of the responses, while only 6% of Communication students fully trust the news content on social network sites.

Another aspect addressed regarding the motivations of Communication university students in South Florida is their level of trust in the content shared by their friends and contacts on social network sites. 42.2% declared themselves “neutral” on this matter, while only 3 out of 10 said they “agree” or “totally agree”. After applying the chi-square test, we observed a significant association between trust in content shared by friends and contacts versus gender. With an estimation error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, the p-value = (0.042), according to which the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that gender conditions the trust in current events content shared by friends and other contacts.

We also asked Communication students about their perception of social network sites and misinformation. We found that most respondents (76.5%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that social network sites are more prone to spreading fake news or misinformation than traditional media. In this regard, a portion of the respondents (39.7%) indicated that they always verify the truthfulness of the news they find on social network sites. This is the most common response category. The second most common response category is “almost always”, with 34.9%.

#### 4.1.3. The role of news media and their perception

The survey results reveal limited use of legacy media as a source of information: radio and newspapers are used by 1% of respondents daily. Television shows a slight advantage, but only 8.7% of university students consume it daily for news. This contrasts with the daily consumption of current affairs content on social network sites, which reaches 36.4% of this population. Twice as many respondents “always” prefer to seek information on news media websites or apps compared to watching television, listening to the radio, and reading newspapers.

When we asked about respondents' trust in legacy media for consuming current affairs content, we observed that 44.9% trust them. The “agree” category leads the responses with 39.9%, followed by 33.3% of responses in the “neutral” category. We verified that there is a relevant association between trust in news content from legacy media and gender when performing the chi-square test. With an estimation error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%, the p-value = (0.03), according to which the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a statistically significant association between the gender of Communication students and trust in current affairs content from legacy media.

Additionally, university students were asked if legacy media are a reliable source of current affairs content. 57.2% said they “agree” or “strongly agree”, while only 10% said they “disagree” or “strongly disagree”. They were also asked if they consider legacy media to have a higher standard of professionalism and journalistic ethics than social network sites. 70% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this statement.

#### 4.2. Evolution of digital news consumption after graduation (RQ2)

The focus group with nine graduates from the FIU School of Communication revealed that, after graduation, news content consumption habits were characterized by the predominant use of social network sites, with limited use of legacy media, even when they work in them:

You give me more social networks and I'll simply consume more. As if I don't even check my screen time. It's disgusting. When I'm at work, obviously it's for work reasons. [...] But yes, I can't say it has changed because I've always really liked being on social networks (Vicky).

The only reason I listened to the radio last week was because we had a radiothon and we partnered with iHeart Media. That's it. [...] [My media diet] is super unhealthy, 100% digital. There's no balance here (Christian).

I listen to the radio. I listen to only one station. And on that station, they have a partnership with BBC News. So, they play BBC news every hour on the hour. Those are the only radio news I receive (Leo).

From the participants' perceptions, it can be observed how the consumption habits of the graduates are related to their main professional functions.

I downloaded TikTok after graduating, but I mainly use TikTok to look for sources or stories because I'm [a] audio [producer] (Constanza).

I have to look for information mostly on X when I'm working, for example, to post some news from AP or Europa Press. And I have to put more information in my video or post. And I used to find that on X, which was Twitter, and I spend a lot of time there (Grethel).

The reasons for content consumption on social network sites are associated with news consumption trends, on one hand, and with the need to stay up to date with the content involved in such trends:

It's crazy how everyone, like Instagram now, is turning into Threads and I like it. It's interesting how all these different social media platforms are expanding. And so, I guess I'm trying to keep up with consumer demand (Ingrid).

The graduates reported a diversification in their information sources, including a higher consumption of legacy media than during their time as university students. They all agreed on the fact that there is a high level of trust towards them regarding their content. In fact, six of the graduates admitted to being subscribed to the digital version of *The New York Times* newspaper.

I currently pay for access to reliable information outside of my work. I'm subscribed to The New York Times and The Washington Post. I'm considering subscribing to The Wall Street Journal (Ingrid).

I trust. Yes. [...] Miami Herald, Sun-Sentinel, New York Times [...]. Whenever something happens at work, local government, local reports [I consult them]. I also watch C-SPAN. I'm the only person I know who watches C-SPAN (Leo).

Participants discussed their fact-checking habits for both legacy media and digital platforms, as well as their circles of trust, with the latter being the least trusted:

I trust much less if the content is from close friends/family than if it comes from an official account... And by official, I mean news, journalist, expert, etc." (Andreina).

Finally, we detected that news consumption habits, and work-related practices associated with social network sites often lead to excesses that are difficult to control, as it would imply complete availability of the user:

I have my phone on and I can't, I just can't leave it there. I have to open X and check what's happening. Hamas, Israel, and it's constantly like a constant, constant noise that surrounds us as part of the job. You know, where the news doesn't stop. And sometimes I have to get up and say: 'Okay, I stop here, I'm done, I need to relax'. But it's a bit difficult for me (Grethel).

### 4.3. Perceptions of media executives (RQ3)

#### 4.3.1. Generation Z as an audience

Nine executives from different media outlets in South Florida were asked about their perception of Generation Z's relationship with legacy media. The majority pointed out that, although young people recognize that they can be "more professional" than social network sites, they do not consume them at all:

It's very common that when we're in an interview with an intern candidate, we say: 'Have you recently listened to...?' They haven't. They won't have listened to WLRN at all. And none of our shows, special programs, newscasts, etc. They are not listening. I almost wonder if they like the idea of working for traditional media. [...] They understand that traditional media have a higher level of professionalism and ethics, but they don't consume them (Caitie Muñoz, WLRN).

In line with the above, the survey in this research showed that half of the students trust the content generated by legacy media and 7 out of 10 believe they have a higher standard of professionalism and ethics, but only 1% get their news from newspapers or radio. Therefore, interviewees were asked how they make sense of this paradoxical situation. According to the interviewees, the form and devices for accessing information have changed because the modality of legacy media does not fit into the daily routine of digital natives.

It's because they were raised in this technological environment. They were raised in an era where it's not necessary to watch or consume any live entertainment. You could record it, you could rewind, you could pause, you could get up. Therefore, they don't have the patience to sit down and consume anything of any size (Emily Cárdenas, *Miami Times*).

In this sense, one of the interviewees maintains that the dichotomy occurs in young people because they distrust media "brands", but then discover that there is a reality that goes beyond what is shown on social network sites:

They say: 'I don't believe in CNN, I don't believe in the BBC, I don't believe in VOA, I don't believe in brands'. That's why they look for information without seeing the brand, although they end up going to see the brand afterwards. Once they have the information, they corroborate it with the brand (Iscar Blanco, Voice of America).

Given this apathy of Generation Z towards traditional media, executives were asked if the media they work for are using strategies to reach this elusive audience. In summary, the interviewees pointed out that the characteristics of this generation, influenced by the culture of fast consumption and immediacy, raise the need for the practice of a new journalism more connected with these new audiences, but without losing the quality of information.

We're trying to do what everyone does. SEO [Search Engine Optimization], you try to put headlines that attract [...]. We try to use all those methods, strategies [...]. And we've also used newsletters a lot [...] and we've sent News Alerts, but we don't want to bombard them with emails. But when we have a well-written and very important article, we send it by email and that does attract (Sergio Bustos, WLRN).

#### 4.3.2. Generation Z as journalists

For all interviewees, the technological skills of Generation Z bring a new way of working with the content produced by the media, which can be considered competitive advantages. In general terms, the professionals interviewed highlight their skills in managing social

network sites, which allows for a greater presence of media on various platforms, in line with current trends.

All of this generation are social media genius kids, they love making TikTok [...]. I think they are definitely more aware of and connected to the social space, and how people read the news (Dana Banker, *The Miami Herald*).

Other interviewees highlighted that these skills brought by Generation Z allow them to better reach new audiences because they understand these new communicational and informational codes in a native way:

Basically, everyone has moved to social media. [...] And what happens? It's that this generation has the ability to engage with those audiences and those things when it comes down to it [...]. That this generation is disconnected from the news, I don't think that's correct. They are using other types of resources to educate themselves on the same news (Miguelangel López, Telemundo).

In other cases, the responses emphasized the technological skills that allow them not only to search for information faster but also to produce it in new formats:

They don't need to use our expensive camera equipment or editing equipment to produce a story. They know how to record and edit a story using their smartphones. They also know how to find story ideas on multiple news platforms like Apple News (Erika Draper, NBC Miami).

Despite their strengths, professionals identified that Generation Z lacks certain skills and knowledge considered essential for journalism. There is a perceived lack of depth in research, driven by the immediacy of information provided by the Internet and social network sites, which limits their ability to analyze large amounts of data, provide context, interview multiple sources, and thoroughly fact-check.

And I also think they lack the judgment to see through the trees. [...] If the mayor says he's reduced crime by 74%, they put that in the story. And I say: 'Wait, did we check that? Did we check the statistics?' [...] They're very, I don't want to say gullible because I think that's too dramatic, but they're happy to trust people's word without looking beyond that (Caitie Muñoz, WLRN).

Another recurring response in the interviews was that, although they recognize young people's skills in handling digital formats, they often find it difficult to adapt them to the particular environments and demands of professional journalism. This deficiency is compounded by a lack of in-depth reading, which impacts skills in formal writing and journalistic style.

Read the Associated Press every day. Read it for the information, but also read it for the structure. How do they form an article? How do they start it? What quotes do they use? What background do they provide? [...] And that's where I think again, they bring social media, they know that, but it also gives them trouble in how to tell a story, because in the end we are storytellers, as I tell them. And they don't know how to tell a story because I don't think they read enough good literature and good newspapers (Sergio Bustos, WLNRR).

According to the results of this research's survey, 6 out of 10 Communication students get their news from social network sites instead of legacy media. Based on these data, we investigated how this situation affects their performance in the newsroom and what strategies they are using to close this gap between the consumption and production of news content.

[I ask them] To consume what they're going to do. Because you can't do something that you don't consume [...]. When I start asking them: what was in yesterday's newscast in the third segment? Newscast. Hello, Newscast. Social Media? No, no, no. The thing is, you're going to go work at a television channel, a legacy medium, because, whether we like it or not, the business that still generates money and provides jobs is the legacy medium. (Miguelangel López, Telemundo).

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

This study has provided a comprehensive view of news consumption on social network sites among Communication university students in South Florida, a region of great economic and demographic importance in the United States not addressed in previous studies, shedding light on their habits, motivations, and perceptions in a rapidly evolving media ecosystem. The findings reveal a generation that is significantly transforming the media landscape, posing both challenges and opportunities for the journalism industry, with a high use of social networks as a source of information and entertainment during their university years, which contrasts with a more professional consumption when they enter the labor market. In the media, managers value young people's digital skills but warn of their lack of critical consumption in a global context of disinformation.

The survey results show a clear preference among Communication students for social network sites for information consumption, in line with other studies (Newman et al., 2024; Catalina-García, Sousa & Olivéira, 2019; Alsulaimán, 2022). In contrast, the use of legacy media is notably limited (RQ1). The preference for platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube for news consumption suggests that Communication students are seeking not only information but also a news consumption experience that is more interactive and visually appealing.

Regarding the UGT, the survey results show that the main motivations are socialization, entertainment, and information, in line with other studies (Pertegal, Oliva & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, 2019; García-Ruiz, Tirado & Hernando, 2018). These findings demonstrate how social network sites are satisfying a variety of needs for Communication students, beyond mere information seeking. The combination of socialization, entertainment, and information offered by social network sites seems to be particularly attractive to this generation. This poses significant challenges for legacy media in terms of how they can compete for the attention of this elusive audience.

On the other hand, an apparent contradiction was observed: although only 37% of respondents consider social network sites to be a reliable source of current content, the vast majority use them as their main source of information. This paradox, confirmed by Tejedor et al. (2021), reflects the complexity of young people's relationship with social network sites and legacy media. It could indicate that, despite being aware of the limitations of social network sites in terms of reliability, students prefer them for other gratifications they offer. More than a third of respondents said that their information consumption on social networks is incidental, which raises the question of whether these digital platforms really function as information spaces, given the ephemeral nature of attention to their content.

However, despite their low consumption, legacy media still maintain a significant level of trust. This contradiction between consumption and trust has been observed in other studies (Sobral & Nina de Moraes, 2020; Elvestad & Phillips, 2018). It could be interpreted that students recognize the value and quality of legacy journalism but find that social network sites better meet their daily information needs, whether due to

convenience, immediacy, or the integration of news with other social and entertainment activities.

Regarding the news consumption habits of Communication students after graduating and entering the job market, the analysis of the focus group with graduates revealed an evolution in them (RQ2). Although consumption continues to be predominantly on social network sites, an adaptation of media consumption practices to professional demands is observed. Thus, a more strategic and focused use of social networks sites for professional purposes was evidenced, as well as a greater tendency to verify their contents, in line with what was pointed out by Giraldo-Luque and Fernández Rovira (2020). Graduates also reported a diversification in their information sources, including increased consumption of traditional media. This trend is consistent with what was reported by the American Press Institute, which found that three out of ten young people in this generation pay or donate money to subscribe to a news outlet (Media Insight Project, 2022).

Interviews with media executives revealed a mix of concern and optimism regarding Generation Z's news consumption (RQ3). They see its potential to transform and revitalize journalism, but also express the need to ensure that the fundamentals of good journalism are not lost in the process. On one hand, in line with other studies (Soengas Pérez, López-Cepeda & Sixto-García, 2019), professionals expressed concern about young people's tendency to rely primarily on social network sites for news, which could lead to greater vulnerability to misinformation. These concerns are reflected in the findings of Tejedor et al. (2021), who observed that Communication students do not trust their ability to distinguish between true and false information. The interviewees also identified significant deficiencies in traditional journalistic skills, such as source verification and the ability to contextualize information. However, professionals also recognized Generation Z's technological skills and digital fluency as valuable assets, an opinion that coincides with what was observed by Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira Rey and Sixto García (2022). However, this technical expertise does not mean that young people also have deep digital skills such as critical analysis (Vissenberg et al., 2023). Professionals interviewed also highlighted Generation Z's ability to connect with younger audiences through digital platforms.

Regarding the study's limitations, its sample was limited to Communication students from a specific university in South Florida. Although this provided a deep insight into this group in this strategic region of the United States, not addressed in previous studies, it prevents the generalization of results. Future studies could benefit from a broader and more diverse sample that includes students from different regions and fields of study. The self-reported nature of the survey data also presents limitations. Participants' responses may be subject to social desirability biases or inaccuracies in self-assessment of their media consumption habits. Future studies could consider incorporating methods of tracking actual media consumption behavior to complement self-reported data. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable information about the news consumption habits of Communication students in South Florida and the perceptions of media professionals and graduates. These results can serve as a basis for future research and help media outlets and educational institutions, in that region and in the United States in general, to develop strategies that better adapt to the needs and preferences of the elusive Generation Z. Universities could develop training workshops on fact-checking content published on social networks to develop students' critical thinking skills. For their part, media outlets could include Gen Z journalists in all of their departments, which would

help them connect with younger audiences who do not currently consume their information.

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