Influence of Public Service Media Consumption on Citizens' Perceptions of the Need for Public Media: The Moderating Role of Political Ideology

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Public service media (PSM) are under constant pressure to prove their public value and cultural impact. Ultimately, beyond theoretical arguments and regulatory actions, citizens' perceptions and evaluations of PSM stand at the center of its legitimacy. Drawing on representative survey data from Spain ($N = 1,717$), this study examines the role of PSM consumption and ideology in predicting citizens' attitudes toward the need for PSM. In line with previous literature, our results suggest a positive association between the consumption of PSM channels and citizens' perceptions of its necessity. Regarding ideology, individuals who place themselves further to the left in the political spectrum tend to perceive a stronger need for PSM, particularly at lower consumption levels. Overall, findings highlight that consumption, reach, and appeal still matter and that ideology plays a critical role in energizing the perception of the need for PSM.

Keywords: public service media, media consumption, political ideology, need for public media, media perceptions

The idea of broadcasting as a public service was conceived when the scarcity of spectrum defined the media landscape and under the shared truth that well-informed citizens would make free and rational choices to sustain democracy and maintain the well-being of their communities (Scannell, 2005). These two elements (scarcity and informed citizenship) were at the center of the arguments for creating and sustaining public service broadcasting (PSB; Donders, 2021; Hoffmann-Riem, 1996). Since then, Hertzian paucity has given way to digital overabundance and a multiplatform, globalized media environment that challenges yet another critical element of PSB: its national footprint (Horowitz, 2015).

These changes have prompted the eventful transformation of PSB into PSM (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007; Donders, Pauwels, & Loisen, 2012) and ignited a long-lasting, ongoing debate around their value and need in a high-choice media environment (Cushion, 2012, 2019). Allegations against the expansion and legitimacy of PSM are both market driven (e.g., Armstrong & Weeds, 2007; Elstein, Cox, Donoghue, Graham, & Metzger, 2004) and political in nature, representing what Cushion (2019) calls an "ideological resistance to public media" (p. 70). Extant literature has responded (e.g., Barnett, 2004; Garnham, 1990; Jakubowicz, 2007; Price & Raboy, 2003), proposing a social-responsibility, citizen-centered perspective to discuss the value and need for PSM (Donders, 2021). This brings a "novel emphasis on the importance of

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the general public as the new target of accountability" (Just, 2020, p. 3) and the understanding that PSM's legitimacy ultimately lies in citizens' perceptions of its need and belief that they are delivering "good for society" (Donders, 2021, p. 54).

It is worth noting that not all countries, even within Europe, have followed a similar path regarding the evolution of PSM. The arguments for and against their need and relevance resonate differently in contexts with strong independent public media than in some Southern or Central Eastern European countries with a communist or dictatorial past that have faced the challenge of transforming state broadcasters into public service media (PSM) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Terzis, 2008). This is the case in Spain. Despite almost 50 years of democratic rule, the Spanish PSM have not yet achieved complete institutional stability or "insulation from government" (Schulz, Levy, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 9).

To address its stakeholders' demands, and as Martin and Lowe (2014) pointed out, "one of PSM's ongoing strategic challenges is developing capacity and competence to capture, interpret, and respond to the diversity of expectations for its service" (pp. 32–33). Responding to these expectations ultimately requires actively listening to citizens' attitudes, perceptions, and evaluations of PSM and researching how these are shaped. However, thus far, limited independent empirical research has advanced on the matter by capturing the citizens' perspective, particularly their perception of the need for PSM (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Maurer, 2017; Sehl, 2020).

Our study taps into data from a national survey representative of the Spanish population ($N =$ 1,770) to examine the influence of citizens' ideologies and the consumption of PSM on their perceptions of its need. Our model first shows a direct positive association between public service media consumption and their perception of it as necessary, thus supporting the predictive value that PSM consumption yields in public service media evaluations. The regression also reveals a direct influence of citizens' ideology on their perceptions of the need for PSM, showing that left-wing partisans are more prone to perceive PSM as necessary. Finally, moving forward with our theoretical understanding of citizens' perceptions of PSM, the analysis explored the moderating role of ideology in the association between PSM consumption and public media needs. Results show that, though the perception of the need for PSM grows with consumption, for both left- and right-wing partisans, this relation is stronger for those on the left, especially at lower consumption levels. The findings reaffirm consumption as a crucial indicator of PSM performance and identify ideology as a strong predictor of citizens' perceptions of its social value. This reminds us that PSM's mission and values in Western, mainly European, countries are only understood in connection to specific ideas and ideals on the functioning of society and the role informed citizens and public institutions play in it.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Public Service Media Consumption and Need for Public Media

The way we engage with media has been transformed and continues to evolve. Digitalization, mobility, platformization, and ultra-connectivity have made the 'anything, anywhere, anytime' mantra an everyday reality (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). In Mark Deuze's (2011) words, "we live in

media, rather than with media" (p. 143). This immersion has changed consumption patterns, opened new ways to connect with audiences, and given citizens tools to make their voices heard. Public broadcasters have struggled to keep up with the changes, moving beyond linear programming and reorganizing themselves both practically and conceptually as PSM (Cola & Prario, 2012). Once the driving force and central element of the European media landscape, PSM are now constantly searching for new ways to stay relevant to their audiences and in the face of other social, political, and institutional stakeholders that ultimately define their financing and functioning (Donders, 2021).

The decline in traditional consumption and the regulatory and practical roadblocks in the transition from PSB to PSM have been extensively documented and discussed (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007; Gulyás & Hammer, 2014; Helberger, 2015; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015). TVE, Spain's national public television, has seen a steep decline in the number of its audiences. According to the audience research company Barlovento (2021), its primary channel, La 1, reached its lowest annual share (8.8%) in 2021, and its newscasts ranked behind those of the two leading private networks, Antena 3 and Telecinco. In today's multiplatform, search engine-controlled environment, a more robust digital strategy in terms of both content and connection to audience cannot by itself counter the fall in linear access and guarantee PSM distribution, discoverability, and ultimately, reach and diversity at the consumption end (Tambini, 2015). These transformations have affected the bond citizens once had with their PSM (Donders, 2021), especially among younger generations with no personal reference to the centrality they once enjoyed (Costa-Sánchez, Mazza, & Frazão-Nogueira, 2021; Goyanes, Costa-Sánchez, & Demeter, 2021a; Schulz et al., 2019).

Following the quick changes in consumption patterns, it has been discussed whether reach, frequency, and consumption levels are still the most relevant measures to assess PSM performance, arguing that a citizen-centered approach to PSM must see beyond reach and delve into other measures (Hoffmann, Lutz, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2015; Picone & Donders, 2020). While parameters such as trust, diversity, and distinctiveness gain relevance in a high-choice media environment, consumption is still crucial. Universalism implies both reach and appeal (Lowe & Savage, 2020), and to fulfill its remit, PSM must consistently connect with citizens (Donders, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Social engagement, understood as the multiple ways in which public media is and can be present in citizens' daily lives, is a prerequisite for PSM being perceived as necessary at an individual level and essential to avoiding its marginalization in a multiplatform environment (van Es & Poell, 2020). Today, this can entail going beyond the linear and digital distribution of news and entertainment and providing citizens with vital services, such as fact-checking, personalization, or attention-preserving tools (Reviglio, 2019; van Es & Poell, 2020). However, as PSM overcomes regulatory and practical issues to grow in this direction and develop new points of contact with citizens, consumption remains critical, as extant literature suggests that consumption, particularly of traditional media, is positively related to media perceptions, evaluations, and trust (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Mothes, 2017; Tsfati & Peri, 2006; Vos, Eichholz, & Karaliova, 2019). Moreover, Annika Sehl's comparative study of German, French, and UK citizens' perceptions of PSM shows that, in all three countries, PSM news consumption is the main predictor of citizens' perception of its quality (Sehl, 2020).

As a societal project, PSM is about citizens' needs and not consumer preferences (Garnham, 2000); this poses a balancing act between being appealing enough to guarantee consumption and reach while covering other needs, even if they drive audiences away. This tension between individual and societal needs and wants is at the core of PSM management and the construction of citizens' perceptions of PSM's value (Hartmann, 2008). As presented by Cañedo, Rodríguez-Castro, & López-Cepeda (2022), PSM's public value must be thought of through the lens of social utility, considering it is called to guarantee universal access to unbiased information, ensure a national public conversation, and promote a shared identity while providing content and coverage to those underrepresented or uninteresting for commercial media. Hence, since PSM's mission exceeds the personal sphere, citizens' perception of PSM as necessary for societal well-being must be considered a key indicator of its perceived value and performance. Therefore, if the perception of PSM as valuable and essential for society is a critical element for its assessment, considering the previous findings that support the positive association between media consumption and performance evaluation (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Sehl, 2020), it stands to reason that:

H1:   *Consumption of public service media channels is positively associated with citizens' attitudes toward the need for public media in society.*

Political Ideology and Need for Public Media

Media, defined as a public service that provides universal access to independent information and quality entertainment, as well as the institutions created to render and guarantee access to such services, are essentially ideational constructions that reflect the normative role of media and informed citizenship in representative democracies (Holland, 2003). However, even within Europe, the question of why we need PSM and the scope of their remit have different answers rooted in history, market conditions, prevailing socio-political views, and the institutional framework that regulates and sustains PSM (Hanretty, 2011). Once, PSM was very much a given within European liberal democracies and was accepted along party lines. Today, however, the need for PSM is questioned because of the impact of emerging technologies and the shift in the political mainstream (Donders, 2021). The 1980s widespread debate around the state's role in the economy and functioning of society has impacted the understanding and handling of government in mediation, challenging the position of public institutions as central players in the media system (Martin & Lowe, 2014).

Hence, the first big ideological divide regarding how to approach PSM in a digitized environment boils down to the core of the traditional left-right ideological cleavage: the extent and nature of the government's intervention and use of public funds (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015). A liberal, market-driven perspective will support the need for informed citizenship but will allow for public intervention only subject to failures in the market (Sehl, Fletcher, & Picard, 2020a). Views on the left of the political spectrum that advocate for robust public services will not trust commercial media to satisfy citizens' informational and communication rights and will support public-funded media, regardless of the evolution of the private sector (Donders, 2021). Previous research supports this, suggesting that commercial media tends to align with center-to-center-right political parties that advocate for financial and expansion constraints for PSM (Van den Bulck, 2008). Furthermore, in their analysis of the negotiations that led to the 2012–2016 management contract for VTR, Van den Bulck and Donders

(2014) highlighted how the different advocacy groups' arguments were based on "well-entrenched" opinions regarding PSB and responded to different economic logics that could be associated with a market-driven versus a social-responsibility approach to PSM (p. 96). In this direction, a recent comparative study concluded that considering left- and right-leaning groups (leaving out the center) in seven out of the eight countries surveyed, including Spain, PSM are trusted more by the left-leaning audience segments compared with the right-leaning segments (Schulz et al., 2019).

Besides the traditional opposing ideological views of PSM, we must also consider the growing populist contestation rooted first in the pretense that communication between the leaders and the people needs no mediation and the framing of PSM—and media in general—as biased and alien from the people's real needs and views. With the extreme right, this bias is presented as favorable towards the leftist elites, immigrants, minorities, and the "true nationals" (Sehl, Simon, & Schroeder, 2020b). Populist voices appeal to polarization, deny diversity, and accuse PSM of being biased against "the people" (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020b). However, the truth is that many extreme right and populist views are contested by PSM simply because PSM are not neutral—they uphold a set of values that sustain liberal democracy (Donders, 2021; Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Price & Raboy, 2003).

In Spain, PSM's past as a state broadcaster has tainted its development and allowed for instrumental use of the debate around its independence, where left and right parties accuse each other of interference (Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, & Demeter, 2021b). Using arguments shared by right-wing and populists throughout Europe, which signal PSM as biased towards elites and detached from the silent majority (Sehl et al., 2020b), the Spanish extreme right represented by Vox constantly attacks national television TVE (Vox España, 2023) and promotes the shutdown of regional stations. In Madrid, budget reductions have been foisted on Telemadrid, the regional public television, in exchange for supporting the governing Partido Popular (Mateo, 2021). According to Marzal and Zallo (2016), Spain's PSM has been in the crosshairs of conservative politicians since the turn of the century. The 2012 amendment to Spain's audiovisual law, introduced when the right-wing Partido Popular held the majority in Congress, is a glaring example. The new regulations allowed for flexibility in the management of the regional PSM. This translated into budget cuts and outsourcing services for communities such as Aragón, the Balearic, and the Canary Islands and the complete privatization of services in Murcia (Campos-Freire, 2021; Cañedo, 2019; Lozano, 2012; Rodríguez Gómez & Rosique Cedillo, 2022). The center-left and left political parties, namely the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos, have systematically opposed these closures and budget cuts.

Given the general notion that left-wing ideology advocates for robust public services and that this extends to the discourse regarding PSM, it stands to reason that:

H2:   *Left-wing partisans are more prone to consider public media a needed service for society.*

Public Service Media Consumption, Political Ideology, and the Need for Public Media

Consumption and the satisfaction of personal needs and wants shape attitudes and perceptions toward media (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013; Rubin, 2009). However, in the case of PSM, a normative

conception of its contribution to society also comes into play in citizens' expectations and evaluations of PSM (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020). To advance our understanding of the associations between the variables of interest, we focus on how ideology moderates the direct relationship between PSM consumption and the perception of its need. Considering the support for robust public services that is present in left-leaning discourses and policies (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015) and the positive framing of PSM in the left-wing normative conception of media (Holland, 2003), we expect that, at lower and higher levels of news consumption, left-wing individuals will show support for the need for PSM than right-wing individuals. Following this premise, we present our third hypothesis:

H3:   *There is a contributory divergent positive interaction effect of political ideology (M) on the relationship between public service media consumption (X) and the need for public media (Y).*

PSM in Spain: Achievements and Outstanding Accounts

Unlike its Northern European counterparts, conceived of as a core institution of liberal democracies, Spain's national television was born in 1956 as an instrument of Franco's propaganda (Bustamante, 2006). Notwithstanding censorship, lack of diversity, and a monolithic discourse, TVE was central to Spain's culture. This strength played an interesting role during the transition and early years of democracy. TVE was critical in building a new national discourse akin to the democratization and modernization of Spain (Palacio, Villaluenga, & Roldán, 2012). The creation of regional public service radio and television stations was instrumental in resurfacing Spain's linguistic and cultural diversity (Cañedo, 2019). Despite the positive shift in quality and pluralism brought about by democracy, TVE remained a loudspeaker for the government (Jurado, 2022).

Though the discourse around the role of public service media in a liberal democracy and the need to insulate PSM from power was soon adopted by both major political parties,[1] from a regulatory, political, and practical perspective, consolidating a fully independent and stable PSM institution remains, to date, an unfinished business (Bustamante, 2006; Goyanes et al., 2021a). The 2006 law that transformed the Spanish PSM system brought only a short period of enhanced independence. Since 2011, the law has been subject to a series of reforms and counter-reforms dictated mainly by the shifts in power and the Spanish Congress' inability to compromise on the election of a fully independent governing board (see Bustamante, 2006; Goyanes, 2021a; Humanes & Fernández-Alonso, 2015).

In 2021, when our data were collected, José María Pérez Tornero had just been elected president of RTVE, ending two years of interim government due to a block in the negotiations to elect new authorities (Bustamante, 2021). The truce was short-lived; a year later, Pérez Tornero resigned under crossed accusations of misconduct, pressure, and manipulation (Gómez & Cúe, 2022). A new president, Elena Sánchez, was elected among the board members, and the political battle for control over RTVE is once again a part of the political agenda in Spain.

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[1] Center-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Center-right Partido Popular (PP)

Methods and Measures

Sample

Our data were fielded in May and June 2021 through an online access quota-based panel survey. The questionnaire achieved a 35% response rate, and our final sample added up to N = 1,770. Sampling and sourcing were handled by Qualtrics, a third-party company that employs stratified quotas that tend to match the distribution of the Spanish population in terms of gender (50.1% female), age (M = 45.2 years), and education (30.6% college graduates). With 42% of individuals within the €1000/2000 bracket, income distribution was similar to the one presented by the Spanish Institute of Statistics (INE). Zero-order correlations are shown in Table 1. The regression model accounting for interaction effects was tested using Haye's PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1; 5000 bootstrapped samples).

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Among Demographics and Variables of Interest.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	–							
2. Gender (female)	−.203**	–						
3. Ethnicity	−.005	−.091**	–					
4. Education	−.079**	.014	.099**	–				
5. Income	.192**	−.209**	.098**	.349**	–			
6. Need for Public Media	.038	.086**	.012	.010	−.050*	–		
7. Political Ideology	−.031	−.024	−.012	.057*	.086**	−.232**	–	
8. Public Service Media Consumption	.011	−.052*	−.002	.024	.149**	.177**	.144**	–

Note. Sample size (N) = 1717. Cell entries are two-tailed zero-order correlation coefficients *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Need for Public Service Media

To assess respondents' perceptions of the need for PSM (Sehl, 2020), they were asked to express their level of agreement with the following items: "Our society can do without public media," "Public media are necessary to ensure that everyone has access to quality information," and "Public media are necessary to ensure that everyone has access to audiovisual entertainment" (3-item average scale; Cronbach's α = 0.73; M = 6.21; SD = 2.06).

Public Service Media Consumption

We used a 7-item average scale to measure respondents' frequency of consumption of both linear and online channels considering PSM's national and regional offerings ("La Primera de TVE," "La 2," "Noticias 24 hrs.," "Regional Public Service Channels," "PlayZ," and "Teledeporte"). The answer options were

presented on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 stood for "Never" and 10 for "Several times a day" (7 items; Cronbach's α = 0.84; M = 3.54; SD = 1.83).

Political Ideology

Following previous research (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015), we asked respondents to assess their "general," "economical," and "social" views using a 10-point scale where 1 indicated being "strongly to the left" (1) or "strongly to the right" (10) of the ideological spectrum (3 items; Cronbach's α = 0.93; M = 4.98; SD = 2.24).

Controls

We selected our control variables following previous literature on media performance, consumption, and relationships with political attitudes. Standard measurements were used to compute the sociodemographic data of our sample: age (M = 44.2; SD = 14.2), gender (50.1% female), race (94.4% Caucasian), education, and income. The latter were measured following the categorizations used by Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE, 2020). Considering that levels of news consumption show associations with perceptions of media performance (Mothes, 2017), we used a 10-point Likert-type scale where 1 meant "never" and 10 meant "several times a day" to gather participants' responses on how frequently they consumed news from 14 different media, social media, and messaging apps.

Traditional News Consumption

This construct computed respondents' frequency of consumption for "newspapers," "radio," and "linear television" (3-item average scale; Cronbach's α = 0.79; M = 5.68; SD = 2.05).

Online News Consumption

The three items measured were "online newspapers," "news sites," and "blogs" (3-item average scale; Cronbach's α = 0.61; M = 5.72; SD = 2.35).

Social Media Use for News

This construct included the frequency of news consumption on "Instagram," "Twitter," "Facebook," "Whatsapp," "YouTube," "Twitch," "Tik Tok," and "Telegram." (8-item average scale; Cronbach's α = 0.82; M = 4.94; SD = 2.08).

To further isolate the effects of our predictive variables, we included a control block of political attitudes that the literature suggested were related to media perceptions and evaluations (Morris, 2007).

Political Interest

An overall assessment of respondents' levels of political interest (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019) was computed by asking individuals to rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, "their interest" and "level of attention" regarding news about public affairs and politics (Spearman-Brown ρ = 0.95; M = 6.56; SD = 2.45).

Internal Political Efficacy

Following previous literature (Morrell, 2003, 2005), we used a 2-item scale: "I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country" and "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics" (Spearman-Brown coefficient = 0.71; *M* = 6.32; *SD* = 2.01).

External Political Efficacy

To tap into respondents' external political efficacy, the items used were (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, & Ardévol-Abreu, 2017): "people like me don't have any say in what the government does" (recoded*)* and "no matter whom I vote for, it won't make a difference" (recoded; Spearman-Brown coefficient = 0.51; *M* = 6.37; *SD* = 2.27).

Political Knowledge

Based on Carpini and Ketter's (1996) definition and extant research, we used a 6-item additive scale to measure participants' political knowledge. Questions taped into national and international current affairs and the functioning of the political system in Spain ("Which country in Asia has surpassed 20 million cases of COVID-19 with more than 300,000 daily infections during the month of April 2021?" "Who is the President of Brazil?" and "The United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union on January 31, 2020. The terms of this rupture were set out in two key documents, one being the Withdrawal Agreement. Which is the other?" "What former Spanish colony has been in conflict with Morocco for more than 30 years over its self-determination?" "Which of the following best describes the system of government in Spain?" "Which parties presented a motion of censure in the Community of Murcia last March?" and "Who is the first vice president of government?"). Correct answers were coded as one, and incorrect or "I don't know" answers were coded as zero (λ = 0.57; *M* = 4.02; *SD* = 2.04).

Results

To test the predicted hypothesis, an ordinary least squares regression (OLS) was conducted. Specifically, controls were introduced in blocks to ascertain their incremental explanatory power. Accordingly, a set of demographics was introduced in block one (ΔR^2 = 1.4%), media orientations were included in block two (ΔR^2 = 3.5%), and political antecedents in block three (ΔR^2 = 1.5%), while both the variables of interest (i.e., the main independent variables, ΔR^2 = 7.7%) and the moderating effects were finally introduced in blocks four and five (ΔR^2 = 0.3%). In total, controls, variables of interest, and moderating effects accounted for 30.6% of the variance in the need for public media. Thus, the regression model suggests moderate explanatory power in predicting citizens' perceptions of the need for PSM. In what follows, the directionality and significance of the hypotheses are reported.

First, hypothesis 1 predicts a positive association between the consumption of PSM channels and the perception of its need. The results reported in Table 2 support our expectations, suggesting that higher levels of PSM consumption are related to higher perceptions of PSM'S need (β = .148; *p* =.00). Accordingly, H1 was fully supported according to our data. Moving to the second hypothesis, which predicted a negative association between political ideology and the need for PSM, the regression analysis results reported in Table 2 show a statistically significant and negative association between both variables. Thus, consistent with

hypothesis 2, the results show that the need for PSM grows as we move to the left of the political spectrum (β = −.264; p = .00). H2 was, therefore, empirically supported.

Both of these associations stand regardless of demographic controls or political attitudes. Within the demographics, both genders (being female; β = .094; p = .00) and income (β = −.097; p = .000) appeared to significantly predict the need for public media, while in the media consumption block, traditional news use showed a significant positive association with individuals' need for PSM (β = .026; p = .01). Regarding political antecedents, the results of the regression analysis revealed a statistically significant and positive association between internal political efficacy and the dependent variable (β = .074; p = .000).

Table 2. Regression Model Predicting the Need for Public Media.

Variables	β	t	p
Block 1: Demographics			
Age	.036	1.40	.16
Gender (female)	.094	3.93	.00
Ethnicity (white)	−.005	−.23	.82
Education	.022	.88	.38
Income	−.097	−3.77	.00
ΔR^2	.014		
Block 2: Media Orientations			
Traditional News Consumption	.126	4.36	.00
Online News Consumption	−.025	−.87	.38
Social Media News Use	.011	.37	.71
ΔR^2	.035		
Block 3: Political Antecedents			
Political Interest	.067	2.30	.02
Internal Political Efficacy	.074	2.64	.01
External Political Efficacy	−.037	−1.61	.11
Political Knowledge	.018	.69	.49
ΔR^2	.015		
Block 4: Variables of Interest			
Public Service Media Consumption	.148	5.30	.00
Political Ideology	−.264	−11.44	.00
ΔR^2	.077		
Block 5: Moderating Effect			
Public Service Media Consumption * Political Ideology	.026	2.46	.01
ΔR^2	.003		
TOTAL R^2	0.306		

Note. Sample size *(N)* = 1717. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients.

Finally, the results were also consistent with H3, which predicts a contributory divergent positive interaction effect of political ideology (M) on the relationship between PSM consumption (X) and the need for public media. Accordingly, individuals with higher consumption levels and who identify themselves ideologically further to the left are the ones who express a stronger need for PSM (β = .026; p = .01). At low PSM consumption, left-wing partisans have a more statistically significant need for public media than right-wing partisans, while at higher levels of PSM consumption, this significance vanishes, as the visual inspection of the confidence intervals in Figure 1 overlaps. Accordingly, it could be suggested that political ideology is a significant moderator between PSM consumption and the perception of its need, especially at low levels of PSM consumption.
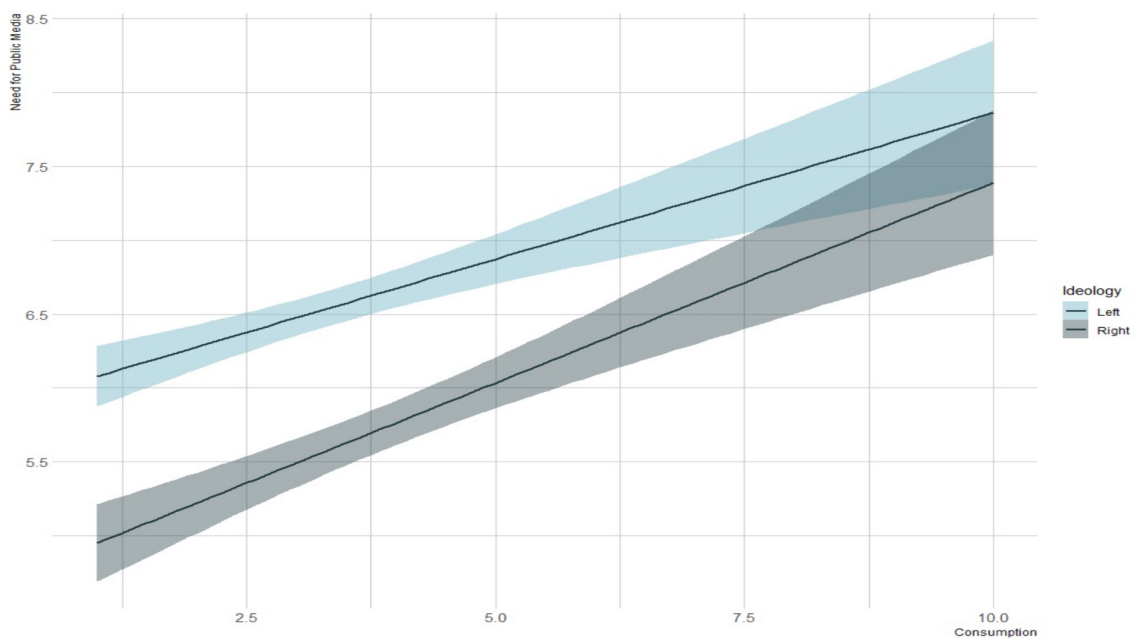

Figure 1. Moderation effect of political ideology on the association between PSM consumption and the need for public media.
Note. The theoretical model for the same demographic, political antecedents, and media orientation control variables is found in Table 2. Groups are the mean plus/minus *SD* from the mean.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the potential associations of consumption and ideology with citizens' perceptions of their need for public media. These relationships had been underexplored, as previous studies mainly focused on consumption regarding individuals' evaluations of PSM and neglected citizens' reflective preferences (Just, 2020). Likewise, despite the ideological underpinnings of PSM, empirical research on the role of ideology in citizens' perceptions and evaluations of PSM is scarce. We consider exploring these associations topical since the idea of public service, once a "conceptual glue" that allowed contradictory

visions and forces to coexist and sustain institutions such as PSM (Holland, 2003), is now subject to the effects of polarization and populist contestation.

Results supported all presented hypotheses, providing three interrelated empirical contributions. First, the results suggest a positive association between citizens' PSM consumption levels and their perceptions of its social need, which reaffirms the relevance of exploring new ways to engage with audiences to overcome the fall in linear consumption that still accounts for the majority of PSM's reach (Schulz et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for citizens born into a high-choice media environment who hardly know linear distribution. PSM must actively go out to meet younger audiences who otherwise grow oblivious to their value proposition and societal role (Costa-Sánchez et al., 2021).

However, in today's scenario, the challenge of raising consumption and engagement demands not only new content and distribution strategies that evolve at the pace of a media landscape in constant flux (Cañedo et al., 2022; Donders, 2021), but, as some scholars have suggested, also explores new possible roles for PSM, such as the development of ethical personalization and recommendation tools and a digital environment that preserves users' privacy and attention (Reviglio, 2019; Tambini, 2015). Their work signals that sustaining and growing PSM's engagement and public value demands flexibility regarding what services the citizens both expect and can benefit from. This approach opens new avenues beyond PSM as news and content providers. It conceptualizes them as possible gatekeepers in the contemporary high-choice media environment by empowering citizens through ethical digital tools and education (Mazzoli & Tambini, 2020). It can be thought of as the flip side of their initial role. PSB was called to guarantee that everybody had access to quality information, entertainment, and education in a world of scarcity. In times of overabundance, PSM should also guarantee citizens the right to regulate their attention, privacy, and exposure to the news while still providing a source of trusted information and quality entertainment (Reviglio, 2019).

Second, for ideology, our model shows a direct positive relationship between left-leaning self-identification and the perception of the need for PSM. This association is consistent with the role left-wing imaginaries attribute to public institutions and the need for government intervention to guarantee universal access to services and rights. Market-oriented discourses, usually linked to right-wing visions, have consistently depicted PSM as a response to market failures and have questioned the need for PSM in the actual high-choice media environment (Sehl et al., 2020a). The current dis- and misinformation phenomena call for new debates and agreements that appeal to a far-reaching ideological base on the need for and legitimacy of PSM and its role in guaranteeing citizens' information rights. Furthermore, following our third finding, ideology appears to moderate the relationship between consumption and need, signaling that those further to the left have a stronger perception of the need for PSM, particularly at lower consumption levels. The fact that at higher consumption levels, the perception of PSM's need is similar for both ends of the political spectrum is yet another signal that PSM should reinforce their connection with all citizens and allow them to have a direct experience of their value proposition (Donders, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). When the term "public" is presented as a disvalue or identified with partisan interests, and the media's legitimacy is under scrutiny, PSM must double up its efforts to deliver to the expected standards of quality and independence that allow them to have a broad appeal.

It is worth emphasizing that PSM are not called to be neutral, since the defense of democratic values is an integral part of its remit (Donders, 2021). Notwithstanding, this must not be confused with the accusations and assumptions of a left-leaning bias in PSM. The depiction of PSM as one-sided comes mainly from extreme right- and right-wing populists who do not share the ideals PSM upholds and claim to be unfairly excluded from public conversation (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). Beyond any question, their inclusion must be subject to respect for democratic values, which entails acceptance of the diversity of voices and interests in society (Sehl et al., 2020b). On this account, recent studies argue that the traditional left-right ideological divide is no longer as clear (Mounk, 2018; Schroeder, 2019), and populist/anti-populist attitudes have a growing weight in predicting media attitudes (Mitchell et al., 2018). Considering this, we suggest that the associations between left-wing partisanship and the need for public media be read not following traditional party lines but in line with values regarding the role of public institutions and the understanding of citizenship and informed participation as core elements of democratic societies.

Our results focus on Spain, where the national public television TVE has experienced a dramatic fall in linear consumption and has long lost the leadership of its newscasts (Barlovento, 2021), while online reach among younger audiences does not grow (Schulz et al., 2019). Concurrently, as ratings reach record lows, PSM is at the center of partisan debate, finding it hard to brush away its past as state media and achieve institutional stability (Goyanes et al., 2021a). Unfortunately, unless PSM finds a way to be present again in Spanish citizens' daily lives and its independence becomes a given, they are severely endangering their public service nature.

The question is not if, but how, in these uncertain times, PSM must evolve to continue providing the services and values that citizens expect and deserve. Even within Europe, each society's particular historical, social, political, and economic circumstances might call for different answers and strategies to guarantee that PSM fulfills its democratic remit and delivers value to its stakeholders. Despite these differences, if PSM are to play a role in the institutional network that sustains mature and aspiring liberal democracies, it is imperative to take the initiative, which "requires renewed efforts to legitimate their public service 'soul' under contemporary conditions" (Cola & Prario, 2012, p. 182). This calls for a proactive approach to the role of PSM in society, not merely responding to the arguments that oppose PSM but explicitly seeking their audiences' attention and preference while clearly stating why their audiences need and deem PSM desirable for society.

Limitations

As with most empirical research, our study has limitations. First, those derived from the cross-sectional nature of the survey inform our work. A longitudinal design informed by panel data is necessary to confirm these associations beyond contextual variables and to explore their directions. Furthermore, considering that attitudes and perceptions towards PSM are influenced by the historical and socio-political context in which they operate, results must be read in relation to Spain's PSM and its evolution. Further studies are necessary to understand how the suggested associations play in different contexts, particularly regarding the rise of populism in both left- and right-wing incarnations across Europe.

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