# SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE NEWS CONSUMPTION, BEHAVIORS, AND ONLINE CIVIC REASONING AMONG GENERATION Z

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE NEWS CONSUMPTION, BEHAVIORS, AND ONLINE CIVIC REASONING AMONG GENERATION Z

presented by Lisa Collins,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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# SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE NEWS CONSUMPTION, BEHAVIORS, AND ONLINE CIVIC REASONING AMONG GENERATION Z

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## Abstract

The purpose of the research is to examine social media usage for news consumption, news behaviors, and online civic reasoning among Generation Z. Specifically, the study has two main purposes: 1) examine social media usage frequency for news consumption and other news behaviors (e.g., sharing, liking) via social media; and 2) examine the extent to which Gen Z uses aspects of online civic reasoning in their social media news consumption/behaviors. This was accomplished via an online survey of Gen Z college-aged students (*N=187)* enrolled at a private university located in the southern part of the United States.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Much has been written about and studied with regard to young adult's use and information processing of social media news and information but much less is known about their ability to reason about the information they read. A project by the Stanford History Education Group illustrates this. The researchers spent eighteen months attempting to understand just how much young people in middle school, high school, and college participate in what they called "civic online reasoning." The study developed 56 tasks for students across 12 states to undertake. Their research demonstrated that the large majority of students apply average or lower than average civic online reasoning skills in relation to the news and information they read. For example, the majority of individuals could not tell the difference between a news story and an advertisement.

This is problematic because misinformation and lack of trust in the press threatens the news industry and its role in keeping citizens informed. And our nation's democracy is based on free-flowing and public discourse. Reliable information is the cornerstone of that discourse, and increasingly, Americans rely on the internet and social media for that information. In particular, the American Press Institute found that young people get 75 percent of their news online (*How Millenials Get News* , 2015). Despite the Stanford History Education Group's strengths, the research is qualitative and complex so may not be practical for educational institutions to use, nor are the findings generalizable. Additionally, only a limited number of social media were examined (e.g., Twitter), leaving questions about the generalizability of the results in other social media. What we need is a study that can extend understanding of civic online reasoning by creating quantitative measures using the Stanford History Education Group's original qualitative assessment measures.

That is the goal of the current research. Specifically, the purpose is threefold: 1) examine social media usage frequency for news consumption and other news behavior via social media; 2) explore reasons for the growth of news consumption/behaviors among Generation Z (Gen Z), generally defined as anyone born during or after the year 1997 through the year 2012 (Dimock, 2019), to understand what is driving dissemination and use of social media news; and 3) examine online civic reasoning, as one aspect of social media news usage, to understand the extent to which Generation Z uses aspects of online civic reasoning in news consumption/behaviors.

This is accomplished by conducting an online survey and adapting the qualitative assessment measures set forward by the Stanford History Education Group to quantitative measures, disseminated to a group of college-aged student participants. Focusing on college students helps to control for differences in civic online reasoning that would be noticeable in younger students, such as middle schoolers.

The overarching research question addressed by this study is: What is Gen Z's social media usage for news consumption and behavior and their ability to reason about the information they send and receive on social media and the internet in general? Put another way: What is the civic online reasoning of Gen Z college-aged students when it comes to news and information sent/received via social media and the internet in general?

This research question is important due to the changing audience of news, reaching a younger demographic that has grown up using social media. Additionally, changes in technology (Bakir & McStay, 2018), algorithms that may control news media searches and which users see what news content (Caplan & Boyd, 2018), and actors that spread misinformation on purpose to create distrust in the media to sway public opinion (Corner, 2017) point to the importance of

examining perceptions of the younger generation of news consumers who rely mostly on social media for news and information.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Definition of Generation Z

The focus of the study is Generation Z, which is generally defined as anyone born during or after the year 1997 through the year 2012 (Dimock, 2019). This is the generation that follows the Millennial generation, defined by William Strauss and Neil Howe as Americans born from 1982 to roughly 2005 (2007). Their generational theory states that there is a pattern in historical generations, which revolve around generational events which Strauss and Howe call turnings. But some experts are finding a dramatic break between Millennials and the children that followed. In 2018, the Pew Research Center began using 1996 as the last birth year for the Millennial generation in its research. Pew researchers found that generational events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2008 election shaped Millennials and Gen Z in different ways, thus creating a divide between the generations. And technology is another dividing variable. According to Dimock (2019, para. 12), "Social media, constant connectivity and on-demand entertainment and communication are innovations Millennials adapted to as they came of age. For those born after 1996, these are largely assumed."

The aspect of technology usage is a key reason Gen Z is a prime target for learning about social media usage and online civic reasoning skills. Researchers have found that members of Gen Z tend to look beyond traditional media outlets for news and information because they have always had the internet as a tool to explore their world. But instead of relying on institutions and conventional forms of media, Gen Z members are more likely to rely on personal and close networks that they cultivate— both in person and online— to find answers to their questions (McKnight, 2018, pg. 15). This cohort is creating entire communities outside traditional media

channels in order to make sense of the world, and online civic reasoning skills are key to deciphering that information.

Generation Z is the most diverse in American history: 55 percent are Caucasian, 24 percent are Hispanic, 14 percent are African-American and 4 percent are Asian (Bernstein, 2015). And they will be the driving force behind the newest wave of buying power. Gen Z members have never known a world without digital media, and they live online. Their preferred way to communicate with others is by sharing details of their lives across dozens of social media platforms in two-way conversations with friends, family, strangers and companies. This makes them ideal candidates for learning about the truth discernment skills used when employing social media sites for news consumption.

**Definition of Civic Online Reasoning**

The foundational concept guiding this research is civic online reasoning, defined as "the ability to evaluate digital content and reach warranted conclusions about social and political issues" (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016, n.p.). The ability to discern among news and non-news aspects afforded by online civic reasoning is key for Gen Z because they are more likely to learn about the world through social media than through traditional sources like print newspapers and TV news. Additionally, it is crucial for young people to have skills that help them evaluate the content they see on their screens. As they sort through mass media messages, Gen Z needs to be able to "consciously and critically analyze and evaluate mass media messages and then decide on their own response step. This reflective process also helps students follow the stimulus-impulse cycle so they can think before they act" (Farmer, 2017, p. 12).

News is defined in multiple ways. In 2016, Harcup and O'Neill provided a taxonomy to help answer the question, "What is news?" This research expanded upon their first 2011 study in

order to examine the impact of digital and social media on journalistic values. Their revised list includes fifteen required elements of which a news story must include one (or more) to satisfy the value: exclusivity, bad news, conflict, surprise, audio-visual elements, shareability on social media, entertainment, unfolding drama, follow-up stories about subjects in the news, the power elite, relevance, large magnitude or impact, celebrity, good news and stories that fit or set a news organisation's own agenda, whether ideological, commercial or as part of a specific campaign (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016).

Civic online reasoning calls upon a news consumer to "decipher credible information and explicitly discern reliable evidence from suspect evidence" (Colglazier, 2018, p. 4). This type of reasoning is structured as an investigative approach to information. The practitioner asks, "How do I know what I know?" There are three steps to this process. Step one: identify the source behind the information being presented. Step two: analyze the evidence presented. And step three: cross-check information with other websites (McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone & Wineburg, (2018), p. 5). Whether and to what extent Gen Z uses similar reasoning skills is one of the central questions of this research.

Media literacy is defined further as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts (Christ & Potter, 1998, p. 7)." One hallmark of media literacy is the concept of reading laterally, in contrast with reading vertically (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017, p. 1). When one reads a website vertically, they glean information from the site about its reliability and trustworthiness. Conversely, lateral reading is defined as judging the credibility of the original site by leaving the website and opening new browser tabs for new sources of information to learn more about a site and its claims. Lateral reading "requires knowledge of sources, knowledge of how the Internet and searches are structured, and

knowledge of strategies to make searching and navigating effective (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017, p. 38).” It is that knowledge which enables the news consumer to analyze and evaluate messages.

When it comes to media literacy and young adults, research shows that Gen Z finds it difficult to discern between what is true and what is false. In 2018 researchers with Project Information Literacy published the results of a survey of 5,844 college students across the United States which examined how they gather information and engage with news in the digital age (Head, Wihbey, Metaxas, MacMillan, & Cohen, 2018). Almost half of those surveyed (45 percent) said they lacked confidence with discerning “real news” from “fake news,” and only 14 percent said they were “very confident” that they could detect “fake news.” When it comes to sharing news on social media, some respondents did use lateral reading skills to evaluate the veracity of news before they shared the item. 62 percent said they checked to see how current an item was, while 59 percent read the complete story before sharing and 57 percent checked the URL to see where a story originated.

Some states have taken steps to help students build civic online reasoning skills and improve media literacy in the classroom. In 2016, the governor of the state of Washington approved a bill to establish a support structure to enable state educators to implement media literacy and digital citizenship education in every school (Media Literacy Now, 2016). That law spurred more action by a national coalition of groups to work to persuade 20 states to pass new digital-citizenship legislation. The group is made up of Common Sense Media, Media Literacy Now, the Digital Citizenship Institute and the National Association for Media Literacy Education (Herold, 2016). The group found some successes in statehouses across the United States. In Massachusetts, lawmakers passed a bill that mandates a civics instruction and requires media

literacy be a component of that instruction, as well as a bill requiring financial literacy instruction in schools that also requires evaluating media content. California passed a bill to provides for a website of resources, tools and professional development information for educators. And in 2019, 12 more states are considering legislation to improve media literacy in various forms at the K-12 level (MLN, 2019).

In short, as young people increase their reliance on digital outlets for news and everyday information, it is important to understand the many ways in which social media has changed news consumption among Gen Z, and how young adults use different social networking sites for different news needs.

**Evolution of Social Networking Sites (SNSs)**

Social networking sites (SNSs) are creating a new dynamic of news, which is now personalized, portable and participatory (Purcell, Raine, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010, para. 4). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNS is defined as an internet-based service that allows individuals to do three main things: "(1) construct a public or semi□public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). SNS changes the way news is consumed and disseminated due to its personalization, self-selection by the end user, participatory nature, and portability due to smartphones and handheld devices, briefly discussed next.

First, news becomes more personalized because users can self-select the type of information or media outlets they see in their social network feeds. People can choose to follow a news outlet or an individual reporter. Additionally, users engage with content that is shared by friends in their network, which typically means the users share a commonality, such as a shared

interest or history. And sites like Facebook have prioritized posts from users' friends over news outlets in an effort to stem the proliferation of false news stories (Isaac & Ember, 2016).

News becomes more participatory for users because SNS provide unique ways for the audience to interact with news. Users can share and "like" stories, give their own take on topical issues, and have debates with people they know in real-life as well as people they have never met. Users can also generate their own content and share it on SNS.

And news is more portable, due to a rise in smartphone proliferation. Purcell et al. (2010) call this "pocket-sized news" (para. 19). In January 2017, Pew researchers found that 77 percent of Americans own a smartphone (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). The ease of access to online content has changed how Americans seek out news and information. While TV news and newspapers are accessed at home, smartphones are being used in the interstices— the gaps in the routines of media users between scheduled activities (Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2010). In layman's terms, individuals are checking their phones while they wait in line at Starbucks or in the doctor's waiting room.

When people check their smartphones, they are accessing social media sites. In November of 2016, Pew researchers found that 86 percent of Americans aged 18-29 use at least one social media site (Greenwood et al., 2016). Young adults remain the most active and engaged group on SNS. However, the popularity of each SNS platform varies greatly among generations. 88 percent of Americans aged 18-29 have a Facebook account, and 59 percent of the same age group use Instagram (Greenwood et al., 2016). Among teenagers, defined as ages 13 to 17 years old, only 51 percent say they use Facebook, making it the fourth-used SNS by this age group. 85 percent of teens report using YouTube, 72 percent say they use Instagram, and 69 percent report using Snapchat (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Globally, more than 2.8 billion people,

or 37 percent of the world's population, use social media (Gallagher, 2018). This has implications for news consumption.

For example, research shows that more Americans than ever are using it to find news and information. As of August 2017, 67 percent of the public get at least some news on social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). That number increases to 78 percent for people ages 18 to 49. The Reuters Institute for News 2017 annual report found that mobile usage for news continues to increase. More than 65 percent of smartphone users say they use their devices for news at least once a week (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy & Nielsen, 2017). Reuters also found that 40 percent of people under the age of 35 say their smartphone is the main way they consume news (Newman et al., 2017). The Pew Research Center found that 58 percent of Americans often got news from smartphones, up from 21 percent in 2013 (Fedeli & Matsa, 2018.) That number grows to 71 percent for young adults aged 18-29.

News consumption online is evenly split among news outlet apps and websites and social media platforms. In 2016, Pew Center researchers followed more than 2,000 U.S. adults who got some news online over the course of a week. The survey found that on average, 36 percent of the times individuals got news online, they did so by going directly to a news organization's website or app. About 35 percent of the time the individuals got news through social media. Search engines were used 20 percent of the time, notices from news organizations like alerts, texts and emails were used 15 percent of the time, and emails and texts from friends were used seven percent of the time (Mitchell, Gottfried, Shearer, & Lu, 2017.) Researchers also found that 65 percent of the time, people preferred one pathway to find news online, with 26 percent preferring social media as that pathway and 23 percent preferring online media outlets (Mitchell et al., 2017). But young people are more likely than older ones to get news through social media, with

47 percent of 18 to 29 year-old online news consumers accessing news on SNS. Young women in particular prefer social media for news. Women ages 18-29 got news through social media about half of the time on average (47 percent), compared with 28 percent for women 50 and older (Mitchell et al., 2017).

News consumption among young adults has been the focus of several studies. For young people to seek out news, it needs to be relevant to their lives (Williamson, Qayyum, Hider, & Liu, 2012). But there is no finite answer for what is relevant to young people. There are major cultural and societal differences among young adults, which play a role in how they decide what is news to them.

Young adults use a range of sources to suit their particular needs and purposes when it comes to communication (Qayyum & Williamson, 2014). When seeking news and information, young people use a mix of SNS, television, online websites and newspapers. If they are looking for specific news or information, they primarily turn to Google to search. But when using SNS, social interaction is the primary motivation (Qayyum & Williamson, 2014). Users learn about the world around them through their friends' posts.

Of course, SNSs are unique and differ from traditional news websites and online sources of news in important ways so it is important to examine each one separately. Additionally, some SNS platforms are used more frequently than others for news information. For example, Facebook is the number one platform American adults say they use to get news. Twenty-five percent of young adult Facebook users report getting news on the network, compared to 40 percent of Americans aged 30 to 49 (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). But other SNS are catching up to Facebook when it comes to using the platform for news.

YouTube is the second-most common SNS for Americans to consume news. 18 percent of all Americans now use the platform for news (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Nielsen reports that more than half of YouTube TV viewership is 13 to 34 year-olds. 36 percent of YouTube news users are aged 18 to 29 (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). The platform has seen a boost in news usage thanks to changes like YouTube TV, a service that streams live local feeds from all four major broadcasters — ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC. The service has been expanded to include more than 100 TV markets (Whitwam, 2018). The platform also added a "breaking news" tab to its feed, which allows users to quickly find news content in a crowded video marketplace (Matney, 2017).

Twenty-one percent of young Americans now use Snapchat to get news (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). In fact, a full 80 percent of the platform's news users are between the ages of 18 and 29. This high number is largely due to the increase in news outlets that are now publishers on Snapchat's Discover feature. More than 40 media outlets are now creating "editions" for the app, and some, like NBC, have even created special newscasts for the platform (Flynn, 2017). The outlets report growth in both viewership and revenue thanks to their presence on Snapchat. For example, the Telegraph launched a Snapchat Discover channel in May of 2017. One year later, the channel has grown to reach more than one million viewers each day, with the biggest age demographic between the ages of 18 and 24 years old (Kunova, 2018). The second-largest audience for the Telegraph on Snapchat is between the ages of 13 and 17 years old.

Twitter is another platform that people use heavily for news. Pew researchers found that 74 percent of Twitter users say they use the network for news, a 15 percent increase since 2016 (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). This is due in part to Twitter's recent push to get news outlets to publish on the platform, as well as new partnerships to stream content from outlets like Live

Nation, Bloomberg, BuzzFeed and the PGA (Kafka, 2017). Overall, 28 percent of the platform's news users are aged 18 to 29 (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017).

People use SNS for three primary news-related behaviors— reading, posting and endorsing (Choi, 2016). But they do not consume news in a uniform way. Pew Center researchers found that 66 percent of Facebook users clicked on news links, 60 percent endorsed news stories by using the "like" button, and 49 percent shared news stories (Mitchel & Kiley, 2013).

So if SNS users consume news differently, it makes sense that they have a range of behaviors to seek out/disseminate news on SNS. The strongest motivation overall is socializing (Choi, 2016). But posting news links on SNS is motivated by a desire to be recognized (Choi, 2016). Studies have found that people get a sense of agency when they post news on SNS— they feel that they are a relevant actor in a situation and can assert their influence over the nature and course of the interaction (Sundar, 2008). By acting as gatekeepers or opinion leaders when posting news, people can feel that they are important actors within a SNS community or group, and can establish their identity on that platform (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). When it comes to endorsing news, however, entertainment is the highest motivator (Choi, 2016). Users are likely getting enjoyment and feeling pleasure from expressing their thoughts about news content by posting comments or using the "like" button (Choi, 2016).

**"Fake" and False News**

"Fake" news has been making headlines recently, but the concept of misleading information goes back as far as humans have been communicating with each other. The American Press Institute's website defines journalism as "the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information" and the purpose of journalism as to "provide

people with verified information they can use to make better decisions, and its practices, the most important of which is a systematic process – a discipline of verification – that journalists use to find not just the facts, but also the 'truth about the facts (n.d.).'" These definitions are drawn from the 2001 book *The Elements of Journalism*" written by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel.

However, the phrase "fake news" has become weaponized by politicians. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral say, "... the term has lost all connection to the actual veracity of the information presented, rendering it meaningless for use in academic classification (2018, p. 1147)." The scholars instead use the more objectively verifiable terms "true" or "false" news in their research. They further define false news as "any story or claim with an assertion in it and a rumor as the social phenomena of a news story or claim spreading or diffusing through the Twitter network. That is, rumors are inherently social and involve the sharing of claims between people. News, on the other hand, is an assertion with claims, whether it is shared or not" (p. 1146).

Scholars have determined six different ways in which false news has been used and defined: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation of images, propaganda, and advertising (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). This literature review will focus on three of these categories: fabrication, manipulation of images and propaganda.

Fabrication refers to articles which have no factual basis but are styled to look like news articles to create legitimacy, while using partial truths. The creator of the items often has the intention of misinforming (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). The manipulation of images is defined as altering still photos or videos to created a false narrative (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). This is an ethical line that most news organizations do not cross. For instance, the Reuters code of ethics on image manipulation states that it is primarily a "presentational tool" using effects like

balancing an image's tone and color, but there can be "no additions or deletions, no misleading the viewer by manipulation of the tonal and color balance to disguise elements of an image or to change the context" (Moss, B., 2015). And misappropriated images or quotes, when an item is taken out of its original context—intentionally or not—to represent a different context, also falls into this category. Even if the photo or statement is factual, it was misappropriated to support a concocted narrative. Finally, propaganda can be defined as news stories which are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions, with the overt purpose to benefit a public figure, organization or government (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

The role of the audience in the acceptance and spread of false news is also a key part of this research. Unless the audience believes the deception created by the false news producer, false news remains a work of fiction (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). But when the item is believed to be true by its audience, false news can undermine the journalism industry. Information literacy, also called media literacy, is therefore a key skill to fight false news. The American Library Association defines information literacy as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."

Another variable is the proliferation of false news on social media sites. Research shows the most popular fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential election were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories (Silverman, 2016). Additionally, many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). And a false story is much more likely to go viral than a real story, according to MIT researchers. A false story reaches 1,500 people six times quicker, on average, than a true story does (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This misinformation and lack of trust in the press threatens the news industry and its role in keeping citizens informed.

A complicating factor in the spread of false news is the reliance of more people on social media over traditional news outlets to gather news and everyday information. Reuters found that 66 percent of Americans turned to TV news as a source of information in 2017, while just 22 percent used print newspapers. Compare those numbers to 2013, when TV was used for news by 72 percent of those polled, and newspapers by 41 percent (Newman et al., 2017). In the place of those traditional news outlets, social media is gaining ground as a source of information. As of August 2017, 67 percent of the public get at least some news on social media. That number increases to 78 percent for people ages 18 to 49. Reuters also found that 40 percent of people under the age of 35 say their smartphone is the main way they consume news.

While there have been many studies about the ability of young people to find, evaluate, and use digital information for school and issues that arise in their everyday lives, few studies have been done to evaluate the information literacy skill level specifically of Gen Z when it comes to their ability to tell real from fake news on social media platforms. One large study done by the Stanford History Education Group in 2016 focused on a younger sample. Researchers surveyed more than 7,000 students at the middle, high school and college level. The researchers called their findings “bleak.” They found that across the board, students had poor skills when it came to correctly evaluating and assessing information that they find on social media (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016).

Other research has focused solely on Gen Z. As previously discussed, the 2018 Project Information Literacy report focused on college students with its survey of 5,844 college students across the United States to examine how they gather information and engage with news in the digital age (Head, Wihbey, Metaxas, MacMillan, & Cohen, 2018). A 2015 study by Hans Martens and Renee Hobbs explored the relationship between participation in a media literacy

program, academic ability, frequency of Internet use, information-gathering motives, news and advertising analysis skills, and the intention toward civic engagement. The survey of 400 U.S. high school students in a Mid-Atlantic urban high school shows that students in a selective-admission media literacy program have substantially higher levels of media knowledge and news and advertising analysis skills than other students (Marten & Hobbs, 2015, para. 1).

In summary, the foregoing literature review suggests that: 1) Gen Z is using social media for news consumption more frequently than older generations and in fact they prefer to use those platforms over traditional media; 2) young adults use YouTube, Twitter and Snapchat to seek out news and information in larger numbers than older adults; 3) social media users use different platforms for a variety of reasons, including socializing, a desire to be recognized, a sense of agency and entertainment; and 4) Gen Z's reliance on social media for news is creating an opportunity for fake news to spread quickly and reach a wide audience, so increasing online civic reasoning skills is key to stop bad agents and increase trust in news media.

Persuasion knowledge model

This theoretical foundation determines our hypothesis regarding the frequency of social media usage as it relates to civic online reasoning skills among Gen Z.

H. There is a correlation between higher frequency of social media usage and higher level of online civic reasoning skills.

## Chapter 3: Method

The method is an online survey, defined as a questionnaire which is administered via the internet (Cummings & Ballantyne, 1999). There are multiple reasons to use an online survey in quantitative research. Using an online tool is cheaper than using paper printouts. There is no cost to print the survey or mail it to the sample members. There is also no time spent mailing the survey. Additionally, an online tool gives the researcher instant feedback. There is less time spent inputting data when the information is already in a file. And online surveys can provide a better quality of data because fields can be made 'required,' thus avoiding missing data in key variables, a single response option can be forced, there are no unreadable comments which cannot be used and data entry mistakes are avoided (Cummings & Ballantyne, 1999). Additionally, an online survey is preferable to the study's research subjects, young adults. Research has shown that this age group feels that online forms are easier to complete, require less time and provide greater anonymity than paper-based surveys (Cummings & Ballantyne, 1999). In general, they feel an online survey is more convenient than paper printouts. The survey was created using the University of Missouri's Qualtrics account, which is a survey composition tool used commonly for uncovering academic insights (Qualtrics: About Us, 2015).

### Participants and Sampling

In alignment with best practices, the study surveyed between 100 and 150 college students. The study can best gather a picture of Gen Z, generally defined as anyone born during or after the year 1997 through the year 2012 (Dimock, 2019), and their social media usage for news by using stratified random sampling. By narrowing the study population by age, the results

will achieve greater accuracy. One possible bias is that the study used only university students, which does indicate a certain level of education and wealth.

**Study Setting**

The study surveyed members of Generation Z who attend a southern U.S. private higher education institution. These students are ideal for the purposes of the study since they will provide a wide range of traits involving education, race, gender identification, personal wealth and frequency of social media usage to establish a varied sample for the study within the desired age range.

Given that the focus of the research is on news consumption via social media, it was felt that a sample pool enrolled in an Introduction to Mass Communication (required course) would be appropriate since news consumption is one of the topics discussed in the course, making the topic both relevant and timely for this sample. The class is required of mass communication majors and has more than 100 students enrolled. As background, the undergraduate population of the Southern college sampled is 40 percent male and 60 percent female, and ethnic minorities represent 39 percent of all freshmen. Eighty-nine percent of undergraduates receive some form of financial aid, and the undergraduate students come from 48 states and 39 countries.

**Instrumentation and Survey Measures**

Consistent with the study's purpose, the survey contained three main parts: 1) social media usage for news, and 2) online civic reasoning with regard to news consumption via social media, and 3) demographics. Survey instrumentation consisted of prior scales used by existing studies, most of which are measured as interval-level scales, such as Likert scales. This was true of all scales except those in the Stanford study, which consisted of qualitative questions. The researcher turned the questions into quantitative scales, indicated below. Using existing scales

(as opposed to creating new scales) helped to ensure reliability of the survey measures. Kumar (2011) notes that a reliable instrument is vital to ensure that a design can be replicated and reproduced.

*Social media news usage*. Social media news usage is defined as the degree to which a social media user employs the technology specifically for news consumption (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Analysis found that familiarity with social media is related to comfort with crowd-based information and its use by professional news organizations. The more Gen Z use social media, the greater familiarity they will have with it for news consumption/behaviors. Therefore, social media usage for news was measured by adapting items from the SOY survey (2017), produced annually by the Strategic Communication program housed in the Missouri School of Journalism. The statement was adapted for the study's purpose.

In order to gauge frequency of social media use in general among Gen Z, Scale items ranged from (1) never to (7) several times a day with the statement "How often do you use the following in your everyday life?" followed by these options:

Facebook

Twitter

LinkedIn

Instagram

Pinterest

Reddit

Snapchat

Tumblr

Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope)

YouTube

In order to gauge frequency of social media use **specifically** for news among Gen Z, scale items ranged from (1) never to (7) several times a day with the statement "How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from a news professional such as a journalist" followed by these options:

1.Facebook

2. Twitter

3. LinkedIn

4. Instagram

5. Pinterest

6. Reddit

7. Snapchat

8. Tumblr

9. Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope)

10. YouTube

Even though the study's primary focus is that of social media and news usage among Gen Z, the author felt it was necessary to include measures for other forms of news consumption on the internet, in general, to account for the possibility that news could be consumed from non-social media sources online. Scales used by Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, and Logan (2012) were adapted and employed. Scale items ranged from (1) Very unlikely to (5) Very likely with the

statement, “Where do you get your news and information produced by a journalist on a typical day?” followed by these options:

National or local newspaper website

TV news outlet website

Radio news outlet website

News aggregator (e.g., Google news)

International news outlet website

Website that mixes news and commentary

Website of an individual blogger

Even though the study’s primary focus is that of social media and news usage among Gen Z, the author felt it was necessary to include measures for other forms of media consumption on the internet, in general, to account for the possibility that everyday news and information could be consumed from non-news sources online. Scales used by Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, and Logan (2012) were adapted and employed. Scale items ranged from (1) never to (7) Several times a day with the statement, “How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from an everyday person who is not a trained journalist, such as a blogger or YouTuber?” followed by these options:

1.Facebook

2. Twitter

3. LinkedIn

4. Instagram

5. Pinterest

6. Reddit
7. Snapchat
8. Tumblr
9. Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope)
10. YouTube

Studies have found that sharing, following, retweeting, and liking are behavioral aspects of news consumption and are central to the way that people experience the news in the 21st century. The author believes that it is important to examine news consumption behavioral aspects with regard to Gen Z's social media usage for news since Gen Z has grown up with social media and sharing, in particular, is a common activity among the younger adult population. Indeed, the Project Information Literacy study found that among respondents, the most common way of getting news was discussions with peers (93%) whether face-to-face or online via text, email, or direct messaging on social media (Head et al., 2018.) Therefore, to address the behavioral aspects of social media and general internet usage among Gen Z, the following measures were adapted from Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, and Logan (2012). Scale items ranged from (1) unlikely to (5) very likely. The statement "On a typical day…." was followed by these items:

1. Do you share a news story via social media?
2. Do you follow a news organization/journalist on a social networking site?
3. Do you get Twitter updates from a news organization/journalist?
4. Do you "Like" a news story on Facebook?
5. Do you "ReTweet" a news story via Twitter?
6. Do you recommend a news story via social media?

7. Do you forward a news story you saw on social media?

*Online Civic Reasoning*. Online civic reasoning is defined as as "the ability to evaluate digital content and reach warranted conclusions about social and political issues" (Wineburg et al., 2016, n.p.). To examine the extent to which Gen Z applies online civic reasoning in their news consumption/behaviors, the qualitative measures and results provided by the Stanford study were adapted to create quantitative measures used here. The scale selected to measure online civic reasoning ranged from (1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true. Individual scale items adapted from the Stanford study included:

1. On the whole, I would say I have the ability to distinguish between a news article and an advertisement in social media.
2. I am inclined to believe that I can identify both traditional and native advertising in social media.
3. I have no problem explaining the features that distinguish a news story from an advertisement.
4. I would have no problem explaining what "sponsored content" means.
5. I would say I have an excellent ability to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate sources online.
6. When I read a news story online, I always check where the document came from.
7. When reading information in social media, I check the credibility of the source the information came from.
8. When I am confronted with a vivid photograph online, I am certain to check who took the photograph or where the photograph came from.

9. I am inclined to “Like” information because my friend recommended it to me.
10. I often check the accuracy of a claim made in a social media post.
11. I make sure information in social media is accurate before recommending it to a friend.
12. When I look at information online, I tend to accept it at face value.
13. When I look at information online, I check to see if it has strong evidence.
14. I accept information at face value if the information comes from a trusted friend.
15. I like to verify the source of a post in social media by checking his/her credentials.
16. When I come across information in Twitter, I weigh the strengths and weaknesses of tweets as sources of information.
17. I take Tweets at face value and almost never check their credibility.
18. If a Tweet contains a link to a longer story, I am inclined to click on the link to see if the Tweet is credible.
19. I often think of the motivations of individuals whose Tweets I read.

The final portion of the survey measured demographics of respondents and consisted of gender, ethnicity, age, GPA, and year in school. Gender will be measured by using a simple nominal scale question including the responses: male, female, and prefer not to respond. Participants were asked to note their age and their current year of study at their institution using a ratio scale (Kumar, 2011). So that responses may be further categorized, participants were also asked their ethnicity, GPA and year in school.

1. Please note your gender:

A. Male

B. Female

C. Other / prefer not to say

2. Please note your ethnicity:

A. American Indian or Alaska Native

B. Asian

C. Black or African American

D. Hispanic or Latino

E. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

F. White

G. Other

3. How old are you today?

A. 18-21

B. 22-25

C. 25-30

4. What are your typical grades?

A. Mostly A's

B. Mostly B's

C. Mostly C's or lower

5. What's your current status as a student (e.g., first-year, sophomore, junior, or senior, or otherwise)?

A. College first-year student

B. College sophomore or second-year student

C. College junior or third-year student

D. College senior or fourth-year student

E. College fifth-year student or beyond

F. Other type of undergraduate student (e.g., exchange student)

**Statistics**

Descriptive statistics were conducted examining frequencies, means, and standard deviations of the main survey measures. Only frequencies and percentages were examined for dichotomous questions. Pearson correlation coefficients were run to determine if there are significant correlations between social media use and civic online reasoning responses. For example, is it the case that individuals who use certain types of social media more frequently also apply higher civic online reasoning skills?

# Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

## Results

The survey was distributed via an emailed link to Loyola University students enrolled in two School of Mass Communication courses. The data was downloaded from Qualtrics and transferred to SPSS. Individual scale items were reverse coded so that a lower value indicated a negative response and a higher value indicated a positive response. Four individuals did not have enough responses, so they were excluded from the sample (Allison, 2002). Then, descriptive statistics were conducted to determine the demographic characteristics among the sample.

## Demographic Descriptive Statistics

154 respondents (86.03%) were between the ages of 18-21. 23 individuals (12.85%) were between the ages of 22 to 25. The remaining two respondents (1.2%) were between 25 and 30 years old. The majority of sample participants were female (n=138, 77.53%) and 38 were male (21.35%). Two respondents (1.12%) noted "Other/prefer not to say."

Demographic characteristic data collected also included ethnicity. 98 participants were white (54.75%), 36 were Black or African American (20.11%), 32 were Hispanic or Latino (17.88%), nine were Asian (5.03%), one was American Indian or Alaska Native (.56%) and one was Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (.56%).

Participants also noted their year in school, as well as their typical grades. 54 (30.34%) individuals were first-year college students, 43 (24.16%) were college sophomores of second-year college students, 40 (22.47%) were college juniors or third-year college students, 25 (14.04%) were college seniors or fourth-year students, nine (5.06%) were college fifth-year student or beyond, and seven (3.93%) were another type of undergrad student (e.g. exchange

student.) 89 of the participants (50.0%) reported grades of mostly As, 86 said they had mostly Bs (48.31%) and three said they had grades of mostly Cs or lower (1.69%).

**Social media frequency**

Social media frequency was also measured. In Q2: "How often do you use the following in your everyday life?", the highest frequency was reported for Instagram. 151 participants (83.43%) reported using Instagram several times a day. The second-highest frequency was reported for Snapchat, with 156 respondents (75.14%) saying they use the platform several times a day. The lowest frequency was reported for Reddit, with 140 respondents (77.35%) saying they never use the platform.

Q3 asked "How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from a news professional such as a journalist?" 64 participants (35.56%) reported using Twitter several times a day, and 48 individuals (26.82%) said they used Instagram several times each day. 39 participants (21.67%) said they used Snapchat several times a day. Facebook and YouTube tied with 16.76% each (30 participants.) The lowest frequency was reported for Tumblr and LinkedIn, with 5 participants each (2.78%) reporting they used the platforms for news several times a day.

Q4 asked "Where do you get your news and information produced by a journalist on a typical day?" The top response was national or local newspaper site (48 respondents, 26.97%, said "very likely") followed closely by TV news outlet website (47 respondents, 26.55%, said "very likely"). 53 respondents (29.94%) said it was "very unlikely" that they would use the website of an individual blogger.

Q5 asked "How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from an everyday person who is not a trained journalist, such as a

blogger or YouTuber?" 36 respondents (24.34%) said they turned to Twitter several times a day, while 32 others preferred Instagram (17.98%). 23 respondents (12.99%) said they used Snapchat several times a day, and 21 (11.86%) turned to YouTube several times a day. 13 individuals (7.34%) used Facebook several times a day for this sort of news and information.

Q6 measured frequency of social media usage for consuming and sharing news. 61 participants (34.08%) reported they were "very likely" to follow a news organization/journalist on a social networking site. And 56 individuals (31.28%) said they were "very likely" to share a news story they found on social media.

**Online civic reasoning skills**

An exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was run to analyze the relationship between a large number of variables to determine a set of common underlying patterns or factors. The composite scores will create a new, smaller set of variables (factors) to use in multiple regression or correlation coefficients.

In this data set there are 19 constructs related to the online civic reasoning skills of the participants.

The factor analysis was run on the independent data variables of 183 respondents. The correlations of the sample were analyzed between the independent variables in order to group these variables into factors.

Four factors emerged from the exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.00 explaining 60.88% of the total variance. After grouping the variables, an index was created for each of the four factors that emerged from the procedure: verification, advertising, credibility and Twitter. The corresponding items were summed and

divided by the total number of items per factor to create an average index for each factor ranging from 1-5.

The first factor had an eigenvalue of 6.22, which explains 23.89% of the variance. These items all have to do with news verification, whether it be the source or the validity of an image. Going forward, this factor will be referred to as verification. The items that comprise factor one are:

- When I read a news story online, I always check where the document came from.
- When reading information in social media, I check the credibility of the source the information came from.
- When I am confronted with a vivid photograph online, I am certain to check who took the photograph or where the photograph came from.I often check the accuracy of a claim made in a social media post.
- I make sure information in social media is accurate before recommending it to a friend.
- When I look at information online, I check to see if it has strong evidence.
- I like to verify the source of a post in social media by checking his/her credentials.

The second factor had an eigenvalue of 2.31, which explains 15.26% of the variance. These items all have to do with advertising, ranging from telling the difference between a news article and a paid ad, and defining sponsored content. Going forward, this factor will be referred to as advertising. The items that comprise factor two are:

- On the whole, I would say I have the ability to distinguish between a news article and an advertisement in social media.

- I am inclined to believe that I can identify both traditional and native advertising in social media.
- I have no problem explaining the features that distinguish a news story from an advertisement.
- I would have no problem explaining what "sponsored content" means.
- I would say I have an excellent ability to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate sources online.

The third factor had an eigenvalue of 1.83, which explains 11.96% of the variance. These items all have to do with credibility, ranging from accepting information online at face value to checking the credibility of a source. Going forward, this factor will be referred to as credibility. The items that comprise factor three are:

- When I look at information online, I tend to accept it at face value.
- I accept information at face value if the information comes from a trusted friend.
- I take tweets at face value and almost never check their credibility.
- I am inclined to "like" information because my friend recommended it to me.

The fourth factor had an eigenvalue of 1.21, which explains 9.77% of the variance. These items all have to do with Twitter, ranging from accepting information online at face value to checking the credibility of a source. Going forward, this factor will be referred to as Twitter. The items that comprise factor four are:

- When I come across information in Twitter, I weigh the strengths and weaknesses of tweets as sources of information.

- If a tweet contains a link to a longer story, I am inclined to click on the link to see if the tweet is credible.
- I often think of the motivations of individuals whose tweets I read.

**Internal Reliability**

To ensure that each component of this study measured what it intends to, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each online civic reasoning measure to ensure that the survey instruments were reliable measures. Cronbach's alpha (α) is a measure of internal consistency that indicates the degree of reliability for variables made up of several items (Cronk, 2012).

Cronbach's alpha indicated that the items in factor one together reliably measure attitudes towards verification (α=0.88), the items in factor two together reliably measure attitudes towards advertising (α=0.79), the items in factor three together reliably measure attitudes towards credibility (α=0.78), and the items in factor four together reliably measure attitudes towards Twitter (α=0.68).

H. There is a correlation between higher frequency of social media usage and higher level of online civic reasoning skills.

To test this, the top three social media platforms ranked by frequency (Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) were put individually into a Pearson correlation coefficient to calculate a relationship with the four civic online reasoning factors. If a correlation exists between them, that relationship should be linear.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between frequent Twitter usage and the four civic online reasoning factors: verification, advertising, credibility and Twitter. A moderate positive correlation relationship was found between high Twitter usage and

one of the four factors, Twitter, $r(176) = -.41$, $p < .01$, $r(175) = -.425$, $p < .01$, indicating a significant linear relationship between Twitter usage and the Twitter factor. Using Twitter frequently means a higher level of online civic reasoning skills specific to the Twitter factor.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between frequent Instagram usage and the four civic online reasoning factors. The Pearson r correlation found no significant correlation between Instagram use and the four civic reasoning factors.

Finally, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between frequent Snapchat usage and the four civic online reasoning factors. The Pearson r correlation found no significant correlation between Snapchat use and the four civic reasoning factors.

# Chapter 5: Discussion & Implications

## Theoretical Implications

The purpose of this research was to examine social media usage for news consumption, news behaviors, and online civic reasoning among Generation Z, generally defined as anyone born during or after the year 1997 through the year 2012 (Dimock, 2019). Specifically, the study had two main purposes: 1) examine social media usage frequency for news consumption and other news behaviors (e.g., sharing, liking) via social media; and 2) examine the extent to which Gen Z uses aspects of online civic reasoning in their social media news consumption/behaviors. This was accomplished via an online survey of Gen Z college-aged students (*N=187)* enrolled at a private university located in the southern part of the United States.

A 2016 project by the Stanford History Education Group illustrated the need for civic online reasoning skills among young people. The researchers used a qualitative study to attempt to understand just how much young people in middle school, high school, and college participate in what they called "civic online reasoning." The study developed 56 tasks for students across 12 states to undertake. Researchers surveyed more than 7,000 students at the middle, high school and college level. The researchers called their findings "bleak." They found that across the board, students had poor skills when it came to correctly evaluating and assessing information that they find on social media (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). For example, the majority of individuals could not tell the difference between a news story and an advertisement.

The goal of this research was to adapt the qualitative assessment measures set forward by the Stanford History Education Group into quantitative measures, and focus on college-aged student participants, who are members for Generation Z — the target demographic. The

overarching research question addressed by this study is: What is Gen Z's social media usage for news consumption and behavior and their ability to reason about the information they send and receive on social media and the internet in general? Put another way: What is the civic online reasoning of Gen Z college-aged students when it comes to news and information sent/received via social media and the internet in general?

This research question is important due to the changing audience of news, reaching a younger demographic that has grown up using social media. Additionally, changes in technology (Bakir & McStay, 2018), algorithms that may control news media searches and which users see what news content (Caplan & Boyd, 2018), and actors that spread misinformation on purpose to create distrust in the media to sway public opinion (Corner, 2017) point to the importance of examining perceptions of the younger generation of news consumers who rely mostly on social media for news and information.

Civic online reasoning calls upon a news consumer to "decipher credible information and explicitly discern reliable evidence from suspect evidence" (Colglazier, 2018, p. 4). This skill is important to a thriving democracy because misinformation and lack of trust in the press threatens the news industry and its role in keeping citizens informed. And our nation's democracy is based on free-flowing and public discourse. Reliable information is the cornerstone of that discourse, and increasingly, Americans rely on the internet and social media for that information. In particular, the American Press Institute found that young people get 75 percent of their news online (*How Millenials Get News* , 2015). And many of them rely on social media to get their news and information. 47 percent of 18 to 29 year-old online news consumers accessing news on social media platforms (Mitchell, Gottfried, Shearer, & Lu, 2017.) The ability to discern among news and non-news aspects afforded by online civic reasoning is key for Gen Z because they are

more likely to learn about the world through social media than through traditional sources like print newspapers and TV news.

Those social networking sites (SNSs) are creating a new dynamic of news, which is now personalized, portable and participatory (Purcell, Raine, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010, para. 4). Unfortunately, false news can proliferate on social media sites. Research shows the most popular fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential election were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories (Silverman, 2016). Additionally, many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). And a false story is much more likely to go viral than a real story, according to MIT researchers. A false story reaches 1,500 people six times quicker, on average, than a true story does (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This misinformation and lack of trust in the press threatens the news industry and its role in keeping citizens informed. Increasing online civic reasoning skills is key to stop bad agents and increase trust in news media.

Some lawmakers see the importance of teaching online civic media skills to K-12 students. A handful of states have taken steps to help students build civic online reasoning skills and improve media literacy in the classroom. In 2016, the governor of the state of Washington approved a bill to establish a support structure to enable state educators to implement media literacy and digital citizenship education in every school (Media Literacy Now, 2016). That law spurred more action by a national coalition of groups to work to persuade 20 states to pass new digital-citizenship legislation. Lawmakers in Massachusetts and California have passed bills to mandate media literacy or give educators resources to teach online civic reasoning to students. And in 2019, 12 more states are considering legislation to improve media literacy in various forms at the K-12 level (MLN, 2019).

This research provided insight into social media frequency and platform preference for Gen Z. Our survey found that the social media platform participants used the most on an everyday basis was Instagram, with the second-highest frequency reported for Snapchat. But when asked about their social media usage specifically for news, Twitter was named the number one social media platform by participants. This information can help news organizations as they work to reach a younger audience through news delivery methods, and to find new revenue models as the audience grows for online news. The information can also help social media platform operators as they fight against agents who spread false news through those networks.

Online civic reasoning skills were also measured. Four factors emerged from the exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.00 explaining 60.88% of the total variance. After grouping the variables, an index was created for each of the four factors that emerged from the procedure: verification, advertising, credibility and Twitter. These factors can be helpful to educators as they work to craft curriculum to increase young people's online civic reasoning skills.

This research looked to find a correlation between higher frequency of social media usage and higher level of online civic reasoning skills. Pearson correlation coefficients showed only one moderate significant relationship between high social media frequency and the four factors of online civic reasoning skills. Only Twitter usage showed a moderate significant relationship. This finding shows that just because one has a high frequency of social media usage, it does not translate to a high level of online civic reasoning. It can be easy to assume that just because a young person uses social media often, they know how to use it well when it comes to finding news and information, or how to discern real news from false information. This sort of assumption can create a bias against media literacy programs.

Our findings show that even if a member of Gen Z has a high level of social media use, it does not necessarily translate to a high level of online civic reasoning skills. In other words, one should not assume that just because a person uses Snapchat or Instagram often, they will be able to seperate fake news from real information, or advertisements from news copy. However, the findings do indicate a moderate correlation between using Twitter and having good online civic reasoning skills.

There are multiple reasons why Twitter stands out as a indicator of strong online civic reasoning skills. The platform's format lends itself to both lateral and vertical reading. As previously discussed, one trademark of media literacy is the concept of reading laterally, in contrast with reading vertically (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017, p. 1). A Twitter user reads their feed vertically, and there are certain factors that give the user clues about a source's reliability and trustworthiness. Twitter uses a verification system that adds credibility to accounts. A user can also track the frequency of posting and the reliability of an account.

Additionally, Twiter users use lateral reading skills by clicking on web links and opening new sources of information to learn more about a tweet and its claims. This action helps the user analyze and evaluate messages outside of the platform and allows for more investigation by the user.

Finally, Twitter is a public clearinghouse of ideas and information. Users share content from each other, which means that users will see news and information even if they don't subscribe to an account. The platform itself is always trying to make a user's timeline more engaging in order to increase time spent on the app. Twitter does this in a few ways. Each tweet is scored by a relevance model to predict how interesting and engaging a Tweet would be specifically to each user (Koumchatzky & Andryeyev, 2017). Those tweets are shown to each

user at the top of their feed, and they may not be from people the user already follows. Twitter also uses algorithms to create a "in case you missed it" module, which contains a handful highly-ranked relevant tweets. The algorithms take several factors into account, including how recent the tweet is, if it uses media, how many total interctions it was (such as retweets or likes), the author of the tweet and a user's past interactions with that author, the origin of the users relationship, tweets a user has found engaging in the past, and how heavily a user uses Twitter (Koumchatzky & Andryeyev, 2017). All of these factors combine to create a newsfeed that includes news and information a user may not intentionally seek out, but is able to view and access based on the platform's design. Conversely, Facebook requires users to be "friends" before they can view each other's content, which makes for a more narrow timeline and limits access to information.

**Practical Implications**

Social media has changed the way people consume and share news and information. Gen Z is using social media as a primary source of news over traditional forms such as newspapers and television newscasts. If news outlets can better understand how Gen Z uses social media as a newsgathering tool, they can create products to better reach the Gen Z audience, as well as generate funding based on advertising models designed to target Gen Z.

Social media networks can also use these findings to strengthen their efforts to keep false information from spreading through their platforms. They could use tools designed to educate their users on online civic reasoning skills.

Additionally, educators can use these findings to create curriculum to address the online civic reasoning. By knowing which skills are needed by students, teachers can design lesson

plans and exercises to better prepare Gen Z for the challenges they face when they use social media for news and information.

As previously discussed, more states are considering legislation to mandate online civic reasoning skills in the classroom. Lawmakers can use these findings to craft specific required outcomes and deliverables for school systems as they work to arm students with essential skills.

**Limitations and Future Direction**

While the sample was designed to target only members of Gen Z, some participants were older than the cutoff age of 22. Nonetheless, the author felt that those individuals were close enough in age to the preferred sample to include the responses. Repeating this survey using a platform that ensures only individuals who fit the Gen Z age range would be an easy way to replicate the survey with reduced risk. Additionally, the survey would be simple to replicate using a sample of different college students. Repeating the study, but expanding the recruitment to other areas of the United States would provide additional perspective for social media usage and online civic reasoning skills. Additionally, the online survey was limited to only those participants who have access to the Internet and are enrolled as a mass communications student at Loyola University New Orleans. It is possible that those who choose to participate had a certain interest in the topic, allowing for slight potential for voluntary response bias (Creswell, 2014). And the survey recruitment allows participants to either choose to participate or ignore the opportunity, with the incentive of extra credit for a college course.

Not every type of media delivery was included in this survey. For example, one participant contacted the author to say that she often uses podcasts to get news and information, but podcasts were not listed as an option in the survey. It would be interesting to include other

types of media delivery such as over-the-top (OTT) media services, online newsletters and other emerging media.

To ensure that each component of this study measured what it intends to, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each online civic reasoning measure to ensure that the survey instruments were reliable measures. Cronbach's alpha (α) is a measure of internal consistency that indicates the degree of reliability for variables made up of several items (Cronk, 2012). Cronbach's alpha indicated that the items in factor four together reliably measure attitudes towards Twitter (α=0.68). This is slightly under the range most scientists consider to be acceptable, as George and Mallery (2003) suggest in their tiered approach consisting of the following: "≥ .9 – Excellent, ≥ .8 – Good, ≥ .7 – Acceptable, ≥ .6 – Questionable, ≥ .5 – Poor, and ≤ .5 – Unacceptable" (p. 231).

This survey focused only on Gen Z; however, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study on a different generation, perhaps the group Strauss and Howe dubbed the Silent Generation, born from 1925-1942, or the Boom Generation, born between 1943-1960. More older Americans are getting their news and information from social media. For example, researchers found that 21% of the American adults who use Twitter are between the ages of 50-64, and 10% are older than 64 years old (Greenwood et al., 2016). It would be interesting to see how those generations use social media for news and if their frequency on such platforms affects their online civic reasoning skills.

**Conclusions**

By quantifying the usage of social media networks and the civic reasoning skill level of Gen Z, the findings in this research can help a wide range of stakeholders who have a vested interest in increasing online civic reasoning skills. Twitter could be better leveraged by news

organizations and educators to target Gen Z for both news delivery and revenue. Secondly, social media networks can use this data to improve how they work to fight agents who spread false information or to better arm their users to detect problematic content on their platforms.

Finally, members of Gen Z are often assumed to have strong digital skills because they have grown up with this technology. But our findings show that just using social media in one's daily life for news and information does not mean one is able to use it wisely when it comes to finding and evaluating that content. This can help educators and lawmakers push for more resources for Gen Z to improve their online civic reasoning skills. This research can also shape curriculum that is designed to help members of Gen Z meet the challenge of living in a digital world.

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# Appendix A

## Survey Consent Form

You have been invited to participate in this survey conducted by Lisa Collins, visiting professor in the School of Mass Communication at Loyola University New Orleans. We are interested in understanding how Generation Z uses social media for news.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your responses will be kept completely confidential and will be reported in aggregate form. There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant that are greater than those of normal daily experience.

As appreciation for your participation, you will have an opportunity to provide your name at the end of the survey to earn five points of extra credit.

We estimate it will take about 15 minutes to complete this survey. If you have questions about the survey, please contact Lisa Collins at lisacollins.loyno@gmail.com.

I consent

I do not consent

## Appendix B

**Final Survey Questionnaire**

**Q2. How often do you use the following in your everyday life?**

Facebook:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Twitter:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

LinkedIn:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Instagram:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Pinterest:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Reddit:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Snapchat:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Tumblr:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope):

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

YouTube:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

**Q3: How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from a news professional such as a journalist?**

Facebook:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Twitter:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

LinkedIn:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Instagram:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Pinterest:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Reddit:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Snapchat:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Tumblr:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope):

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

YouTube:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

**Q4: Where do you get your news and information produced by a journalist on a typical day?**

National or local newspaper website:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

TV news outlet website:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Radio news outlet website:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

News aggregator (e.g., Google news):

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

International news outlet website:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Website that mixes news and commentary:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Website of an individual blogger:

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

**Q5: How often do you use the following in your everyday life for news and information that comes from an everyday person who is not a trained journalist, such as a blogger or YouTuber?**

Facebook:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Twitter:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

LinkedIn:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Instagram:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Pinterest:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Reddit:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Snapchat:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Tumblr:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

Live video streaming services (e.g. Facebook live, Twitch, Periscope):

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

YouTube:

*(1) Several times a day (2) About once a day (3) A couple times per week (4) Once a week (5) A couple times per month (6) Once a month (7) Never*

**Q6: On a typical day, do you:**

Share a news story via social media?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Follow a news organization/journalist on a social networking site?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Get Twitter updates from a news organization/journalist?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

"Like" a news story on Facebook?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

"Retweet" a news story via Twitter?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Recommend a news story via social media?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

Forward a news story you saw on social media?

*(1) Very unlikely (2) Unlikely (3) Neutral (4) Likely (5) Very likely*

**Q7: Please respond to these statements:**

On the whole, I would say I have the ability to distinguish between a news article and an advertisement in social media.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I am inclined to believe that I can identify both traditional and native advertising in social media.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I have no problem explaining the features that distinguish a news story from an advertisement.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I would have no problem explaining what "sponsored content" means.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I would say I have an excellent ability to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate sources online.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When I read a news story online, I always check where the document came from.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When reading information in social media, I check the credibility of the source the information came from.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When I am confronted with a vivid photograph online, I am certain to check who took the photograph or where the photograph came from.*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I am inclined to "Like" information because my friend recommended it to me.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I often check the accuracy of a claim made in a social media post.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I make sure information in social media is accurate before recommending it to a friend.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When I look at information online, I tend to accept it at face value.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When I look at information online, I check to see if it has strong evidence.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I accept information at face value if the information comes from a trusted friend.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I like to verify the source of a post in social media by checking his/her credentials.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

When I come across information in Twitter, I weigh the strengths and weaknesses of tweets as sources of information.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I take Tweets at face value and almost never check their credibility.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

If a Tweet contains a link to a longer story, I am inclined to click on the link to see if the Tweet is credible.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

I often think of the motivations of individuals whose Tweets I read.

*(1) not at all true, (2) more false than true, (3) neither false nor true, (4) more true than false, (5) very true*

**Q8: Please note your gender.**

Male

Female

Other/prefer not to say

**Q9. Please note your ethnicity.**

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Other

**Q 10: How old are you today?**

18-21

22-25

25-30

**Q 11: What are your typical grades?**

Mostly A’s

Mostly B’s

Mostly C’s or lower

**Q 12: What's your current status as a student (e.g., first-year, sophomore, junior, or senior, or otherwise)?**

College first-year student

College sophomore or second-year student

College junior or third-year student

College senior or fourth-year student

College fifth-year student or beyond

Other type of undergraduate student (e.g., exchange student)

**Q 13: Thank you for participating! If you would like extra credit for completing this survey, type your name in below. Your data will remain anonymous, this only proves that you have finished the survey.**