FULL PAPER

Between reflective evaluation and opinion-finds-me
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opinion-forming process

Zwischen reflexiver Evaluation und Opinion-Finds-Me
Die Rolle von News-YouTuber*innen im politischen
Meinungsbildungsprozess junger Erwachsener

Nariman Sawalha & Veronika Karnowski

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Abstract: With more young adults turning to YouTube for up-to-date news, this development raises questions about their news usage patterns and, more precisely, their perception of News-YouTubers as a crucial source for opinion-forming. Drawing on concepts of social media information behavior and the heuristic-systematic model, this study provides initial insights into the role of YouTube and especially News-YouTubers in young adults' involvement with the news. Taking their general interest and information behavior in their daily lives into account, we identified high- and low-involved news users based on qualitative interviews with German-speaking young adults. While both types of news users appreciate News-YouTubers for similar reasons – namely, comprehension, entertainment, and identification – they differ in their opinion-forming processes. Those highly involved in news use News-YouTubers solely to support opinion formation, whereas those with low involvement tend to heuristically process and adopt News-YouTubers' perceptions and opinions. We conclude that low-involved users not only perceive that *news-finds-me* but also *opinion-finds-me*.

Keywords: news-finds-me, opinion-finds-me, YouTube, young adults, news use.

Zusammenfassung: Die Prävalenz von YouTube im Nachrichtenrepertoire junger Erwachsener wirft Fragen zu ihrem Nachrichtennutzungsverhalten und darüber hinaus zu ihrer Wahrnehmung von News-YouTuber*innen als wesentliche Quelle ihres Meinungsbildungsprozesses auf. Aufbauend auf Konzepten des Informationsverhaltens in sozialen Medien und dem heuristisch-systematischen Modell, liefert diese Studie erste Einblicke in die Rolle von YouTube und insbesondere von News-YouTuber*innen bei der Nachrichtennutzung junger Erwachsener. Unter Berücksichtigung ihres allgemeinen Nachrichteninteresses und -nutzungsverhaltens identifizierten wir auf Basis qualitativer Leitfadeninterviews mit jungen Erwachsenen hoch und wenig involvierte Nachrichtennutzer*innen. Während beide Typen von Nachrichtennutzer*innen News-YouTuber*innen aus ähnlichen Gründen – vornehmlich Verständnis, Unterhaltung und Identifikation – schätzen, unterscheiden sie sich darin, wie sie ihre Meinungen bilden. Diejenigen mit hohem Nachrichteninvolvement nutzen News-YouTuber*innen ausschließlich als Unterstützung zur Meinungsbildung, wohin-

gegen diejenigen mit geringem Involvement dazu neigen, die Wahrnehmungen und Meinungen der News-YouTuber*innen heuristisch zu verarbeiten und zu übernehmen. Wir schließen daraus, dass auf wenig involvierte Nutzer*innen nicht nur eine *News-Finds-Me-Perception*, sondern auch eine *Opinion-Finds-Me-Perception* zutrifft.

Schlagwörter: News-Finds-Me, Opinion-Finds-Me, Youtube, junge Erwachsene, Nachrichtennutzung.

1. Introduction

Over ten million views in only seven days: A week before the elections for the European Parliament in 2019, a German YouTuber, known under the pseudonym Rezo, uploads a video campaigning against Chancellor Angela Merkel's governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In the 55-minute-long video, titled "Die Zerstörung der CDU" [The Destruction of the CDU], 27-year-old YouTube comedian Rezo assails the governing party on its failures (Rezo, 2019). Mainly based on climate change-related issues, he wants to show, "dass nach der Expertenmeinung von zigtausend deutschen Wissenschaftlern die CDU aktuell unser Leben und unsere Zukunft zerstört" [that according to many thousands of German scientists, the CDU is currently destroying our very lives and our future] (Rezo, 2019, Timestamp 0:43). Within a few days after its release, the YouTuber's tirade provoked a media-led debate on the impact of YouTubers' political endorsements on their primary audience – the youth (Schuetze, 2019). This example demonstrates current trends on the platform: YouTubers not only entertain their followers with shallow content such as Let's Plays or beauty tutorials but increasingly use their platform to disseminate information and related opinions (Haarkötter, 2019). Yet journalistic content on YouTube is multifaceted, ranging from professional journalism to satirical and emotionally heated commentary and potentially democracy-threatening populist content. Meanwhile, this type of news coverage seems to resonate primarily with young adults, who appreciate opinion-based and 'authentic' information provided by YouTubers (Dander, 2019).

This development is embedded in current trends in youths' overall news use: Recent studies analyzing the information behavior during adolescence paint a picture of young adults, who (1) are hardly interested in current world affairs (news deprivation; Schneider & Eisenegger, 2019), (2) hardly come into contact with traditional news media (e.g., Edgerly et al., 2018), and (3) only deal with news content if presented incidentally (incidental news exposure; e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Given the high significance of social media as the main source of news for 18- to 24-year-old Germans (Hölig & Behre, 2021), platforms like YouTube hence provide young users with news, even "while they're not consciously looking for it" (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018, p. 2).

Although several studies deal with the persuasive powers of influencers on YouTube in endorsing products and brands (e.g., Xiao et al., 2018), the role of YouTubers in young adults' news diets and political opinion-forming processes has been given very little attention so far. Based on qualitative interviews with ten German-speaking young adults, the present study aims to address this research gap by examining the role of YouTube and especially News-YouTubers in young

adults' overall news diets and the potential influence of these News-YouTubers on political opinion-forming processes in this cohort.

2. Young adults and the news

To discuss the role of YouTube and especially News-YouTubers in young adults' overall news diets, we first need to consider the paradoxical nature of young adults' relationship with the news in our current news environments.

Nowadays, TV, print, and radio only play a marginal role in German young adults' information repertoires. The Internet (79%), including social media (52%), rose to their preferred and most used source of information (Hölig & Behre, 2021). Having a closer look at social media news use, Facebook (18%), closely followed by WhatsApp (17%), and YouTube (16%) are the most important platforms to access daily news (Hölig & Behre, 2021). Thereby, attention is not simply shifting away from traditional channels to the online pendants of legacy media, but rather non-journalistic sources of information, i.e., YouTubers, influencers, or celebrities who disseminate news content on their channels or profiles gain importance (Kramp, 2018).

Paradoxically, the actual use of social media for news still contrasts with a great deal of mistrust as more than one in two (53%) young adults do not trust news on social media at all, and more than one-third (32%) are on the fence (Hölig & Behre, 2021). At the same time, young adults judge legacy media, especially the public broadcasters' news programs and daily newspapers, to be the most trustworthy sources of news. But again, this assessment is not reflected in their actual usage (Hölig & Behre, 2021).[1]

This discrepancy between the overall evaluation of different sources of news and young adults' actual news diets goes along with decreasing interest in the news. Fifty percent, i.e., only half of 18- to 24-year-olds in Germany, state being "very or extremely interested in news" (Hölig & Behre, 2021). Despite this slight recovery compared to 2019 when a mere 43% expressed a high level of interest in the news, the long-term trend indicates a slow but steady decrease in interest in the news (2013: 62%, 2014: 68%, 2015: 67%, 2016: 54%, 2017: 55%, 2018: 54%, 2019: 43%, 2020: 50%, 2021: 50% high interest in the news; Hölig & Behre, 2021).[2]

Many scholars argue that adolescents' decreasing interest in news is inevitably accompanied by relatively low awareness of quality journalism and a poor understanding of political affairs (Edgerly, 2017). Given the waning desire to stay up to date on current world affairs and the contradictions between evaluations and actual uses, today's youth is characterized as "newsless" (Media Insight Project,

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1   In this context, a focused literature review conducted by Strömbäck et al. (2020) shows that the approval or disapproval of news media is not solely determined by rational reasoning such as reliability and trust, but more often by factors of habitual media use, such as entertainment and social utility.

2   Recent research attributes the higher uptake of news in 2020 and 2021 to an increased news demand in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., van Eimeren et al., 2020, p. 542). However, it remains to be seen how sustainable this change is in the long run.

2015) – a generation holding ambivalent and difficult to assess expectations of news formats (Emde-Lachmund & Klimmt, 2018; Huang, 2009). Correspondingly, previous studies labeled them "News-Deprived" (Schneider & Eisenegger, 2019), "News Avoiders" (Edgerly et al., 2018), or "Generation Newsless" (Wippersberg, 2016).

Considering this overall inconclusive picture of young adults' engagement with the news, including a decreasing interest in the news and high levels of use of non-traditional news sources (especially via social media channels), while at the same time only having low levels of trust in these news sources but rather trusting legacy media's news programs, we firstly ask:

RQ1: What role does news consumption play in young adults' daily lives?

3. Characteristics of social media news use

Given the prominent role of social media in young adults' news diets described above, we next need to consider the specifics of social media news use to dig deeper into this cohorts' engagement with the news.

When scrolling through their social media feeds, users often experience news as a by-product between various other and topically diverse postings (Boczkowski et al., 2018, p. 3531). While an active search for news content is possible, it is primarily the incidental exposure to news that plays a major role on social media (Feezell, 2018). A US study revealed that 63% of Instagram and 62% of Facebook users are mainly reached by the news "when they're doing other things online" (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 6). For YouTube, 58% of users are reached by news videos only "by chance" (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 6). A more recent comparative analysis by Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) revealed that incidental news exposure is even more pronounced on YouTube than on Facebook or Twitter.

Of course, this incidental encounter with news on social media does not happen entirely by chance. Instead, several curational processes described by Thorson and Wells (2016) guide the likelihood of incidentally encountering news when using social media. Most prominent to young adults' encounters with news on social media are personal, social, and algorithm curation processes: Whether young adults will subscribe to news channels, in how far their friends will forward news to them, and how the social media algorithms will evaluate their actions and hence display news more or less frequently in their social media feeds. But even those who use YouTube for news (e.g., by subscribing to news-related channels) hardly consciously seek information when entering the platform (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Therefore, scholars need to consider the implications of the non-exclusive news environment on users' overall interest in the news. There are, broadly speaking, two relevant empirical positions: (1) Incidental news exposure potentially promotes the acquisition of knowledge, especially among those who are not reached by news via conventional sources (Lee & Kim, 2017). (2) Others see "stumbling upon news" (Kim et al., 2013, p. 2607) as a hindrance for increasing news interest, as incidental exposure hinders continuous tracking of world affairs and therefore prevents the emergence of political expression and participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

In this context, the Matthew effect allows for a more nuanced view: (Young) users who are already highly interested benefit to a greater extent from (accidentally discovered) information than (young) users who are less interested in the news anyway (Kümpel, 2020). Thus, the user's pre-existing individual level of news interest influences her news experience on social media.

However, users with little motivation and little interest in news feel no need to turn to news coverage intentionally. These users perceive themselves (1) to be sufficiently informed even without actively following the news because (2) the most important news reaches or 'finds' them anyway ("news-finds-me-perception", Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Park & Kaye, 2020). As a result, uninterested individuals do not feel obligated to seek further information from other sources, as the subjective perception of sufficient knowledge dominates (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). However, evidence shows that a news-finds-me-perception does not result in knowledge, but social and political affairs can be barely reproduced (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). Findings of Song et al. imply in addition that a high news-finds-me-perception is often accompanied by the 'blind' confidence of gaining "an efficient and costless shortcut for information acquisition" (2020, p. 64) through peers and opinion leaders in their social network. Hence, the information provided by one's social network is often considered more relevant and therefore more noteworthy than equal posts by legacy media (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018).

Another important aspect of young adults' news use via social media is related to the fading use of traditional news outlets among this cohort. This development is not necessarily due to a genuine lack of news interest on the part of young adults (Gnach et al., 2020). Instead, young adults perceive these sources and their presentation as outdated and detached from their own and digital lifeworld (Kramp, 2018). As a study with Swiss young adults shows, their motives for information seeking are, above all, guided by a wish for an appealing presentation of news that follows the logic of social media feeds (Schwaiger, 2020). Hence, viewed through the lens of the uses-and-gratifications approach, their news consumption motivations and requirements for journalistic coverage on social media do not primarily adhere to quality principles (i.e., factual accuracy, objectivity, independence), but rather are outcomes of platform-related user experience (Lee & Kim, 2017).

4. News content on YouTube

Thus, one source young adults turn to these days to get in touch with the news is YouTube and, more specifically, News-YouTubers. Beyond the context of just news, Haarkötter states that the "Generation YouTube" (2019, p. 16) is almost unreachable to the mass media while YouTube is firmly established in their everyday lives. And, as already discussed above regarding social media in general, YouTube users inevitably encounter content both purely entertaining and informative (Bowyer et al., 2017). However, news channels on YouTube are widely diversified and go beyond the online counterparts of established offline brands.

Although legacy media's news formats are uploaded onto YouTube, it is precisely the user-generated content that is characteristic and prevalent, as Haarkötter (2019) concludes based on data derived from video content on YouTube Germany. Genuine YouTubers – as in 'relatable' influencers – provide content that fits the thematic interests of young adults, which accounts for a sense of representation and identification that they often perceive to be missing in traditional media (Gnach et al., 2020). Those genuine German YouTubers expressing themselves on news topics can be distinguished into two types (see Table 1): those who occasionally express themselves politically in selected videos or formats (e.g., Rezo), and those who dedicate their whole channel to purely political and news-related content and may have a professional journalistic background (e.g., Tilo Jung).

Table 1. Categorization of main news sources on YouTube Germany

Type	Description	Examples
Established news media	Legacy media's news broadcasts uploaded onto YouTube	ARD Tagesschau, ZDF heute, Der Spiegel
Professional-journalistic News-YouTubers: Funk-News-YouTubers	Under contract with funk, a content network of German public service broadcasters	Mirko Drotschmann aka MrWissen2Go (journalist); Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim aka maiLab (chemist, science journalist); Phillip Walulis aka Walulis (TV moderator)
(Topic-)independent News-YouTubers: News-YouTubers	Informational YouTubers, who exclusively cover news topics on their channels	Tilo Jung aka Jung & Naiv; Florian Diedrich aka LeFloid
	Topic-independent YouTubers, who also express themselves politically on their channels	Rezo (comedy); Diana zur Löwen (lifestyle)

Note. Based on Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019; Haarkötter, 2019.

Legacy media outlets have also recognized the potential of YouTubers in addressing the young audience: In 2016, the German public broadcasters (ARD and ZDF) established funk, a social media content network. On its over 70 thematically diverse channels, YouTube personalities – oftentimes with a professional (journalistic) background – produce informational content to win back "das 'verlorene' Publikum" [the 'lost' audience] (Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019, p. 107). Meanwhile, the public broadcasters' role in funk was kept unobtrusive, with ARD and ZDF only mentioned in the end screen and the description box below a video (Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019).

As discussed above, YouTube, being part of the social media ensemble, is also used for political information. But previous studies have shown that the viewers' motives are not primarily directed to strategic political surveillance but rather focus on habitual entertainment purposes (Hanson et al., 2011). This includes a desire for humorous, exciting, or even exaggerated portrayal of political content,

which can be ideally met on YouTube since News-YouTubers (whether from funk or in general) are not (strictly) bound to journalistic standards of objectivity and are free to express their subjective views and opinions (Lewis, 2020, p. 213). Hence, the desire for entertainment is fulfilled while the informative component of the video is 'effortlessly' met along the way. Taking these aspects into consideration, we pose our second research question:

> RQ2: Which role do YouTube and especially native YouTube news content play in young adults' news diets?

5. Evaluating news content on YouTube

Given the characteristics of YouTubers as a news source as well as young adults' tendency to 'effortlessly' gather information while "doing other things online" (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 6), News-YouTubers and their content do not appeal to most young users due to a traditional reporting approach, but rather through parasocial attributes that are far from journalistic evaluation standards (Freberg et al., 2011). As a result of parasocial interactions (i.e., one-sided, pseudo-intimate bonds) between followers and a liked YouTuber (Rasmussen, 2018), these content creators are given a 'trust-advantage' over legacy media (Lewis, 2020). Consequently, low-involved news users make use of heuristic evaluation criteria when evaluating political statements by YouTube personalities (Song et al., 2020). In short: For the sake of ease, the perceived sympathy, attractiveness, or ascribed ability of a YouTuber in other, non-news areas (i.e., beauty, gaming, etc.) is transferred to her competence in conveying political knowledge and opinion through heuristic "mental shortcut[s]" (Pjesivac et al. 2018, p. 27).

This theoretical standpoint stems from Chaiken's Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), which explains persuasion effects in information processing (Chaiken, 1980). Like the more prominent Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), this dual-process theory explains persuasion effects in information processing. Whereas the ELM models a central (systematic) or peripheral (heuristic) route concurrently to evaluate information, the HSM assumes systematic and heuristic evaluation criteria to be applied simultaneously. Hence, the user's involvement and motivation determine whether information processing is (rather) heuristic or (rather) systematic. Several studies (Xiao et al., 2018) suggest that heuristic source cues (i.e., YouTuber's personality, looks, diction, etc.) outweigh systematic message cues (i.e., conveyed arguments) when evaluating news-related content. Accordingly, users with little interest hold a repertoire of heuristic shortcuts for 'effortless' message evaluation (Xiao et al., 2018). In an experimental design, Turcotte et al. (2015) examined the heuristic information processing of political news shared by peers on Facebook. They conclude that the "trustworthiness of [a] friend" (p. 524), which is attributed to her in other, non-news areas (e.g., fashion, health, business), is likely to be transferred to her trustworthiness and expertise in political issues. Thus, a friend's shared message is more likely to be noticed and read and more likely to be interpreted as trustworthy from the outset – without further questioning the source of the shared message (Turcotte et al., 2015). Naturally, this notion is boosted if the trustee is perceived as particularly likable and if the trustor perceives

a great deal of similarity between her and the trustee, whether in terms of appearance or shared values (Xiao et al., 2018). Ultimately, the credibility of a YouTuber is not (necessarily) measured by information-related message cues (i.e., quality of arguments), but primarily by heuristic source cues, like the expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, and homophily of the YouTuber as a person.

Complementing RQ2, we hence pose the following third research question:

> *RQ3: How do young adults assess the credibility of News-YouTubers, and to what degree do they serve them as an orientation for opinion formation?*

6. Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews with ten German-speaking YouTube users aged 18 to 24 recruited through snowball sampling to answer these research questions. Apart from the age-specific determinant, the project required participants who regularly use YouTube for information purposes. We checked this precondition before conducting the interviews. To allow for some heterogeneity regarding the interviewees' educational background, we interviewed five informants with middle and higher educational levels[3] , respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2. List of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education level
Sam	24	male	high
Nora	18	female	middle
Miguel	18	male	middle
Alice	20	female	high
Heidi	22	female	high
Tristan	23	male	middle
Emilia	21	female	high
Romy	19	female	high
Carl	19	male	middle
Diego	22	male	middle

Based on the theoretical framework of our paper, the interview guide covered the topics general news usage, patterns of use, general YouTube usage, news usage on YouTube, and credibility assessment of News-YouTubers. In the final block, we added questions for an in-depth examination by way of example. Here we asked the respondents to back up and exemplify their views and attitudes on an already watched News-Youtuber's video. By referring to a particular video, the interviewer could pose

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3 Middle educational level in the German educational system refers to the completion of 'Realschule' with a Middle Maturity Certificate. This degree equates to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the British educational system. Higher educational level refers to the obtainment of the matriculation standard 'Abitur', which is equivalent to A-Levels.

more precise questions, and the interviewee could provide more detailed answers. Lastly, a short series of standardized questions on socio-demographic data concluded the interview guide. Before entering the field, we carried out pre-tests with three young adults, which indicated the need for slight adjustments for comprehensibility. We changed the order of questions and included uniform definitions to possible inquiries regarding the distinctions of news sources on YouTube, according to Table 1.

The lead author conducted the interviews over video call in May 2020 (*min* = 24 minutes; *max* = 36 minutes; *M* = 32 minutes). The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. During the field phase, the two authors performed preliminary analyses after every two interviews to evaluate the level of saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). We conducted further interviews until a rough grouping of respondents into low- and high-involved news users emerged. According to Mayring's (2014) qualitative content analysis, we resorted to the deductive category approach to analyze the transcripts.[4] The broad categories and sub-categories are listed in detail in Table 3.

Table 3. Deductively formulated category system

News diet	
(Preferred) news source	"I watch TV news the most, usually the BBC, CNN." (Heidi)
Legacy media	"If I really want to get reliable information, I would always turn to traditional media…" (Emilia)
Social media	"In terms of COVID-news, I straight up avoid social media…" (Romy)
News-YouTuber	"For example, the video from maiLab. I thought it was quite good." (Tristan)
News interest	"I would say it's already high because I check the news at least once a day…" (Romy)
Frequency of use	"As someone who has to take the train a lot, I go through my news apps regularly." (Alice)
Variety of sources	"Especially ARD and ZDF. But now also Phoenix, the RKI live-ticker, and international channels like CNN, BBC." (Sam)
Patterns of use/Information behavior	
Reception patterns	"If I'm on YouTube and the videos are recommended to me, I just click on them." (Sam)
Incidental news exposure	"Probably just through Google News, if you go on Google or also randomly on Instagram…" (Miguel)
News-finds-me-perception	"As I said, especially on the home page. I get everything I need through the suggested ones anyway." (Nora)
Heuristic shortcuts	"After the report on the tragic aftermath of the coronavirus in Brazil, they turn the back to the studio, and the anchor makes a totally heartless expression." (Carl)

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4   The analysis of the transcripts was performed using MAXQDA coding program.

General YouTube usage	
(Preferred) channels	"I definitely watch gaming content from time to time, informational stuff and documentaries, a lot of English content, and just entertaining videos." (Romy)
Reception patterns	"I prefer to watch YouTube on the side, while I'm tidying up my room." (Nora)
Subscription to channels	"I don't subscribe to anyone." (Heidi)
Frequency of use	"I'm sure it's several hours a day. Ten to twenty videos for sure." (Miguel)
Motives of use	"Mainly for entertainment." (Alice)
Evaluation of News-YouTubers	
Knowledge of "funk"	"I'm familiar with a couple of funk channels." (Emilia)
News-YouTubers versus legacy media	"News-YouTubers take a much more unbiased and reflective approach to the whole thing." (Tristan)
Ordinary News-YouTubers versus Funk-News-YouTubers	"YouTubers from funk are mostly real journalists, who deal with these issues in a more complex way than a normal News-YouTuber would." (Diego)
Motives of use	"It's just more convenient. Well, first of all, I always think a video is better than reading." (Miguel)
Influence on opinion	"He's also so emotional and really takes it seriously. It's a matter of the heart for him, so you believe it right away." (Nora)
Heuristic shortcuts	"They understand what I'm interested in because they think like I am and like a lot of other young people do." (Carl)

The initial steps of close-reading and paraphrasing the written interviews were performed by the lead author. The two authors reduced the paraphrases to their core content and generalized them to the envisaged level of abstraction, respectively. Table 4 illustrates this procedure as exemplary. We conducted this process in a back-and-forth manner, comparing and discussing the results in each case. During this process, we supplemented the original (deductive) main category system with further inductive categories. The final category scheme is the result of a theory-based (deductive) and material-based (inductive) system.

Table 4. Process of analysis

Category	Quotes	Paraphrase	Generalization
News-finds-me-perception	"As I said, especially on the home page. I get everything I need through the suggested ones anyway. If I see something that interests me, I click on it; if not, I don't. That's all there is to it."[5] (Nora)	Gets everything important on the homepage through the suggested video; clicks/watches only, in case of interest	Reliance on homepage recommendations solely

5   We conducted all interviews in German. Hence, all included quotes are translations.

7. Findings

7.1 Two types of news users: High- and low-involved in the news

Answering our first research question on what role news consumption plays in young adults' daily lives, our sample can be divided into two groups: The *high-involved* who pay close attention to current world affairs and the *low-involved* who take a more effortless approach to their news consumption. Identification and assignment to the groups were based on the respondents' general interest in news, the complexity of their news repertoires – or lack thereof – and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak on their news diets: Did the unprecedented crisis (further) increase their interest in news, or did it remain at a stable (low) level?

High-involved: Sam, Emilia, Romy, Heidi, Alice

To be "up to date" (Alice), this group of participants informs themselves "at least once a day – even pre-corona" (Romy). They follow a fixed and firmly established daily news regime to keep up with current world affairs. Most of their news diet takes place online via apps from legacy news outlets. In navigating the diverse media landscape, they show awareness for the trustworthiness of different sources and the need to validate information through multiple sources and "expert opinions" (Emilia). The outbreak of the new coronavirus led to a "more regular" (Sam) consumption of news and resulted in more diverse repertoires. Due to the pandemic, this group has expanded their preferred "main news sources" (Heidi), now including international news outlets:

> Well, *mostly I watch the TV news. Especially ARD and ZDF. But now also Phoenix, the RKI live-ticker, and international channels like CNN, BBC. (Sam)*

At the beginning of the pandemic, the interviewees perceived their information behavior as "dynamic" (Alice). In addition to their habitual use of news, they react to incoming breaking news from apps (Sam), explicitly search for information online "if [they] quickly need to know something" (Emilia), and obtain in-depth information via podcasts or YouTube videos on COVID-19. In all five interviews, it is striking that the surveillance of the pandemic has not only triggered the use of a broader range of news outlets but also caused a shift to television as the main source of information. When asked whether TV channels have always been her main source of information for daily news, Heidi notes:

> *Even though they are the same channels I usually use on social media, I now much rather watch these channels on TV. I somehow think it is more informative, better, and of higher quality.*

An exception to the overall avoidance of social media for information-seeking is YouTube: In addition to the extensive time this group spends on YouTube for entertainment ("For me, YouTube is like a weird addictive thing.", Emilia), YouTube is also increasingly used for information purposes among these five. During

a YouTube session, they watch news videos in-between other non-news videos and have a broader repertoire of channels with informative focus than the other five respondents, hinting at a Matthew effect being at play here. The urge to always keep up with the latest news ("It's important to know how we compare with other nations, where COVID has increased or decreased.", Sam) and the increasing frequency and breadth in news use indicate a high level of media literacy and a high level of involvement within this group.

Low-involved: Nora, Miguel, Tristan, Carl, Diego

Based on their slightly overwhelmed reactions to questions about their news usage ("When I'm online, or with my mom, I don't know [sighs]...she tells me a lot of stuff.", Nora) we assigned these five participants to the low-involved group. In addition, they confirmed their characteristic undersupply with knowledge about current world affairs by explicit statements. Miguel briefly replies with the verdict "informative" when asked to rate a recently viewed YouTuber's news video. In the following sentence, however, he admits that he "was barely listening" since, at the same time, he was also "busy on the phone." A further indicator of news deprivation within this group is that the unique circumstances of the coronavirus did indeed lead to an increase in interest ("Yes, a little more than before...this is simply due to the current circumstances.", Nora). However, this perception is not reflected in a stronger need for information. Those highly involved stated daily news use via multiple news channels, whereas those low involved declare that their information behavior has not changed – "that has always been like that" (Tristan).

Similarly, Diego immediately repulsed the icebreaking question about his current news usage with a disillusioning answer: "How do I stay up to date about COVID-19? Not at all [laughs]. Not at all." Following current world affairs plays a subordinate role at best. Accordingly, the interviewees in this group do not seek information about anything that goes beyond their personal sphere of interest:

> I hardly pick up on stuff at all, but also because most of it doesn't concern me personally. If something happens in big economic enterprises, that's far too far away. That simply doesn't interest me. But when it affects me, I make sure that I am informed. (Carl)

Due to a somewhat "reckless" (Miguel) approach to news "solely when one is online" (Nora), the identification of preferred news providers within this group is rather difficult. When asked what his preferred news sources are, 19-year-old Miguel answers:

> There is nothing I would necessarily call 'my favorite news source'. It depends on what I catch in the very moment.

Turning towards news mainly in the expectation that the most important information will "pop up on the news feed anyway" (Diego) highlights the 'effortlessness' in the news experience of this group. The contact to news is not sought outside of their general media usage. Accordingly, the news usage completely and

exclusively takes place online and via social media. In contrast, legacy media play a minor role in their news diet – watching the news on TV with his parents is "more of a background noise" for Carl. Overall, the statements testify a low level of involvement coinciding with a news-finds-me-perception (cf., Schneider & Eisenegger, 2019).

7.2 The role of YouTube in young adults' news diets

Regarding our second research question on how young adults experience news content on YouTube, the entire sample stumbles upon (news) videos mostly incidentally. But true to the Matthew effect, we still observe differences in how the two groups curate what content will eventually appear on their feed.

Carl's observation is initially representative for all ten users:

> *You can find everything there. You open the homepage, and various videos will be suggested to you. You have the choice: entertainment, music, Let's Play, reaction, cooking, news. The suggested videos already provide you with a lot of things automatically.*

Since "the algorithm chooses the video I watch" (Alice), the phrase 'It was recommended to me' is repeatedly used in all the interviews. Hence, YouTube's interface is largely in charge of providing a user with content: "I only watch what is suggested – unless I know what to search for" (Emilia). Following the Matthew effect, the difference between the two groups lies precisely in this exception. Although all of them mainly "come across news videos in passing" (Nora), among the high-involved personal curation (i.e., subscriptions or "active search", Heidi) is of high importance. By turning on push notifications or subscribing to preferred news channels on YouTube, the aim is to ensure that the relevant news videos "sooner or later" (Sam) will be recommended to them "anyway." 19-year-old Romy interprets this selection behavior as follows:

> *Well, I usually watch the videos from my subscription box or the people I have subscribed to because I know them, and I roughly know what to expect. […] My feeling is that most of the other trending videos are just clickbait.*

While those highly involved circumvent incidental exposure to unknown sources by subscriptions, the YouTube news exposure of those less involved is perceived as quite "spontaneous" (Nora). In Tristan's statement are indications of news use that "totally depends on the moment":

> *There isn't just one channel that always keeps me up to date. The video shows up on my homepage. I watch it. Done. It always depends a lot on what YouTube shows me.*

Naturally, the effortless news exposure reveals itself beyond just YouTube: The less involved participants either "not really" (Carl) or at best "only through other people" (Nora) catch up on the latest issues. Nonetheless, these statements are opposed to the perception of being "well aware about current affairs anyway" (Nora). Correspondingly, this group's incidental news contact is inherently rooted

in the news-finds-me-perception (cf., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This again becomes clear in the context of COVID-19:

> *I'm just reading the headlines [of push-notifications], if I'm being honest. I usually know enough beforehand, thanks to my mom or my family in general. They talk about it, so I already know enough and don't get anything new out of the news. (Carl)*

During the interview, Miguel realized that before the outbreak of the pandemic, he had "not necessarily actively searched" for news ("Because people are always scrolling on social media anyway, they might get some post that has something to do with news."). Their comfortable "can't be bothered-attitude" (Nora) prevents further, independent information curation. Suppose a News-YouTuber's video 'finds' them. In that case, they have no interest in investigating other sources in more detail ("Just the video is usually enough for me.", Diego) or validating the accuracy of the message ("Well, at least with the YouTubers I watch – nobody would contradict that, it makes sense.", Carl).

7.3 The role of native YouTube news content in young adults' news diets

As the findings of Haarkötter (2019) suggest, precisely the genuine YouTubers are relevant in terms of news exposure on this platform. Our participants, both in the low- and high-involved group, do not consume the uploads of legacy media. Indications for their preference of YouTubers as a source for news on this platform were revealed by the answers to the following interview question: "Which are the reasons for informing yourself primarily through YouTubers rather than other media and vice versa?" Whether very or little involved, the interviewees based their thoughts on the role of native YouTube news content in their news diets (*RQ2*) on three similar criteria: comprehension, entertainment, and identification.

Comprehension: All ten respondents characterize the advantages of genuine News-YouTubers and professional Funk-News-YouTubers in that "information is presented in a way that is easy to understand" (Sam). Carl explains his preference for YouTubers as a news source as follows:

> *Let's say I gratefully turned to News-YouTubers at a time when traditional media failed to provide me with information because, honestly, I no longer understood anything on there. The real [traditional] news is too fast. On YouTube, it's easier, more accessible, and therefore better for me.*

In this sense, Miguel appreciates that every single video requires "zero previous knowledge." The other group reported similar experiences. Sam values maiLab (Funk-News-YouTuber) as she "was the only one who talked straight," while "the news on television would never dare to make absolute statements about COVID-19".

Entertainment: The mentioned lack of comprehension of legacy media's content for many of the interviewees goes along with the "rather boring" (Nora) presentation of issues ("Nobody can tell me that they feel very well informed af-

ter watching the news on TV"). Alice, who watches the public broadcasters' main TV news show Tagesschau "almost daily", yet states a similar aversion:

> *It's [ARD Tagesschau] not as entertaining as a YouTuber who gets you really involved in the issue. I'm more inclined to take the advice from someone enthusiastic and eager to illustrate the issues than from someone who is basically boring.*

Most interviewees repeatedly emphasized that a light-hearted and humorous presentation of complex issues is the key to comprehension.

Identification: Diego attributes the young generation's declining interest in the news to the fact that young people "can't really relate to traditional news coverage." This is partly due to the "choice of topics" and partly due to the "news anchors" (Diego) of established media (cf., Gnach et al., 2020). Overall, the young adults strongly believe that YouTubers generally address topics relevant to their peer group. Once again, this is particularly evident in connection with the coronavirus crisis. News-YouTuber Rezo uploaded a video titled "Wie Politiker momentan auf Schüler scheißen... [How politicians do not give a crap about pupils...] (Rezo, 2020) to express his disapproval on performing final exams despite the pandemic outbreak. 18-year-old Nora acknowledges his criticism:

> *The topic is non-stop on my mind. And as I saw the title 'How politicians don't give a crap about us', I thought to myself, 'He's right.' [...] Finally, someone [Rezo] addresses this topic the right way.*

In this context, (Funk-)News-YouTubers are repeatedly compared to "fellow men" (Tristan), "ordinary people" (Sam), or even "friends" (Heidi), which already indicates parasocial leanings between viewers and News-YouTubers (cf., Rasmussen, 2018).

7.4 Native YouTube news content: credibility assessment and opinion formation

Although the preference and motivations to seek information through News-YouTubers are similar and guided by the same principles (comprehension, entertainment, and identification), the high- and low-involved differ again regarding our third research question. We see a more reflective approach towards native YouTube news content among the high-involved group, while opinion formation in the low-involved group follows an opinion-finds-me-perception.

Even though the enthusiasm towards News-YouTubers is equal among both types of news users in our sample, the two groups evaluate the YouTubers' videos and verdicts with varying degrees of criticism. As expected, low involvement tends to result in heuristic shortcuts for information processing. Nevertheless, it is surprising that the low-involved young adults use heuristics in approval and disapproval of news formats. Despite Carl not complaining about the information provided in News-YouTuber LeFloid's video, he expresses his dislike for it by pointing out that LeFloid is "rather unpleasant to watch and rather old." A similar level of criticism is shown towards legacy media: The anchors of the ARD

Tagesschau are labeled as "zombies" (Miguel) or "news-speaking robots" (Nora), who lack empathy for tragic events they report on:

> *After the report on the tragic aftermath of the coronavirus in Brazil, they turn the back to the studio, and the anchor makes a totally heartless expression. (Carl)*

News-YouTubers provide for the missed likeability and empathy of traditional news anchors. Since, for Tristan, the credibility of news depends on "the character and the person behind it," News-YouTuber Rezo has earned his "fullest respect" after speaking up against the government. The likeability is immediately accompanied by homophily, which reinforces the identification factor. If interviewees like a YouTuber and feel confirmed in their attitudes, they attribute higher expertise, trustworthiness, benevolence, and a fundamental goodwill to this YouTuber (cf., Turcotte et al., 2015; Xiao et al., 2018):

> *I just feel connected to YouTubers. It doesn't feel as if they have the intention or the power to manipulate. (Diego)*

The trustworthiness of a YouTuber from funk tends to be measured more by his expertise than by his sympathy. Miguel classifies the videos of Mr.Wissen2Go (funk) as "reliable [and] factual" because "he backs up his statements with thousands of sources." However, the 18-year-old has "no desire to verify" these sources – "surely his [Mr.Wissen2Go] statements will be right".

The high-involved young adults, in contrast, would "never willingly admit" (Heidi) to watching the videos of an ordinary YouTuber for information purposes. To them, only YouTubers from funk are eligible for opinion formation. Emilia also notes a reluctance towards ordinary News-YouTubers but admits:

> *This surely isn't the most open-minded attitude, but I would always prefer videos of a YouTuber from funk. I have a lot of trust in the information and opinions they are providing. And that is definitely not right, because only if someone does beauty, it does not mean that they are not knowledgeable about the news. But I kind of put a label on these 'normal' influencers.*

As this group fears being exposed to clickbait posts and fake news, their skepticism towards ordinary YouTubers ultimately prevails ("News-YouTubers always choose particularly sensational titles to generate more clicks and more money and less to inform genuinely.", Romy). However, the reflective approach to news from Funk-News-YouTubers also has its limits within this group: As soon as an involved user develops a certain level of trust in a likable content creator, a tendency towards heuristic shortcuts emerges: "I have a certain amount of trust in maiLab. [...] I guess, I simply trust her as a person. She's really likable." (Emilia). A parasocial bond is also evident in Heidi's appreciation of Mr.Wissen2Go: "With his videos, I know what a friend, like a friend in quotes, has to say about a certain subject." The stability of these levels of trust remains questionable, however. Although Romy "really liked the funk channel Y-collective, including the people who run it," the videos have gradually become "too subjective" in her opinion:

I'm not someone who can't change my mind, but unless I get some evidence to back up the opinion, I won't let myself be influenced that easily.

Their high degree of reflection consequently goes hand in hand with a systematic-rational evaluation of news – regardless of the source (cf., Chaiken, 1980). Their opinion on certain topics is neither the result of a single YouTuber's video nor legacy media coverage. Instead, it is the result of self-determined reflection and critical consideration of both sources:

YouTube alone is not a benchmark for opinion-forming. Sure, you can watch the videos, but more as an addition if you already know something about a certain topic and already have your own opinion. (Heidi)

To them, News-YouTubers are never a sole source for forming opinions but rather an "add-on" (Sam) to their habitual news use via legacy media. Sam exemplifies this position:

Walulis' videos are not enough on their own. The news on ARD gives me a general overview and Walulis the opinion on that. He more or less puts what I see on TV in order. But the one would not work without the other.

Accordingly, YouTubers serve them to identify different points of view and find "new ways of thinking" (Heidi).

In contrast, tendencies of a rather effortless engagement with news and opinions provided by News-YouTubers arise in the low-involved group. Since they encounter news primarily incidentally during their general use of YouTube, the perception of "never [having] heard about this stuff outside of YouTube" (Tristan) is settling among those less involved. For example, Carl only learned about the rapid spread of the coronavirus in the USA from a video by Walulis: "I thought to myself 'Really, did it hit them so hard?' Because I don't think you heard anything about that on TV." Consequently, they almost completely renounce established news media and simplify their news use, as they find "two in one" (Diego) in News-YouTubers – "Good research. Good opinion." (Diego). They spare themselves the "stopover at the Tagesschau" and "get information plus opinion from a YouTuber [they] trust" (Carl). However, this trust occurs in the form of a trust advantage:

In retrospect, I realize that their opinion convinces me to such an extent that I agree with their opinion. It is not always like that. It always depends on the character and the person behind it. But most of the time, they hold a common-sense view and good values. (Tristan)

As YouTubers present issues "so emotional" (Nora) in the eyes of the interviewees, they "immediately believe them". We suggest that the effort in news use and political opinion-forming is heuristically facilitated for the low-involved, through an authentic, not necessarily objective, and entertaining mediation of this knowledge via a YouTuber. Considering these criteria, we see a heuristic adoption of the opinion of YouTubers in this group, which can be translated into an opinion-finds-me-perception.

8. Discussion

This study aimed to provide initial insights into the role of YouTube and especially News-YouTubers in young adults' involvement with the news while taking their general interest and usage behavior in their daily lives into account. Based on the statements provided by the ten interviewees, we identified two types of news users: Those highly and those barely involved and interested in the news (*RQ1*). Regardless of their group affiliation, the role of YouTubers in their news diet can be defined by three uniform factors: News YouTubers increase the involvement of users through entertainment (*entertainment factor*), therefore helping them to comprehend current issues (*comprehension factor*) by being able to identify with the personalities and interests of the YouTubers (*identification factor*) (*RQ2*). In line with other empirical studies, we found that these three factors are encouraged by low involvement and heuristic information processing (cf., Xiao et al., 2018). However, true to the Matthew effect, the formation of opinions cannot be described as equally 'effortless' for all respondents: Those highly involved assign News-YouTubers the function of assisting opinion-making. In contrast, the less involved heuristically take on the YouTuber's opinion (*RQ3*).

Similar to the news-finds-me perception centering in passive information exposure, this perspective can be transferred to the role of News-YouTubers in low-involved young adults' opinion formation. With YouTubers as information mediators and perceived 'friends', disinterested and less involved users are provided a shortcut for 'effortless' opinion formation. In a sense, it is less a matter of own, reflected opinion-making, but rather a heuristic adoption of the position of the liked News-YouTuber. Hence, a rational-systematic message evaluation regarding correctness, relevance, accuracy, and objectivity is missing and replaced by superficial evaluation criteria (cf., Chaiken, 1980). For the low-involved, we can hence conclude: The news videos of a likable perceived News-YouTuber (heuristic source cue) are not only (1) more likely to be noticed (news-finds-me-perception), but (2) also immediately interpreted as trustworthy (opinion-finds-me-perception).

However, these findings should be interpreted considering the limitations of our study. In all interviews – whether with the high- or low-involved participants – partly contradictory statements were given. We asked interviewees to describe their evaluations of different news formats impromptu. However, their individual news use seems too natural or passive, so they felt overwhelmed to respond ad hoc. A multi-method design could have helped solve this problem. Above all, a group discussion would have potentially increased the willingness to speak, especially regarding the credibility evaluation of News-YouTubers. As the two groups had fundamentally different views (i.e., on ordinary News-YouTubers versus professional Funk-News-YouTubers), a discussion would have created a dynamic between the two parties – evaluations, judgments, and views would have been stated argumentatively and could have provided further-reaching findings.

Furthermore, future studies would benefit from enhancing the theoretical framework. Our literature review implied that News-YouTubers represent an exclusive source of information for audiences with low political interest through constructs like incidental news exposure and the news-finds-me-perception. With that in mind, this type of news experience almost completely bypasses traditional

mass media and empowers YouTubers to solely set the agenda for their audiences (e.g., Anspach, 2017; Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Feezell, 2018). Indications for an agenda-setting effect also appear in our findings (especially among the low-involved) and provide valuable starting points for further research.

At first sight, heuristic shortcuts and the facilitating opinion-finds-me-perception found among the low-involved lead to a rather pessimistic view on YouTubers as a news source. However, News-YouTubers do succeed in attracting these former "News Deprived" (Schneider & Eisenegger, 2019, p. 37) and "News Avoiders" (Edgerly et al., 2018, p. 202) to engage – albeit superficially – with informational and political content. Their exciting yet easy-to-follow lecture-style YouTube videos seem to resonate with young people's expectations towards news. In the long run, this style of news production and delivery might in fact increase rather than decrease the incidence for a news-hungry youth. This, in turn, also raises questions of the responsibility of genuine News-YouTubers in disseminating information and potentially influencing opinions. Follow-up research should emphasize these aspects by employing longitudinal designs to observe a potential shift in news interest and opinion among young adults. Ultimately, this study conducted among ten German young adults yielded interesting findings that provide valuable ideas for future studies on this topic.

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