

Trust in the Age of Algorithms: How Gen Z Canadians navigate news, skepticism, and selective exposure

La confiance dans le temps des algorithmes : Comment les canadiens de la génération Z dirigent les nouvelles, le scepticisme et l'exposition sélective

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ABSTRACT

News consumption and trust are shifting across generations as the structures of media production and distribution are reshaped by technology. In the past decade, the rise of algorithmically curated feeds, influencer commentary, and platform-specific news cultures have transformed how audiences encounter and evaluate information. What makes Generation Z distinct is not simply their skepticism, but that they are the first generation to have grown up fully immersed in social media, where news, entertainment, and misinformation coexist. This research investigates how Gen Z Canadians navigate trust within this hybrid media environment. Through qualitative analysis, it reveals a shift away from institutional authority toward participatory verification and decentralized trust. Gen Z audiences cross-reference sources, privilege firsthand accounts, and selectively engage or disengage from news as an act of agency. These findings underscore a redefinition of trust in digital journalism—one that is fluid, situational, and negotiated in real time.

RÉSUMÉ

La manière de consommer ainsi que la confiance dans les actualités évoluent d'une génération à l'autre, à mesure que les structures de production et de distribution des médias sont remodelées par la technologie. Au cours de la dernière décennie, l'essor des fils d'actualités sélectionnés par des algorithmes, des commentaires d'influenceurs et des cultures de l'information spécifiques à chaque plateforme a transformé la manière dont le public découvre et évalue l'information. Ce qui distingue la génération Z, ce n'est pas seulement son scepticisme, mais le fait qu'elle soit la première génération à avoir grandi en étant totalement immergée dans les réseaux sociaux, où coexistent actualités,

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divertissements et désinformation. Cette recherche analyse comment les Canadiens de la génération Z gèrent leur confiance dans cet environnement médiatique hybride. Grâce à une analyse qualitative, elle révèle un glissement de l'autorité institutionnelle vers la vérification participative et une confiance décentralisée. Le public de la génération Z recoupe les sources, privilégie les témoignages directs et choisit de s'engager ou de se désengager de l'actualité comme un acte d'autonomie. Ces résultats mettent en lumière une redéfinition de la confiance dans le journalisme numérique—qui est fluide, situationnel et traité en temps réel.

INTRODUCTION

Canada has between 8,000 and 12,000 journalists covering a country of 41 million people (Henley, 2024) within a highly concentrated media landscape. More than 80% of Canadian media is owned by just five corporations—Bell Media, Rogers Communications, Postmedia Network, Corus Entertainment, and Quebecor Media (Reporters Without Borders, 2024)—which has fueled skepticism about editorial independence and corporate influence (Winseck, 2022; Unifor, 2023). Within this environment, mainstream news refers to the corporate-owned, profit-driven, and hierarchically-organized systems of legacy news organizations that employ professional journalists, maintain close ties to corporate and governmental power, and exert widespread influence through exclusive and institutionalized journalistic practices (Holt, 2019; Kenix, 2011). Canada's media consolidation has led to the closure of local newsrooms, creating news deserts that leave citizens without timely, verified information about issues in their own communities (Henley, 2024; Lindgren et al., 2017).

At the same time, news organizations face increasing competition from global digital and technology platforms (Newman et al., 2024), that shape how audiences access and evaluate information. In Kaiser and Partners' (2025) national annual opinion survey on news trust, over half of Canadian respondents reported that their news consumption habits have changed within the past year. These structural and technological transformations have spurred research on younger news audiences, particularly examining the decline of institutional trust (cf. Eddy & Shearer, 2025; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Ehrlén et al., 2023). This research extends that line of inquiry by exploring how trust metrics are evolving and, crucially, what younger audiences distrust and remain skeptical about. Using individual content elicitation interviews with nine Gen Z Canadians, it traces their real-time decision-making as they scroll through digital news and information environments, offering insight into how trust is constructed, negotiated, and withheld in an increasingly chaotic digital information landscape.

GENERATION Z

Born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), Gen Z is the largest age group in the world (Prelog & Bakić-Tomić, 2020) and the first generation to grow up immersed in a digital ecosystem (Papakonstantinidis, 2019). Eighty-five percent (85%) of them in Canada seek news on social media instead of traditional news platforms (Kaiser & Partners, 2025). With the number of media options available to them and the speed with which they can consume condensed, bite-sized information (Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2024), it is no surprise this generation has developed a unique ability to share and process bits of information at a rapid pace (Töröcsik et al., 2014). For them, trust is distributed across platforms, presenters, and personalities in a *mélange* of verified and unverified information (Botsman, 2017; Madden et al., 2017). This environment presents both opportunities and challenges: while it democratizes news production, allowing for personalized news experiences (Duffy et al., 2018), it also fosters fragmentation, fake news, and distrust (Tucker et al., 2017). This does not mean their trust in traditional journalism has evaporated. Recent Canadian data shows 45% of Gen Z still believe established news is more credible than the information they receive on social media, while about a quarter say the opposite (Kaiser & Partners, 2025, para. 6).

Generation Z, Millennials, and news

In 2024 and 2025, the Reuters Institute reported Canadians' trust in news had declined to 39% – a drop of nearly 20 percentage points since 2018 (Brin & Charlton, 2024 & 2025). Although this decline appears to have levelled off in recent years, it remains uncertain whether another shift is imminent. In Canada and the United States, online personalities and content creators increasingly eclipse traditional media outlets (Canadian Digital Media Research Network, 2025; Newman et al., 2025; Stocking et al., 2024). Canadian findings are mixed: some studies show a slight rebound in trust (Kaiser & Partners, 2025; Edelman, 2025),

while broader research suggests that distrust in institutions, including journalism, is likely to continue (Newman et al., 2025; Hanitzsch, 2017; Madden et al., 2017).

As Gen Z becomes a dominant news-consuming demographic, these trends raise important questions about whether traditional definitions and benchmarks of trust still apply. This cohort is both highly skeptical of information and less reliant on legacy news sources. Only 11% of Canadians aged 15 to 24 report high trust in news and information media (Statistics Canada, 2024, para. 10). Research further suggests members of Gen Z do not inherently trust social media and expect to see inaccurate or misleading content on these platforms (Duffy et al., 2018; Hanz & Kingsland, 2019). Compared to Millennials, they are less likely to trust information simply because it appears online (Carlson, 2019; Duffy et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2023), show lower confidence in the news (Duffy et al., 2018), and frequently assume bias is inevitable—they believe news organizations serve the political or economic interests of powerful individuals rather than representing the public (Hanz & Kingsland, 2019; Madden et al., 2017; Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

The rise in skepticism toward online information is hardly unexpected, as trust in online news has been declining for decades. When Millennials entered adulthood, they also expressed reservations about online news; however, their digital consumption came in addition to print media and traditional broadcast news—media they trusted and relied on for accuracy (Antunovic et al., 2018). Gen Z, however, encounters online information in fundamentally different conditions: the digital sphere is their *primary* news environment, where credible journalism, opinion, misinformation, and deep fakes coexist and are increasingly indistinguishable. They have mastered multitasking on their phones, fluidly transitioning between messaging friends, shopping, playing games, scrolling socials, and listening to podcasts (Itzkowitz et al., 2024, p. 7). In fact, they cannot remember life before the smartphone (Itzkowitz et al., 2024, p.13).

Against this backdrop, skepticism extends beyond individual stories to the mechanisms of news selection itself. Whether news is chosen by algorithms or editors, people feel a generalized skepticism towards news selection, concerned they are missing out due to over-personalization

on social media and perceived bias in traditional media (Newman et al., 2023; Ehrlén et al., 2023). Consequently, 40% of people aged 35 and under say they avoid the news entirely (Newman et al., 2025, p. 27). Instead, they rely heavily on trusted interpersonal networks, often placing more value on the reputation of the person sharing the news rather than on the original content producer (Fisher, 2016; Madden et al., 2017; Sundar, 2008).

Taken together, these shifts illustrate that Gen Z's distrust is not merely a continuation of existing trends but a fundamentally different orientation toward news—one shaped by digital information abundance, algorithmic curation, and distributed trust.

Selective exposure

Rooted in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), selective exposure theory suggests people prefer information consistent with their pre-existing beliefs while avoiding information that is not (Metzger et al., 2020). This process of selecting information allows people to maintain cognitive balance, minimize psychological discomfort, and protect their sense of identity (Stroud, 2011; Guo et al., 2024). In this sense, selective exposure functions as a strategy for self-preservation, allowing individuals to reinforce their worldview and to maintain a sense of coherence in an increasingly complex and chaotic media environment (Guo et al., 2024; Stroud, 2011). While early conceptualizations of selective exposure assumed deliberate audience choice, the digital era has introduced new forms of algorithmic selection in which personalization technologies reinforce users' existing preferences (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

Individuals often perceive attitude-consistent information as more credible and trustworthy, leading to the reinforcement of biases (Metzger et al., 2020; Stroud, 2011; Thorson & Wells, 2016). For young adults, this process is amplified through social heuristics, such as relying on friends and family as curators of news content (Edgerly, 2017; Fisher, 2016; Sundar, 2008). Online news consumption has thus become a shared social experience, where people exchange links, tag peers, and interpret news through peer networks (Fisher, 2016; Sundar, 2008). In some cases, individuals even change their opinions toward

what they perceive to be the dominant public sentiment, illustrating the interplay between selective exposure and social conformity (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Lee et al., 2021; Tsfati & Cohen, 2012).

While selective news exposure may serve as a self-regulating mechanism to manage cognitive overload and uncertainty, it simultaneously narrows the diversity of perspectives to which audiences are exposed—an outcome increasingly shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the invisible hand of algorithmic design.

Triangulation: How Gen Z verifies and cross-checks news

With virtually all the information in the world at their fingertips and a growing sense of skepticism and distrust towards the news, youth report feeling a sense of responsibility and a desire to verify information themselves (Yanardağoğlu, 2021, p. 159). To do so, they *triangulate* (cross-check and corroborate) what they encounter against a range of online sources and perspectives before deciding what to feel about it (Duffy et al., 2018; Kalogeroloulos et al., 2019; Madden et. al, 2017).

This pattern is not unique to Gen Z. As social media has made research and cross-checking widely accessible, 85% of Canadians now use it to corroborate information, verify original sources, and evaluate credibility (Kaiser & Partners, 2025). Such practices reflect what scholars describe as “distributed trust”: a model in which confidence in information is no longer anchored in a single institution or gatekeeper, but dispersed across networks or peers, platforms, and shared verification practices (Botsman, 2017; Madden et. al, 2017) In a distributed trust environment, reliability is assembled collectively, through triangulation, comparison, and consensus rather than institutional authority. Young people, in particular, demonstrate this shift by relying heavily on user-generated content, which they often perceive as more authentic and trustworthy than legacy news sources (Newman et al., 2024; Yanardağoğlu, 2021; Marchi, 2012).

However, these strategies are not without limitations. While social media affords users the ability to compile and compare information from a wide array of sources, the very platforms that enable triangulation expose audiences to algorithmic

systems that can narrow informational diversity and reinforce existing biases (Duffy et al., 2018, p.70; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018, Just & Latzer, 2017). What feels like rigorous cross-checking may still occur within algorithmically shaped ecosystems, where alternative sources are surfaced not because they offer independent verification but because they align with past engagement. As a result, triangulation can sometimes reproduce the same blind spots it aims to correct (Masotina et al., 2024), highlighting the need for more intentional media-literacy efforts that help young audiences distinguish between breadth of sources and diversity of perspectives.

Algorithms vs. news trust

The rise of news sharing on participatory communication technologies like social media has introduced new vulnerabilities related to the production and perception of trust. Audiences, especially young ones, report that their social media feeds are saturated with inaccurate information, extreme agendas, and emotionally-charged content, much of which is amplified by algorithmic design (Coster, 2023; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Algorithms are optimized for engagement, not accuracy, meaning that the stories users encounter are those most likely to provoke a reaction rather than those that are most reliable (Blanchett et al., 2022; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Algorithms now play a dual role in the information ecosystem: they shape both what users see and what journalists produce. On the audience side, social media algorithms personalize and prioritize content based on previous clicks, likes, and follows (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019). On the production side, newsrooms themselves rely on algorithmic metrics to assess the reach and performance of stories, allowing data to influence editorial decisions about which topics deserve attention and how they should be framed (Blanchett et al., 2022, p.58). This feedback loop further entangles journalistic values with platform logics of visibility and vitality.

Critics argue that as personalization deepens, algorithms risk distorting reality (Just & Latzer, 2017; Quattrociochi et al., 2016), influence behaviour (Van Damme et al., 2020), and paint an incomplete picture of the world (Nechushtai

& Lewis, 2019). Yet this personalization is also perceived by many young people as helpful. Algorithmic curation offers users an appealing sense of control and efficiency amid information overload. Studies show young audiences often prefer algorithmic curation to human editorial judgement, believing automated feeds better reflect their individual interests (Newman et al., 2023; Swart; 2021; Thurman et al., 2019).

These conditions create a complex environment for news trust. On one hand, algorithmic exposure can enable serendipitous discovery and reinforce learning, even through like-minded content (Guo et al., 2024; Swart, 2021). On the other hand, due to political and social homophily, people tend to see less news from sources with different political views (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). In such spaces, users develop a false sense of confidence in discerning credible information, often trusting stories shared by peers regardless of the original source or algorithmic influence behind it (Furusten, 2023; Melki et al., 2021).

For Gen Z, these algorithmic logics are not peripheral, they are foundational to how they experience, evaluate, and interpret news. This study builds on this literature to examine how algorithmic personalization intersects with evolving notions of trust, exploring how young Canadians navigate credibility, skepticism, and selective exposure within digital news feeds that are both empowering and constraint.

Algorithms: Incidental news exposure

Researchers use the term *incidental news exposure* (INE) to describe the experience of encountering news content while engaging in activities not primarily oriented toward news consumption (cf. Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Van Damme et al., 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Young people often experience this as a kind of algorithmic convenience—a belief that platforms will select relevant news—and they tend to not challenge the selection process (Swart, 2021, pp. 5-8). INE can create what scholars call the “news-finds-me” perception: the belief that important news will find users without any deliberate effort on their part (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

There are two schools of thought on the impact of INE. Some say it can lead to a reduction of intentional news seeking (Park & Kaye, 2020),

narrowing exposure to political information and leaving users only as informed as their personally-tailored algorithm allows (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). From this perspective, INE reinforces passivity as users rely on their feeds rather than on active information-seeking practices, heightening their vulnerability to algorithmic bias.

Others argue the opposite—that algorithmic curation can broaden exposure by introducing users to topics, sources, and perspectives they might never encounter through traditional, self-selected news routines, or in traditional news media (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Zhu et al., 2024). In this view, INE enhances chance encounters with diverse information and can function as an entry point into civic awareness.

As the debate continues over whether technologically-mediated news narrows or broadens perspectives, the question of *how* young people process these encounters becomes increasingly important. This research extends that conversation by examining the selective exposure practices of Gen Z Canadians and the mechanisms they use to determine which content they trust, doubt, or disregard. By tracing their real-time decision-making in algorithmically curated environments, this research sheds light on how incidental encounters with news intersect with evolving notions of trust, skepticism, and credibility in the everyday lives of young people.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative semi-structured social media interviewing was used to examine how Gen Z Canadians navigate trust, skepticism, and selective exposure in digital news environments. This approach was appropriate for capturing their feelings, motivations, and contextual nuances that cannot be accessed through quantitative methods alone. The aim was to represent participants’ perspectives in their own words and generate insights that could inform future, larger-scale studies. We developed a semi-structured interview guide paired with smart-device content elicitation to explore the research question. All procedures received approval from the Royal Roads University ethics committee on January 19, 2024.

Table 1*Participants*

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender/ Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Profession	Education	Location
1	Omar	24	Non-Binary They /them	LGBTQ+	Arab	DJ/Producer	BA	Montreal, QC
2	Anita	24	Cis female She/her	Straight	West Indian	Beta reader and digital creator	MA	Toronto ON
3	Lee	25	Cis male He/him	LGBTQ+	Chinese	Marketing and communication	BA	Vancouver, BC
4	Maria	24	Cis female She/her	Straight	Italian immigrant	People operations	BA	Montreal, QC
5	Makenzie	23	Cis female She/her	Straight	White Canadian	Government relations and restaurant industry	MA (in progress)	Toronto ON
6	Olivia	25	Non-Binary / they/them	LGBTQ+	Italian French Canadian	Film director	BA	Montreal, QC
7	Talia	22	Cis female She/her	Straight	Kenyan immigrant	Communication and Engagement Officer and musician	BA	Vancouver, BC
8	May	26	Cis female She/her	LGBTQ+	White French Canadian	Food industry and content creator	Pastry school	Montreal, QC
9	Chris	24	Cis female She/her	Straight	White Canadian	Athlete	BA	Victoria, BC

Sampling and participant selection

Using the purposive sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016), this research focused on the eldest segment of Gen Z, aged 22 to 26. This cohort was selected as they were less likely to live with their parents or guardians and had begun forming news habits independently of familial influence (Sørensen & Nielsen, 2021; Antunovic et al., 2018). Nine participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling from three Canadian provinces (Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec) (**Table 1**). The lead author posted a call for participants on their personal Instagram and LinkedIn pages, inviting eligible people to participate and for others to share the post. The

sample of participants included diverse genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and nationalities. All participants had some or had completed post secondary education.

Method: Smart device content elicitation interviews

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured, smart device content elicitation interviews (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Hogan et al., 2015), inspired by Rivera et al.'s (2022) social media content and context (SoCo) elicitation method. Rooted in phenomenological inquiry, this method combines open-ended questions and active listening to capture participants'

conscious and unconscious evaluative processes by prompting them to interact with real content in real time.

Interviews were conducted by the lead author over Zoom video conferencing. Participants called in on one or two devices—one to speak with the lead author face-to-face, the other to share their screen on Zoom as they accessed news and information online. The interviews had two components. The first component was semi-structured interview questions to establish conceptual clarity, and the second component focused on social media smart device content elicitation. In Phase 1, the interview began with semi-structured clean language questions, a method of asking non-leading, neutral questions that reflect the exact language of the speaker (Grove & Panzer, 1991). This method is used to minimize introducing a researcher's own assumptions, metaphors, and language into conversation (Tosey et al., 2022). For example, participants were not given prescribed definitions of terms, instead they were asked to define key concepts such as trust, credibility, and news in their own words. This method provided diverse and inconsistent definitions. For example, below are two participants' illustrative definitions of news:

News is like being on the top of a mountain. That comes to my mind. You're there and you can see everything around you, you know, like 360 degrees around you. And you have a hybrid, neutral point of view, and you don't have to judge. You're just on the top because you have to observe. (Maria, 24)

It's what keeps us all connected. And when I talk about the news, I'm talking about international news. I don't talk about the provincial news if I say the word news. If I were to talk about the Quebec news, I would say, Quebec news, but by "news," it's like what's going on in the world to me. That's the definition. It's not a local thing. It's a general topic. (Olivia, 25)

In Phase 2 of the interview, participants shared their screen as they scrolled through a platform of their choice (social media, news app, or website) on a smart device of their choosing (smartphone or tablet). Many participants called in on two devices, one to be on-camera with the lead researcher, and

one to share their screen and scroll through news on Zoom. Participants were asked to scroll through a site or page until they found a piece of news or information they wanted to explore. This allowed the researcher to observe how algorithms play into their news sourcing habits and what posts they scrolled past. Once they found a story or came across one incidentally, participants were asked a series of questions on news trust, algorithms, news consumption, and news engagement. They selected stories either intentionally or incidentally, enabling observations of algorithmic influence, scrolling behaviour, and selective exposure. Participants were asked to explain their immediate judgements, trust cues, skepticism triggers, and engagement patterns. When participants initiated verification or triangulation, the researcher followed their process, using clean-language prompts, such as, "Why have you decided to do this?", "Now what are you looking for?" or "How do you know you've finished this process?". The exercise was repeated a second and sometimes third time until participants had thoroughly explored stories they trusted, stories they did not trust, and reached a point of saturation in verification.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and concluded with open reflections. Although participants raised broader concerns about media literacy and AI, these discussions were not analyzed as part of this study. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved—when additional interviews produced no new patterns relevant to the research question.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The lead author reviewed the transcripts and video recordings of the interviews. Following the first round of coding by the lead author, the codes were shared with the second author. Both authors engaged in rounds of discussion and norming the codes (ensuring coding alignment, consistency, and agreement). This process was followed by additional coding and iteration by the lead author, then returning to conversations until both authors were satisfied with the final result of data theming. The analytical process involved familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, iterative refinement, and final

theme definitions (Anderson, 2007; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In the findings section, we have included verbatim transcripts from the participants whenever possible to show the validity and rigour of our findings. As reflexive thematic analysis does not require inter-coder reliability, rigour was ensured through analytic memos (reflections that document the researchers thinking during coding and theme development), transparency of process (documenting multiple rounds of coding and cross-checking against the full dataset), and the inclusion of verbatim excerpts in the findings.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study show how a small group of Gen Z Canadians navigate trust, skepticism, and selective exposure within a digital-first news environment shaped by algorithms, information overload, and weakened traditional gatekeeping. Although they consume news frequently, their trust in both mainstream media and tech companies was low, driven by concerns about corporate influence, political bias, and journalistic shortcomings. In response, participants relied on their own verification strategies: cross-checking, direct sourcing, and turning to content creators they perceive as transparent or authentic. Algorithms play a central but, at times, ambivalent role as they streamline access to information while simultaneously reinforcing biases and limiting information diversity. Participants recognized these dynamics and, at times, tried to “outsmart” algorithmic systems. Many still depended on automated curation. Across interviews, trust emerged as fluid, situational, and contingent on evidence rather than institutional authority. The sections that follow examine how participants described news consumption, their own skepticism, their perceptions of bias, the role of algorithms, and the processes they used to judge trustworthiness.

The depths of skepticism

The starkest similarity across all participants was a general—and sometimes profound—distrust in mainstream news media. Participants described legacy media as agenda-driven, influenced by

corporate and political interests, and structurally incapable of providing impartial coverage:

I definitely do not consume a lot of mainstream media....I don't believe it, I don't trust it. I always know at the back of my mind is, like, an agenda they are definitely pushing, implicitly and explicitly. (Talia, 22)

I do think that government, people in power, use news as a negative impact in a way to shape public opinion with ulterior motives.” (Chris, 24)

Their skepticism was not merely about individual journalists, but about the systemic conditions of news production: concentration of ownership, economic pressures, and perceived political alignment. As May observed, “Financial incentive is the biggest thing for the media when it comes to truth.” In a separate interview, 25-year-old Lee, who worked in marketing and communication, said, “Various socio-political forces are affecting how we are able to consume and trust news.”

The psychological toll of distrust was a reoccurring theme. Participants noted that the constant need to verify information can feel both exhausting and destabilizing.

You can never know for sure. That's the scariest part. Not only can you not know to trust everyone else, but you can't even always trust yourself. It's like, how do you even trust anything? Who knows? I don't know. You do your best. (May, 26)

Despite the skepticism, participants were not disengaged. They expressed a desire to identify trust cues by evaluating content structure, sourcing, tone, and perceived bias to determine whether information was credible. Skepticism was not always passive cynicism, but an active stance requiring continual assessment.

Algorithms as both infrastructure and threat

Participants viewed algorithms as central to how news reaches them and central to their mistrust. Algorithms were described as powerful, opaque

systems that tailor content with unsettling precision.

It's scary how [algorithms] know what I'm interested in. What I will click on versus not... it's tailored perfectly like a glove to what you want. (Talia, 22)

How is our perception of reality being affected by the news we consume that's pushed up by platforms? (Lee, 25)

May echoed many of these concerns and said the ways in which her algorithms play into "confirmation bias" led her to question everything she is exposed to online. Algorithms were often associated with corporate manipulation, political influence, and the amplification of ideological content:

Right-wing capitalists have monopolies on news and influence platforms based on algorithms and money. (Lee, 25)

We're more aware of the insidious tactics that other major broadcasts and other major corporations use through algorithms. (Omar, 24)

Alongside the criticism of algorithms, some participants accepted they go hand-in-hand with social media use:

People my age, I find, experience algorithms as this is what the technology does. I think there's definitely more of, like, an expectation that it will happen that way, no matter what. (Talia, 22)

Others believed they could outsmart the algorithms. For example, DJ and producer Omar described a tactic by users when algorithms hid their content from audiences or "shadow-banned" content:

[My generation] understands how algorithms work and how they're being used against us. We've also understood how to make them work for us. [When being shadow banned,] what people have started to do is post pictures of their faces with the information because the

algorithm will read that as a selfie...and, like, now we've played the algorithm. (Omar, 24)

Across interviews, algorithms emerged as both indispensable and untrustworthy, mirroring broader research on the ambivalence young adults feel toward automated curation.

Information overload and selective avoidance

Participants felt like continuous engagement with news and information impacted their mental health and influenced their overall relationship with media consumption. They reported feeling "over-saturated" (Omar, Lee, Makenzie, and Olivia), "overwhelmed" (Omar, Anita, and May), and anxious when consuming news (May, Maria, Olivia, and Lee), and felt the news was too "negative" (Maria, May, and Chris). This oversaturation led participants to curate their social media feeds by filtering, prioritizing, and blocking posts. "Choosing what I engage with helps me stay informed without feeling anxious," Olivia, a film director, shared, reflecting on how selective exposure allowed them to manage their mental well-being.

I get news based off topics I'm interested in. Like, I don't follow too much about the environment. I get too anxious. I kind of evade those news. (Olivia, 25)

On one hand, this targeted approach enabled participants to maintain media engagement while mitigating impacts of information overload. On the other hand, participants demonstrated an over-reliance on algorithmic curation. For instance, Talia, who worked in communication, engagement and as a musician, admitted she did not proactively seek out news, rather, she consumed what her algorithms fed her:

We don't really have the time to sit and think, 'Is this really true?' So I now put a lot of trust in the people around me and also my algorithm to bring me things that are true. (Talia, 22)

Digital creator Anita's experience was similar, as most of her news consumption came from Instagram stories that matched her interests.

This illustrates a paradox where algorithms help manage abundance but simultaneously shape and limit informational horizons.

Rejecting journalistic objectivity and valuing transparency

Many participants said they appreciate news that is presented accurately, empirically, and factually, as it allows them to draw their own conclusions on the information shared. This style of news was seen as more credible than claims of neutrality or objectivity, which some participants viewed as unrealistic and misleading.

Objectivity is a little bit of a shield sometimes to further certain forms of oppression and cycles of oppression. The media builds on that by using objectivity [as something] everyone must believe it, which I think there is a level of subjectivity that's inherent in all the things we do, no matter what, there is no escaping that. (Lee, 25)

In contrast to the “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1989), the participants said evidence that a journalist was personally affected by an event could increase their trust in the information presented.

If [a journalist] is kind of talking and supporting an idea because she feels it personally, but is still describing it like a journalist, then I will like the content. The way you say it, the way you describe it, and maybe the way you're exposing your idea, it's important for me. (Maria, 24)

An example of the process that some Gen Z individuals go through to assess acceptable or unacceptable bias could be seen in our content elicitation with film director Olivia. While scrolling through Reddit, Olivia found a story from the Australia Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's public broadcaster: “Wong Speaks With UNRWA as Reports Emerge Questioning Israel's Claims Its Staff are Involved with Hamas” (Bovill, 2024). After skimming the article, Olivia expressed skepticism on the credibility of the report: “It's from ABC Australia so you just have to keep that in mind, what's Australia's stance on this?” They questioned both the country's and the platform's

stances on the topic. To look deeper into the story, Olivia turned to an anonymous Instagram group called “Let's Talk Palestine”—an educational page that monitors the media and distributes plain-language updates from the Middle East. Olivia acknowledged the page's political slant and admitted to not reviewing its cited sources, but said they trust the source because its authors are transparent about their bias, post misinformation alerts, and post corrections. “I always go to the victim and try to understand their positioning,” they said. This example shows how participants' skepticism toward mainstream media can lead them to alternative sources of news, favouring first-hand knowledge over journalistic objectivity, and content creators that share their beliefs, provided they are transparent about their biases and errors.

Triangulation and news verification

Every participant engaged in cross-checking information against other sources, platforms, or within their social network—a seemingly inherent part of truth-seeking in their news consumption. Many expressed a deep sense of personal responsibility to do so, as they trusted their own verification process more than that of mainstream outlets. Even when participants trusted a piece of information, they still felt compelled to search for additional information against trusted online sources or by searching key words in search engines.

During the elicitation exercise, Lee was asked to find a piece of news he trusted and one he did not. In both cases, he selected articles about Alberta's legislation on gender policies for youth. The story he trusted—“Alberta Premier Says Legislation on Gender Policies for Children, Youth Coming This Fall” (French, 2024)—came from CBC, a platform he trusted because he knows some of its journalists personally. The story he did not trust —“Jamie Sarkonak: Liberal-funded Charity Stops Alberta from Protecting Minors from Gender Ideology” (Sarkonak, 2024)—came from the *National Post*, a publication he believed has a strong right-wing political lean. The latter was an op-ed, which contributed to his mistrust:

Much of this is just her own [Sarkonak's] opinion rather than a reporting on the full

thing, whereas if you look at CBC's version, we see that you can hear voices from the other side of the debate. (Lee, 25)

For Lee, having a full understanding of the story required hearing multiple perspectives from people impacted by the issue. After analyzing both pieces, he went to X to see “the more local, on-the-ground sources that are not being featured in an article.” He stopped to watch a video by an LGBTQ+ journalist for Xtra Magazine, an LGBTQ+ publication (Woods, 2024), and said,

This is someone who is queer and works in a queer news publication....I take someone's lived experience into account as someone who is trying to recognize how this policy would affect someone like them. I would probably believe that, and also knowing that this publication is directly tied to these issues. (Lee, 25)

For Lee, having an LGBTQ+ reporter discuss LGBTQ+ issues added a level of nuance that the CBC article he trusted had not: “This offers a more grassroots level reporting....It personalizes it, gives the human impact.” This was an example of triangulation, as Lee searched for multiple sources close to the story, and illustrated the importance of identity and subjectivity as a trust signal.

A concentration of media ownership and limited independent news options in Canada complicates Gen Z's ability to verify information, creating an environment where participants felt fact-checking was inherently compromised by the biases and lack of transparency that comes with control by so few decision-makers.

During Makenzie's interview, she landed on a Canadian Press article published by the *Globe and Mail*, “Immigration Minister ‘Pissed Off’ that Canadians’ Families Blocked from Leaving Gaza” (Osman, 2024). Shocked that a minister would use these words in an interview, the government relations and restaurant industry professional embarked on a fact-checking mission. After a 22-minute Google search, Makenzie was only able to find the same article by the same author republished more than six times in Canadian news. CBC, CTV, the *Toronto Star*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and City News—all of which have different owners, but do subscribe to the Canadian Press wire service—published the same article, sometimes with different headlines:

I realized half the newspapers in Canada are owned by the same people. It's crazy. These are complete reprints of the exact same article. Even if I initially thought it was credible, now I have a much more negative opinion of it, for sure. It has changed my perception. (Makenzie, 23)

When participants sourced information in mainstream media, they always turned to social media to cross-check and find missing perspectives. When information came from social media, they often turned to mainstream news for verification. This process is driven by participants' distrust that either the content creator or journalist have sufficiently scrutinized an issue before reporting on it, an uncertainty that heightens anxiety about inadvertently spreading misinformation.

Mechanisms of trust

Participants' approach to determining trustworthiness was neither calculated nor rooted in a prescriptive set of mechanisms; instead, their trust criteria emerged organically and was applied inconsistently, often becoming apparent only as they were asked to justify their reasoning during the elicitation exercise.

Two mechanisms emerged: pursuit of first-hand accounts and evaluation of how evidence was presented. When a first-person account was missing or participants did not trust how information was presented, they were more likely to embark on a verification process, searching other platforms and perspectives missing from the original source of information.

First-hand accounts

Participants expressed a strong preference for news that either included or directly sourced voices from individuals or groups most affected by the reported events. “I look for people that were there and looked with their own eyes and talked to people,” said Maria, 24, adding she was skeptical of journalists who had not witnessed or were not directly connected to the story.

I would 100% trust a reporter who's living in existing conditions that they're reporting on, than a media house that's going to fly in staff

and report from 100 kilometres away. (Talia, 22)

Omar said, “Someone’s opinion might only matter if they are personally affected by the [story] they are presenting,” reiterating a deep-seeded skepticism towards how mainstream media interpret events. He preferred news on the Middle East from Al Jazeera because, he said, “They’re right there.” He perceived the network’s coverage as more connected to the regions it reports on and more accountable to affected communities than other media sources:

When they comment on the news, it’s something that’s personally affecting them right then and there. I’ve seen footage of newscasters fully crying on TV about a piece of information and they’re begging the people watching, like, ‘This is real, you need to take this seriously.’ And I would take that seriously. I have this undisputed belief that you wouldn’t lie because you don’t have this Western agenda to push. (Omar, 24)

Several participants wanted news about Palestine from Palestinians. Similarly, Olivia wanted stories on the cost of living from young people, and Makenzie wanted stories on women’s rights from women.

How evidence is presented

Despite participants’ preferences for news from journalists with connections to stories, they also valued the use of accurate, factual, and unbiased language in determining what to trust. Chris, 24, an athlete, said: “I want to believe that an event is just being recalled as ‘this is what occurred’ versus any sort of subconscious application to the event that I wasn’t there for.” Participants believed news was more trustworthy if it provided background information, historical connections, included many voices, and was delivered in a way they deemed fair and balanced. Lee relied on the wording a reporter used: “They’re giving dates, specific names, information, dollar amounts.” He said including these facts not only indicated that a journalist cared about detail, but these also provided him with the information he needed to cross-check and verify a claim he did not trust. Other participants defined accurate language as

precise, clear, truthful, factual, grammatically correct, and devoid of bias.

Seeing is believing

Participants placed a high premium on proof in the form of video footage, street interviews, full-length interviews, direct quotes, and links to resources and reference materials as evidence that validated reported claims. For Talia, providing visual evidence meets the expectations of a generation accustomed to consuming a lot of visual information.

Nowadays, we see more live videos, like people actually going live on the scene and interacting with people. So if a post has a live video I could watch as it’s happening, that’s sort of how I have a mark of truth. (Talia, 22)

For Makenzie, 23, stories without accompanying video were often met with skepticism. However, video evidence was not always a marker of truth for participants. Anita, 24, said she was “duped” once by a deep fake on TikTok and now questions the credibility of all videos: “That’s why I don’t trust many creators who talk about the news because there are biases, or there is a side that they may not share.” Anita added that short and condensed video reels can omit crucial information or can be altered to portray false and misleading information.

DISCUSSION

This study examines how a small group of Gen Z Canadians determine what news to trust in online media environments increasingly shaped by algorithmic curation, information abundance, and media consolidation. Consistent with research on selective exposure (Stroud, 2011), incidental news consumption (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), and distributed trust (Madden et al., 2017; Botsman, 2017), participants approached digital news with a complex mix of skepticism, autonomy, and emotional burden. Their practices reflect a vulnerability to the structural limitations of algorithmic curation and digital news systems. Participants relied on social groups, existing beliefs and values, the way content was presented, the perceived authenticity of the content, and

whether the content could be verified with other sources to determine whether it was trustworthy. They also relied on algorithms to filter the high volume of information. Even recognizing that algorithms tend to deliver them information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and contribute to divisiveness and polarization, participants appreciated this affordance, telling us they often do not seek news beyond the information curated by algorithms. Some participants believed they were smart enough to transcend or outsmart algorithmic curation. This finding aligns with the Digital News Report's 2023 findings that 65% of users under 35 have tried to influence story selection by following/unfollowing, muting and blocking, or adjusting settings (Newman et al., 2023, p. 15). The assumption that algorithms can be manipulated may indeed be true in some cases, but since algorithms are not transparent and are always being updated in the interest of maintaining engagement (Blanchett et al., 2022), this represents a strategy that could easily fail over time. While Gen Z participants approached the content they consume with skepticism, that skepticism is not consistently applied. As a result, they may sometimes distrust credible information while placing trust in content that feels authentic or aligns with their values but is not necessarily accurate. Participants' skepticism represents both a more sophisticated understanding of media in general and, paradoxically, their tacit acceptance of the limitations of social media in providing factual information.

While algorithmic curation can broaden news exposure in some contexts (Shi & Li, 2025), participants in this study describe assessing trust primarily through engagement with content that aligns with their existing world views. Many participants took an active role in curating what they see, selectively engaging with sources and narratives they perceive as credible or resonant. At the same time, their accounts reveal how these choices operate within algorithmically structured systems that can reinforce increasingly narrowed information environments. This user-driven personalization appears to be amplified, rather than solely produced, by algorithmic systems. This emphasis on self-curation is closely tied to participants' broader distrust of institutional media authority, both tech platforms and legacy

media. Their skepticism toward legacy media institutions comes from a belief that they are driven by monetary incentives and special interests. While social media algorithms are designed to deliver content that will sell the most advertising to users (Klinger & Svensson, 2018) and have contributed to the spread of toxic misinformation (Kuncoro & Hasanah, 2024), participants in this study believed social media was less influenced by corporate agenda-setting and provided more choice and transparency than traditional media.

Canada's ongoing media consolidation leaves Gen Z in a bind when it comes to trusting news, as they recognize there are few clear alternatives that do not possess some sort of bias. To navigate this, participants looked for transparency, first-hand accounts, and corroborated information they were exposed to that was of interest to them. However, using one social media site (for example TikTok) to corroborate information seen elsewhere on the web is simply trading one brand of algorithmic curation for another, and is no guarantee of trustworthiness. While looking for video, images, or other media that comes straight from the source of a newsworthy event can be a good strategy for cross-checking the news, some tactics, like posting video "evidence" that is actually out of context or tampered with, or, increasingly, photos or video created by generative AI, may make the kind of verification described by our participants ineffective. Additionally, while participants attempted to triangulate sources and verify the news they were consuming, they often did not go as far as to trace the claims made by the alternative media they were using for verification. This means that their strategies were not grounded in best practices for identifying misinformation and could easily backfire.

While Gen Z shows some awareness of media biases, many still struggle to critically evaluate news sources, particularly in social media environments where misinformation spreads easily (Hanz & Kingsland, 2020), prompting them to develop unique strategies for verifying and filtering news. Understanding these strategies is critical for the future of journalism and public discourse. For example, the recognition by our participants that all news is biased, and thus their stated preference for transparency was quite interesting and potentially useful as a strategy. If traditional kinds of journalistic objectivity no longer work in a world

of social media participatory content, perhaps it is better for newsmakers to be honest and reflexive about the assumptions and priorities shaping the collection of news. By analyzing these emerging patterns and capturing the perspectives of young Canadians, this study provides insight into the shifting dynamics of news trust in Canada and how a new generation is redefining trustworthiness in an age of algorithmic influence, with implications for media organizations seeking to engage and retain younger audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mainstream news stands at a crossroads as Gen Z, with a discerning skepticism and digital fluency, demands a reimagining of traditional news delivery models. While mainstream news outlets continue to hold sway in shaping public understanding, the erosion of trust, driven by perceived biases and concerns about corporate interests (Newman & Fletcher, 2017, pp. 22-23; Newman et al., 2025, p. 12), necessitates a recalibration of journalistic practices. This research points to a more promising future for independent journalists (journalists who work outside of media institutions) and citizen journalists (those who may not have formal journalism training but engage in reporting, analyzing, and broadcasting live footage), as the value placed on direct on-the-ground reporting, first-hand accounts, and personal engagement position independent and citizen journalists as critical players in the future media landscape. By nature, these media often operate closer to the ground and can adapt more quickly to digital media trends (Atton & Wickenden, 2005). These forms of journalism meet Gen Z's preference for news that seems to offer unmediated access to information and highlights the personal and human sides of news stories.

The key for both mainstream media and independent journalism lies in embracing transparency, sourcing information directly from impacted communities, encouraging journalists' individuality and authenticity, leveraging technology to enhance engagement, and continuously adapting to the evolving expectations of a digitally savvy audience.

Mainstream news

Young news consumers value agency in their media consumption (Parsons, 2024, pp. 61-62). The way news is presented should reflect a modern understanding of journalism's role, aligning with what younger audiences expect it to be. News organizations can do this by adopting radical transparency as defined by Lowery (2020) and Atton & Wickenden (2005). Examples include disclosing how editorial decisions are made, publishing the names of writers, videographers, editors, producers, and fact-checkers in story bylines, publicizing audience feedback and corrections, and creating accessible channels for reporting errors and holding journalists accountable for accuracy. Newsrooms should implement independent fact-checking protocols to ensure the accuracy of information. For instance, the Canadian publication *The Walrus* maintains a robust fact-checking system, including dedicated training through its editorial fellowship program and transparent verification processes (The Walrus, n.d.). Newsrooms should develop strategies for journalists to engage directly with communities (especially those that are underrepresented) and invest in local journalism to cover stories that directly affect local communities. This would help create more authenticity (Abidin & Ots, 2016, p.160) and build intimacy with young audiences. To achieve this, mainstream media could benefit from collaborations with non-traditional news sources to expand their reach and enhance their credibility.

Looking beyond journalistic objectivity

Young people's preference for unfiltered news does not mean they are not interested in the basic ideals of professional journalism, such as fairness, accuracy, and balance. Rather, they desire more authentic storytelling and believe objectivity gets in the way of that (Marchi, 2012). Objectivity holds to the ideal that journalism remains impartial, ensuring personal biases do not obscure facts (Curry & Stroud, 2021). However, traditionally mainstream media has allowed what it considers "objective truth" to be decided almost exclusively by white journalists and white media executives

(Lowery, 2020). This is impacting Gen Z's willingness to trust these sources.

Canadian newsrooms continue to fall short. Eighty-three percent (83%) of newsroom supervisors are white, 66.7% of newsrooms do not have Indigenous people or people of colour working in their top three roles, and women are overrepresented in part-time and intern positions (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2024). Despite this, journalistic objectivity is staunchly maintained by professional news outlets, giving rise to news skepticism, especially among young people (Marchi, 2012).

For decades, journalists have been calling for their industry to abandon this notion of objectivity as a journalistic standard (Thompson, 2012 [1973]; Wallace, 2019), and instead redefine fair and balanced reporting, rebuild trust with disadvantaged groups by diversifying newsrooms, re-evaluate journalistic hiring practices, and address representational harm caused by journalistic practices (Arguedas et al., 2023). Participants' demand for tangible evidence and their reliance on visual media show how images and first-hand accounts can diminish skepticism and subjectivity.


CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Taken together, these findings show a generation navigating news through a mix of deep skepticism, algorithmic dependence, emotional burden, and a heightened sense of personal responsibility. Participants rejected the neutrality claims of mainstream media and were aware of how algorithms shaped what they saw, yet they continued to rely on those same systems to filter an overwhelming flow of information. Across interviews, their practices revealed a shift away from institutional authority toward individualized, evidence-oriented, and community-rooted mechanisms of trust, reflecting broader transformations in how trust is negotiated in a digital-first media landscape.

This research is based on nine qualitative interviews and is therefore not generalizable to all Gen Z Canadians. All participants had completed or were completing studies in post-secondary institutions and lived in urban centers, which may

influence their access to media sources, political orientations, and verification strategies.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted shortly after the events of October 7, 2023, during a period of intense media scrutiny, misinformation, and political polarization surrounding coverage of Palestine and Israel. The heightened salience of this topic may have amplified participants' skepticism toward mainstream media and their reliance on first-hand accounts or alternative sources. This study reflects a snapshot in time rather than a longitudinal view.

Further research could investigate how Generation Z's trust in news changes as they age or as news topics diversify. Research into this topic might also be strengthened by exploring the intersection of socio-economic factors and disparities that affect access to diverse news sources or the perception of media trust and bias. A larger sample size can provide a clearer and more general understanding of how Generation Z develops trust in news and information. 

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Generative AI Declaration

This paper was written and developed by Iman Kassam. ChatGPT was used in a limited capacity to assist with tasks such as brainstorming, refining language, and improving clarity. However, all ideas, arguments, and critical analyses presented are their own, and any AI-generated content was reviewed, edited, and validated to align with the original research and intent. Proper academic integrity and citation practices have been followed throughout this work.

Author Contributions

This paper was conceived, researched, and written by the lead author, Iman Kassam, who conducted this project's interviews, data collection, thematic coding, findings, and analytical development. The ideas, arguments, and critical interpretations presented in the paper originate from Iman Kassam's research and academic work.

The second author, Dr. Jaigris Hodson, was Kassam's thesis supervisor during the first iteration of this research. Dr. Hodson served as methodological and scholarly support, ensuring the rigor and reliability of the research. They reviewed and provided feedback on each version of the manuscript, contributing domain expertise in trust, credibility, and digital media. Dr. Hodson's role strengthened the theoretical framing and academic integrity of the paper.

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