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# Stuart Portman<sup>1</sup> and Anastasia Veneti<sup>2</sup>

## An investigation into the Modern News Consumption Habits of Students and their Adoption of Twitter as a Mainstream News Outlet

*This research presents the findings of a qualitative investigation into the modern news consumption habits of young people, with a special focus on role of Twitter. The adoption of Twitter by global news media outlets, journalists and political and cultural figures has transformed the platform into arguably a global news machine. Although recent empirical work has explored the impact of social media as a whole on individuals news seeking behaviours, to this point little attention has been made to focus solely on Twitter, and its perceived role in the new media environment. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Uses and Gratifications (Katz et al. 1974), we explore student's perceptions and motivations of use of Twitter as a news source. Our findings suggest that convenience and personalisation are amongst the main drives behind choosing Twitter as a news source. Moreover, the findings point to significant alterations in young adult's news habits during times of political uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** Science Communication; Twitter; Social media; Public engagement

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### INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2006, Twitter is a micro-blogging platform providing an outlet for publishing SMS-style messages to others from a user's social network. Over the last 14 years the site has morphed into one of the world's largest platforms, with over 14 million users in the UK alone (Ritschel 2019). Twitter's accessibility and ease of use have been attributed to its success, allowing for the instant dissemination of information, shared and commented on, connecting people across the world. Twitter, and close rivals such as Facebook are playing increasing roles in the spread of public information, causing massive disruption to the news industry. By the closing of 2018, Social media (SM henceforth) had officially outpaced print newspapers as a news source in the US (Shearer 2018). As SM has weaved its way into the fabric of the news ecosystem, technological advancements and societal factors such as adapting consumption demands have forced changes within the traditional news sector. The prominence of each SM site in the news ecosystem depends on two factors: its overall popularity and the extent to which people see news on the site.

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Across those factors Twitter stands as the highest, closely followed by Facebook (Matsa et al., 2018).

A wealth of studies suggests that news consumption habits vary by generation and recent scholarship has been particularly focused on younger audiences (Antunovic et al. 2016; Huang 2009; Sveningsson 2015; Rosengard et al. 2014). It has been suggested that lifelong news consumption habits are shaped by individuals as they grow up and are not fully established until an individual is in their 30s (Pablo et al. 2017). Thereupon, this study aims to provide insight into young consumers' news habits on Twitter in order to further our understanding of young people's perceptions and news consumption attitudes. To do so, we apply the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in the digital environment in order to examine young people's relationship with news media sources. Our research design includes a series of in-depth interviews with British university students. Information that accesses their personal online spaces, including those provided by brands, is considered pragmatically and analytically. Driven by their desire to search for truth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), their attitude towards advertising is rather sceptical (Gutfreund, 2016). In the context of brand communications on social media, they scrutinise the sources of the branded content posts and question who produced the message and how that message was promoted within the particular social media environment. Those actions reflect that they particularly value knowing what is going on around them and being in control (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Despite their distrust in advertising, social media still play an important role in their consumer-brand relationship (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). However, due to their private online conduct and critical questioning of information sources, their social media engagement practices may occur "below the radar" of current online metrics (Boccia Artieri, 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### From traditional to New Media

The introduction of new and social media was followed by a steady decline in people's preference in mainstream media, and falling levels of trust amongst young people (Reuters Institution 2019). Marchi (2012) suggests that many young people hold the view that the traditional sectors of the media are simply part of the "establishment". The orthodox agenda setting powers that print, TV and radio organisations hold, and a feeling of being 'left out of the conversation' has caused alarming levels of disengagement (Barnhurst 2000). This has led young people in search of an outlet which encourages active involvement in both the conversation and agenda setting of the news. An influential study by Raeymaeckers (2004) suggests that young people identify newspapers with the adult world and have a "utilitarian view of the press". Traditionally, young people could be depended upon to grow up, mature, and become loyal newspaper readers (Schlagheck 1998), but a declining readership suggests young people are no longer bound by the same patterns as their predecessors. As Tandoc and Johnson (2016) suggest traditional media are losing younger audiences as they are seen as less credible than newer forms of media.

A variety of different studies have concluded that young people do consider it important to keep up with current affairs; but it is the ways in which news is presented in traditional sources which has led to their rejection (Barnhurst and Wartella 1991; Meijer 2007; Marchi 2012). Whether it be on television or over the radio, Barnhurst (2000) assimilates that young people are believed to have grown tired of listening to people they cannot relate to, discussing issues they are largely not interested in, without the ability to

involve themselves or influence the conversation. Relevant concerns and realities for this generation, such as climate change, have been granted little attention until recent years. It is argued by failing to meet the needs and expectations of this group by covering topics that do not directly affect them, they are likely to ignore the outlets altogether (Vanderbosch, et.al., 2009). Subsequently, young consumers are seeking alternative sources of information which grant them the freedom to find relevant information and 'cherry pick' what suits them (Raeymaeckers 2004).

With the invention of SM, applications such as Twitter led to the emergence of always-on ubiquitous awareness of news events, marking a distinct change in the traditionally structured relationship between news producers and news consumers. SM allows for the publishing of 'personal media' (Newman et al. 2011); users have gained control over their media experience through generating their own information streams on social networking environments. Twitter hashtags and social commentary are now a welcome part of the daily currency of news output and the micro-blog format allows journalists to provide short updates with their followers at all times (Newman et al. 2016). This has led to increased involvement from the public in the news acquiring and sharing process, now viewed as a "partnership" between them and media producers (Sambrook 2015).

Tandoc and Johnson's (2016) theory into the 'displacement effect' provide empirical support that Twitter is displacing traditional news sources, particularly when it comes to breaking news. When shocking or high-profile political stories 'break', they are picked up and shared first on mobile SM formats before being printed in newspapers or shown on televised news. As Dimmick et al. (2004) argue, the internet is more successful when competing for gratification opportunities, which allow the satisfaction of individual gratifications. The distinct difference is that internet usage offers no geographical or timing restrictions as opposed to traditional media sources, and this is particularly prevalent nowadays due to the prolific use of mobile devices. This concept originates from the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which was developed by Katz et al. (1974) as a way of understanding the motivations of news users. The theory is a social and psychological approach, which focuses on the functions that the media serve for people, rather than what media does for people (Klapper 1963; Rubin 2002). UGT promotes the idea that people manipulate their media usage behaviours to seek and obtain gratifications for their needs and wants. As university students begin their journey to adulthood, the UGT posits they will select the most appropriate media channel which will provide them with distinct gratifications that will benefit them in this journey (Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld 1983). The theory has faced past criticism for its individualistic nature, leading some to devalue it as a tool for exploring audience consumption on a societal level (Carey and Kreiling 1974). Nevertheless, in recent years it has seen a resurgence in popularity, providing a valuable framework for exploring internet research (Ruggiero 2000). The increasing prevalence of SM has promoted numerous studies on UGT which propose that as well as information seeking, other gratifications deriving from SM use include socialisation, entertainment and self-status seeking (Diddi and LaRose 2006; Dunne et al. 2010; Lee and Carpini 2010). Following from previous work, this study will adapt the UGT to study the modern media environment, focusing on the specific reasons why young people are choosing Twitter as a source of news.

A seemingly opposing viewpoint to the idea of media displacement, the theory of 'media saturation' (Newell et al. 2008) suggests that online media in fact supplements traditional media, through driving interest in the news medium as a whole and pushing increased consumption across both new and incumbent media. An example of this could

be following BBC news across all their platforms. Matsa et al. (2018) found that in the UK the BBC is the most named news source across all age groups, highlighting its recognition across both old and new media forms. Tandoc and Johnsons (2016) findings support this ideal, as they highlight complimentary patterns between traditional and online media. This led them to theorise that media displacement and media saturation may not necessarily be contradicting hypotheses. As such, they argue that in the modern ecology of news consumption, some platforms may be displaced, but this results in increasing specialisation of remaining platforms, and new digital platforms driving traffic back to existing outlets.

The coined term 'media snacking' has suggested that consumers will view online environments, taking little 'bites' of information on a vast selection of news topics. This may lead them to seek confirmation and further detail on interested topics through other media sources (Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2014). Current uses and gratifications research have indicated that news consumers of the modern age will use multiple digital platforms to meet their consumption needs, jumping from one platform to another (Westlund 2008). Tandoc and Johnson (2016) argue that news consumption can be due to incidental exposure. This incidental exposure happens on SM sites such as Twitter, where popular news is shared, acting as entry points to traditional news sites (Pablo et al., 2017).

#### News Consumption and Twitter

The consumption of news is viewed as both an active selection and a habitual behaviour, as when confronted by many choices, a consumer is likely to lapse into habitual patterns of using their individual selection they are most satisfied with (Diddi & LaRose 2006). Zerba (2011) found that internet news consumption among 18-29-years old has grown exponentially, driven by motivations of convenience and mobility. It is suggested that among students in particular, habit is a strong predictor of news consumption (Diddi and LaRose 2006), with university students being particularly prone to internet news consumption as the internet use is already a part of their everyday lives (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000).

Through utilising SM applications as their primary news media (Ripollés 2012), the lines between social connection and information seeking have become blurred. It has even been argued that SM's primary function amongst the younger cohort is now for news sourcing (Ripollés 2012), although recent studies on Facebook and Twitter refute this claim, suggesting young people are using these applications mainly for social gratification (Cheung et al. 2011). Meijer (2007) believes that digital natives see news as a 'public service', believing it is their right to have news information readily and freely available online, as they always have. Additionally, young consumers are seeking to take control of their own media experience, with the ability to customise news that is served to them (Spyridou and Veglis 2008; Huang 2009). Twitter, which is free to download, asks users to select particular areas of interest and manipulates a 'for you' news feed based on the selected preferences (Twitter 2020).

Newman et al. (2011) stated that young people's reading behaviours are evolving with new technologies and presentation formats, but the popularity of Twitter within this age group could be assumed due their attraction to online, interactive social environments. Kim (2011) highlights that the open system of Twitter, which enables users to respond to the question "what's happening?" when composing a tweet, creates a venue for users to share information regarding the world around them, thereby making it a vibrant forum for public discourse. In recent years, a large sphere of political conversation

has moved onto SM, prompting empirical understanding into the role Twitter now plays within covering political events (Jungherr 2015).

Rather than consumers feeling “left out of the conversation” (Barnhurst 2000), a perception previously established regarding traditional media within this review, Twitter actively encourages involvement and establishes a rebalancing of the traditional one-sided agenda setting. The functionalities on offer within Twitter to assist with the publication and sharing of news content would help to explain this; by promoting a platform for a broader range of discussion than the mass media, encompassing the views and opinions from those around the globe. Young people appreciate the opportunity to gain different perspectives on wide ranging issues, and value perspectives of those from different countries and cultures, as this helps them to shape their core beliefs and opinions (Sveningsson 2015; Meijer 2005). The ‘retweet’ function is a distinctive feature which provides motivation for users and media outlets alike to publicise themselves in ways never done before. Swigger (2012) argues that this feature has changed the nature of social communication. Since this, complementary features have been added to enhance the user interface. A recent update allows for multiple tweets to follow after each other attached as a ‘thread’ (Twitter 2019). This has been popularised by journalists as a way to update an ongoing story.

Although tweets are limited to short form copy, they are also now used as a communication tool carrying “rich” information. Within a tweet, links can be added to mainstream news web pages providing additional information (Parmelee and Bichard 2012). These newly established news-seeking habits may evidence Rosengard (2014) earlier claim that a convergence of the two outlets has formed a new media model. According to Hansen et al. (2011), a quarter of all tweets can be regarded as news. The advantage of brief messaging on Twitter lowers user requirement of time and thought investment for content generation, facilitating speedy and flexible communication and information intake (Park 2016). Students' reading habits favour this style of information intake; Huang (2009) discovered they would read a long story less than once a week and that was only if they were interested in the subject matter. Raeymaeckers (2004) earlier study supports this, as it was found that young people strategise ‘scanning’ articles, favouring the shorter content.

The aforementioned benefits have led multiple theorists to assimilate that Twitter is increasingly dedicated to its use as a means of news acquisitions and sharing (Park 2016; Honey and Herring 2009). Few studies have found that the process of information seeking and sharing news reporting, and the resultant conversation around these stories are confounding drivers for Twitter use (Lee and Ma, 2012). Drawing on the above literature, there are three research questions that emerged as follows:

RQ1- What are young people's modern media consumption behaviour?

RQ2- What are young people's perceptions of Twitter as a news source?

RQ3- Do young people's Twitter news seeking behaviours alter in times of political uncertainty?

## METHODOLOGY

To answer our research, we conducted a qualitative study based on ten semi structured in-depth interviews with British university students. The goal of adopting this approach is to contribute new insights concerning how Twitter fits into a bigger picture of news consumption, through establishing findings and understanding the complex social world in which it sits (Wilson 2014). The strength and power of the interpretivist

approach lies in its ability to address the complexity and meaning of situations (Black 2006). The participants were asked to provide detailed information regarding their navigation of the media landscape, and their use of Twitter as a news source. Purposive sampling was deployed and the selection criteria included the age and education background, as relevant studies have suggested that Twitter users are primarily young adults, and hold a university degree (Salman Aslam Mughal 2019). All participants had their own Twitter accounts. Participants’ information can be seen in Table 1 below.

[Insert Table 1 here: Table 1: Interviewees’ information]

As a direct result of the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic, the interviews were conducted online through video calls, while the audio was recorded for transcribing and coding purposes. The interviews took place throughout April 2020. The duration of each interview was between 45 and 75 minutes, with over eight hours of interview audio in total. To align with the inductive approach of the research, the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013) were implemented, taking a holistic view when analysing the data. To secure anonymity, the participants names were removed and replaced by numbers as shown in Table 1 above.

Table 1: Participants Table

Participant No.	Age	Gender	University Course
1	21	F	Marketing
2	22	M	Business Studies
3	21	F	Media & Communications
4	23	M	Events Management
5	20	M	Product Design
6	23	F	Marketing
7	19	F	Forensic Investigation
8	22	F	Business Studies
9	24	M	Economics
10	19	F	Psychology

## FINDINGS

### British Youth Media Consumption Behaviour

To answer our first research question, interviewees were asked a series of questions that allowed us to map their news media habits and their conceptualizations of staying informed. The overarching assumption here is that we detected a considerable change in students’ understanding of news and media consumption behaviour before and after joining university. Our findings show that, to varying degrees, all participants outlined a genuine interest in the news medium, which has increased in recent years.

*“When I was younger, I wasn't as aware of how important it was to know about the news.” (P9)*

This lends support to the suggestion that young people wish to be well informed (Huang 2009). The interviewees associated news informing as a part of the process of growing up,

making them more of a “complete person” (P5). P5 further clarified, suggesting he would feel “embarrassed” if he was ill prepared to navigate through important social situations such as future job interviews, unequipped with vital news information. It seems these students associate news-seeking as part of the process of joining the working world. Multiple students named the primary reason for keeping up-to-date with the news as helping them from a “professional standpoint” (P5) when entering their given industries once they have graduated. As a topic, politics was noted amongst a majority of the participants as an essential issue to stay informed on, particularly since these young adults were afforded the opportunity to vote:

*“When there's elections, I think that's my duty to stay up to date and be as informed as I can to make a good decision.” (P4)*

An important distinction should be made from that of Huang's (2009) understanding. The cohort shared the view that an oversaturation of news exposure, in other words, ‘knowing too much’, would be “unhealthy” (P10), or detrimental to their mental wellbeing. As a whole, the practice of reading the news is regarded as a generally negative experience. As a whole, interviewees expressed their concern towards misinformation, as well as mainstream media biases:

*“I'm more grown up in a sense. You've got to take everything with a pinch of salt that you read online, because it's just not going to be true.” (P3)*

Multiple participants claimed they are now “more aware of fake news” (P1), with issues of trust being cited on the fact that “anyone can literally post anything” (P4) on SM. The lack of ‘gatekeeping’ in social environments (Park 2016) has affected Twitter's perceived credibility, due to the risk of misinformation spreading quickly online. In the words of P7, it seems young individuals are “becoming more aware of how much bullshit you can get online”. For this reason, a connection has been drawn from using ‘official’ sources to obtain what is perceived as more credible information. The use of the language “grow[ing] up” and “becoming more aware” suggest that as the individuals have grown older, they have learnt which sources they deem more trustworthy for accurate information and will actively seek these sources in online formats:

*“Until a more credible source confirms it, I wouldn't believe it.” (P2)*

P5 suggested that through his studies, he has built understanding of the news sources that are most respected for being credible:

*“Being a student and having to reference sources in my work, the ones I've referenced would be The Guardian, BBC. I wouldn't reference things like The Sun. They tell you to be critical, and an aspect of being critical is choosing the right sources”.*

Reinforcing this theme of transition, it can be argued that learnings from each of the individuals educational experience has impacted their media perceptions. Through asking each participant to describe their daily news-seeking behaviours, important distinctions were found which suggest dramatic changes in students' news consumption behaviours before and after going to university:



*“When I was at school, I had a stricter routine where I would get up at 7am, go downstairs and the TV would be on. But the only thing that would be on would be the news. So, you'd have to sit and eat breakfast, or get ready with the news in the background, or actively watch it. But now being a student, we don't even watch that much TV, so when we wake up in the morning, it's quick, get washed, dressed, get out the door. It's a lot more sheltered, I think. You're kind of away from the whole news thing.” (P3)*

This quote is echoed by ideas shared from many of the other participants. Raeymaeckers (2004) found that parental influence had a significant impact on the formation of young people's information seeking behaviours. These findings support Raeymaeckers' claim, however suggest that when no longer bound by the media habits “ingrained in [their] family dynamic” (P6), these behaviours fail to mirror once individuals are living in the “student bubble” (P10). Students' lifestyles are often unstructured. The habituated routines of typical work life, such as reading or listening to news during the work commute, are not yet formed. Despite our interviewees suspicion over SM as news content providers, they admitted that they are those that they primarily use to stay informed. Televised news is rarely watched and the participants questioned the value in purchasing newspapers.

*“Because I'm in an environment where no one would ever buy a newspaper, I wouldn't do that the most.” (P9)*

The participants demonstrated that their news exposure is almost entirely through digital platforms, primarily through the use of Twitter on their mobile device.

*“Now I'm a student, the only time really looking at the news is if I'm on Twitter.” (P1)*

Bozkowski et al. (2018) spoke of the primacy of the mobile device for news. The constant use of Twitter, outlined by all participants, allows individuals to stay informed in a way which best suits their needs and lifestyles as young, educated adults. The theme ‘surveillance’, drawing from work by Antunovic et al. (2016) best describes the random and frequent news-checking habits of the sample, providing a consistent awareness of news events as part of being connected digitally and socially to the world of media. Despite news-seeking occurring randomly throughout the participants day, most spoke of a time in the morning, usually just after waking up, dedicated to ‘catching up’ on their phones. This time was often spent on Twitter, reviewing the ‘trending’ list, in addition possibly reviewing news applications, to learn about major news events.

#### Twitter as a News Provider

There are three main themes that emerged from our analysis as drivers behind the preference of Twitter as news source, namely: convenience; personalization, and multidimensional news.

##### *Convenience*

The theme ‘convenience’ was identified as the primary driver behind young individuals' media choices. Twitter is viewed as the most convenient news outlet by our interviewees, as it provides timely and accessible access to a plethora of information:

*“Twitter, you get the information in seconds, you never have to wait, you just know straight away.” (P1)*

One of the main advantages of Twitter is its prominence in providing users with a constant stream of immediate information. Updated in real-time, the participants share the view that Twitter plays a vital role as an “immediate source of information” (P6). Viewed as significantly faster than traditional media outlets, it can be argued it is now even displacing online search tools such as Google as a portal to search news online, claims supported by Newman et al. (2011)

*“I think it's just a natural instinct to check Twitter.” (P10)*

Through utilisation of the search bar and reviewing the trending lists, users are served an ever-constant stream of updating information on developing news topics across the globe.

*“I would have not even known that unless I had Twitter and saw the hashtags.” (P4)*

*“I do think if I didn't have Twitter, it would be bad. I think I'd be ashamed of myself because I wouldn't know half as much.” (P1)*

It is clear young people associate news discovery with Twitter use, reinforcing how central the application has become to their core media habits. Participants spoke of the opportunities Twitter gives for news visibility at all times, even on occasions where news-seeking was not their main focus:

*“I'd be lying if I said that I go on Twitter primarily just to look at news. Sometimes you just go on and then you end up finding out what's going on.” (P7)*

This idea of ubiquitously available news, integrated throughout the platform, can be related to Coleman et al. (2011) concept of media convergence. It can be assumed that users associate frequent Twitter use with keeping well-informed in news content. This understanding may also point to incidental news exposure; users who may or may not be driven by motivations to read the news are exposed to a constant stream of information as part of frequenting the space (Pablo et al. 2017). Incidental news exposure is consistent with the niche theory's reference to gratification opportunities as an important resource that media organisations compete for (Dimmick et al. 2004), gratifying the users need for information while in the space for other reasons such as social connection (Newman et al. 2011). The sheer quantity of infinitely updating news content on Twitter allows young consumers to gratify their wish to remain ‘shallowly informed’, through practices such as scanning through trending topics. Noted by some of the participants, those wishing to seek further detail could “jump to more official platforms” (P2), clicking article links from Tweets carrying ‘rich’ information (Parmelee and Bichard 2012), transporting them to the webpages of mainstream news websites. Thus, providing the opportunity to gratify a need for more in-depth information on interested topics.

### *Personalisation*

The second important drive is related to Twitter's ability to personalize individuals' pages dependent on their own needs. Twitter users engineer their idealised news feeds, tailored to their interests, by utilising functionalities such as ‘News for You’ offered by the service: “More personalised suggestions make building a great timeline — filled with

Tweets, links, media, and conversations from people and topics you're interested in — easier and faster." (Twitter 2020). Again, links can be drawn from this and the theme 'convenience': the participants' detailed behaviours seem to evidence a rebalancing of the traditional agenda setting within mainstream media, making information more accessible. It offered them opportunities to dedicate time to their specific news interests.

"If you are a fan of a few writers or journalists, you can follow them." (P8)

Following and thus unfollowing users dependent on their alliance to one's personal beliefs is something the participants appreciate, as they are able to further engage with individuals/topics of interest, and likewise, mute those they do not wish to see. Mutz and Young (2011 cited by Sveningsson 2015) describe this process as an "active selection" and claim this can lead to social networks which tend to be homogeneous, particularly in regard to political views. The term 'echo chamber' has been well documented to describe this (Garrett 2013).

*"My Twitter newsfeed, I agree with. I think it's because I only follow students or people my age, and we've got the same views."* (P3)

This is a viewpoint shared by the interviewees, who perceive Twitter as a highly political environment. The participants seem to recognise bias within the interface, where, in this case, there is more exposure to liberal arguments. P3 perceived their news feed as:

*"Just inundated with Labour supporters...it makes you feel that everyone feels that way, when clearly they don't."*

It appears the participants recognise they have curated an environment which bolsters their personal beliefs, through adopting the personalisation strategies detailed. Our findings demonstrate that Twitter offers particular social gratifications such as a feeling of being part of a like-minded community, with their personal political views mirrored on a large scale within the shared space.

#### *Multidimensional news*

The thematic analysis identified a common theme among all participants, that gratifications sought through social motivations such as entertainment and opinion-sharing drive Twitter use just as much, if not sometimes more, than seeking timely information. 'Multidimensional News' is the final theme, descriptive of news exposure and commentary layered amongst social and entertainment functions on the platform.

*"It's the perfect balance of quick information, people's views and funny memes."* (P2)

For young people in particular, Twitter grants a space where they are able to engage with news information in an accessible way. Six interviewees stated they would rarely tweet anything themselves but would broadcast their opinions on news topics through using the 'favourite' and 'retweet' app functions. By retweeting or favouriting news related tweets, users such as the interviewees are actively showcasing their agreement or interest in a news item through their engagement. Twitter enables 'social commentary' through its open platform, connecting those around the globe to share their opinions, insights and suggestions on wide ranging issues. The interviewees often spoke about spending long periods of time scrolling through news topics on the platform, which they suggest allows

for their increasingly developed understanding of news events, long after they have been reported in the mainstream media. Previous UGT studies support the importance of entertainment as a media seeking outcome (Dunne et al. 2010).

#### News Consumption Habits in Times of Uncertainty

As mentioned above, this research took place in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. The government enforced lockdown led to the closure of Bournemouth University campuses, and students were advised to move back to their family homes, thus causing major disruption to their lifestyles. This uncertainty presented the perfectly unique opportunity to explore whether living through major political events has an impact on students' media seeking habits. The findings were particularly striking as they seem to demonstrate significant changes to the behaviours previously explored in RQ1, including enforcing new relationships between the individuals and Twitter:

*"Just before lockdown everyone was talking about it, it was changing every minute, so my use was just constant." (P7)*

Each interviewee expressed an increased interest in the news medium as a whole, demonstrated through more purposeful news 'surveillance' behaviours. This included actively searching for news content, devoting more time to reading articles in full as opposed to regular scanning strategies, and seeking to discuss the issue in online and offline environments. P5 stated that he had "been checking Twitter more than ever before"; supporting the idea that the importance of Twitter for those wishing to seek timely information increases during times of uncertainty.

Interestingly, it does appear that young people's perceptions of the platform being a source of misinformation is heightened in a time where they are seeking clarity and credible news updates. As developed in RQ1, serious issues over the reliability of information on the service led many of the individuals to return to the traditional outlets they had previously abandoned:

*"I'll still use Twitter a lot. But I'll use the traditional sources way more than usual during times of uncertainty." (P2)*

*"The only recurring time where I've watched the news was during the beginning of Coronavirus when there was a lot more uncertainty. So, Boris Johnson is doing a 5pm speech, it would either be on TV, or through streaming on my laptop." (P5)*

It appears, when seeking what is viewed as crucial information, students will make a concerted effort to return to more mainstream outlets, viewing it as "important to have an official person telling you what's actually going on because you can't believe anything unless it's backed up" (P9). These highlight the significance that traditional media may have for this age group, in providing what is seen as the most reliable information, when information is at its highest demand. It is important to note that the participants reported constant Twitter use during this time, with a few of the participants suggesting suffering from possible information-fatigue, due to the volume of information being shared on the issue at all times. This could underlie the new complementary relationship established with programmed televised news, to gratify the individuals need for detailed, clear and accurate information.

Moreover, the notion of looking for a 'sweet escape' can be found in a 'tweet escape'. The majority of the participants suggested that the 'multidimensional news' aspect of Twitter, as spoken in RQ2, increases importance throughout times of political uncertainty.

*"I need a distraction. I need to know about what people are doing in quarantine. I need to retweet those funny tweets, some of the memes were amazing...It's helping me get through it all." (P8)*

*"There's a lot of memes about it. Brings a sort of light-heartedness to it. You're still learning about how people are coping during times." (P7)*

Notably, the phenomenon of Twitter 'memes' was spoken about frequently, as something the participants would seek out to gratify their pursuit for entertainment. 'Meme' content, in the form of pictures or short video clips, are paired with tags to join in discussion on trending topics. During difficult times such as their experience with the pandemic, these students described actively seeking out this style of commentary on Twitter, possibly partaking in the creation of their own 'meme', or sharing others, as a form of entertainment. Participants spoke about how they use this shared language as a way of "escaping" (P8) the negative coverage found elsewhere in the media and appreciated the chance to find funny moments in seemingly downbeat times. This supports the findings of Diddi and LaRose (2006), who found escapism gratifications to be the most consistent predictors of news consumption behaviour. Interestingly, some interviewees spoke about how they find political memes entertaining, remarking their engagement with them often helps them to understand more complex news items, such as the pandemic, in more everyday terms. These findings demonstrate the importance of Twitter's 'meme culture' within this generation's interpretation of news.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research project was to examine British youth news media consumption habits and their use of Twitter as a news source. The qualitative research approach encouraged detailed understanding of the interviewees' views and offered valuable insights as for their conceptualization of news seeking, the significance of staying informed, their use of Twitter as a news source, and the changes that a major crisis brings about to their news consumption habits. The changes that have occurred before and after joining university are illuminating of young people's perception and attitudes towards news consumption. This seems to stress the importance of an individual's lifestyle on newly forming media behaviours. Moreover, the adoption of the UGT framework allowed us to further our understanding of the individuals' perceptions of Twitter, successfully identifying characteristic gratifications based on a young users' desire to access news out of 'convenience'. These findings both support and build on existing empirical understanding of the UGT on SM. Through using Twitter, young people have established consistent 'surveillance' of news information, centred around frequent use of their mobile phones. Studies have suggested a disinterest with the media from the younger generation, but the findings of this study argue that news-seeking, although not always purposeful, is still very much a concern of this age group. Last but not least, the personalization and multidimensional news themes stressed the significance of Twitter as a news provider of information that is now layered with social and communicative functions, presenting individuals with new ways of contextualising news content to seek entertainment and

information. Although the themes emerged from this analysis offer fruitful ground for further investigation, this research does not come without its caveats. Based on a very small number of participants, our findings need to be further scrutinized with a wider group. It will also be useful if future studies examine such behaviours with participants from different educational backgrounds.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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