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Tracking the Roots of Low News Usage on Smartphones – Do Individual Interests, Political Attitudes, and Media Consumption Habits Affect the Mobile News Use of Young Adults?

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ABSTRACT

While democratic opinion formation relies on citizens receiving vital information from the news, an increasing number of people consistently consume very little of it. To address this concern, we tracked the mobile news consumption of 382 young adults in Switzerland and combined it with survey data of the participants to determine the effect of topical interests, political attitudes, and media consumption habits on news usage. We found that interest in domestic politics was a strong predictor of news consumption. Additional predictors within our 18–25-year-old participant group were age and time spent online. These findings have implications for policymakers; fostering an informed citizenry may be more effective when targeting the underlying interest in politics rather than directly attempting to boost news use.

Introduction

News use is regarded as beneficial for democratic societies because it is correlated with political knowledge (Andersen et al., 2020; Damstra et al., 2021; Edgerly, 2022; Marcinkowski & Došenović, 2020; Moeller & de Vreese, 2019; Prior, 2003; van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021), political participation (Andersen et al., 2020; Edgerly, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010), and trust in democratic institutions (Andersen et al., 2024, Goyanes at al., 2023; Udris et al., 2022). However, researchers have observed a growing share of the population consuming little to no news content (Edgerly, 2022; Ohme et al., 2022; Palmer & Edgerly, 2024; Palmer et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). This phenomenon raises the question of whether news can play a positive role in democracy in the future. Research has explored antecedents of low news use at the individual and national

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levels, often focusing on news avoidance as a potential cause (Goyanes et al., 2023; Prior, 2009; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020).

News consumption is often the result of a conscious decision. The uses and gratification approach emphasizes the active nature of media usage identifying information needs as the main antecedent of news consumption (Palmgreen, 1984; Recalde et al., 2025). However, it can also be a deliberate decision not to read the news. Individuals may not be interested in the news or even intentionally avoid it because users cannot cope with the flood of information, the news content is too negative or too complex, or because it does not align with their political opinions (Garrett, 2009; Goyanes et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Intentionally consuming a small amount of news can have a positive effect on well-being (Toff & Palmer, 2019). It may also be the result of a more pragmatic news habit in digital media environments. Many users believe that relevant news will find them via social media and that it is not necessary to follow the news regularly to be informed (Strauß et al., 2021). At the same time, not using the news can occur unintentionally (Skovygaard & Andersen, 2020). Reasons for this include users investing their time in activities other than consuming news (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) or because algorithms give low priority to news in social media feeds (Powers, 2017; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

When we try to understand low news use at the individual level, there are currently two challenges: a disparate and sometimes contradictory set of potential causes and the methodological problems of accurately conceptualizing and measuring news usage. First, the literature indicates that factors related to low news use depend on the target group under review. Young adults, for instance, exhibit more frequent mobile news use than older audience segments, which is related to less engagement with news content and so called "news snacking" (Molyneux, 2018). Research also shows that young adults are less interested in the news offered by outlets because they do not always consider it relevant for their everyday life (Schwaiger et al., 2022). Other studies have shown that low news use depends on political attitudes or trust in the news (Edgerly, 2022; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Such significant heterogeneity in effects requires focused studies, which, in the case of younger audiences, means considering mobile news consumption and interests related to news topics, among other antecedents to news use. Second, recent research on news use and news avoidance has often relied on self-reported data (Prior, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012), which is often not a precise measure of participants' actual news usage (Festic et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2023; Reiss, 2023; Valli et al., 2024) particularly among mobile users (Jürgens et al., 2020). Although they have their own limitations, innovative research designs with digital trace data collected in tracking studies offer a solution for measuring news usage more precisely than design, which solely rely on survey self-reports (Jürgens et al., 2020; Reiss, 2023).

For this study, we used a multi-method design with a self-developed user-centric mobile tracking solution (cf., Christner et al., 2022) to measure the news use of young adults on smartphones. We identified participants with no or very low news use and combined the data with survey questions about participants' interests in news topics, political attitudes, trust in media and politics, and media use habits to estimate which individual-level factors may be associated with a propensity for low news consumption.

Table 1. 2 x 2 typology of high-low news use with relevant concepts.

	Unintentional	Intentional
High news use	Incidental News Exposure (e.g., Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017)	News Seeking (e.g., Edgerly, 2017) News as Gratification (e.g., Recalde et al., 2025)
Low news use	Unintentional News Avoidance (e.g., Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) Entertainment Orientation (e.g., Blekesaune et al., 2012)	Intentional News Avoidance (e.g., Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) News Finds me Perception (e.g.,Strauß et al., 2021) Selective Exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009)

Literature Review

In this study, we examine how individual interests in news topics, political attitudes, and media consumption habits are related to the low news usage of young adults, measured on mobile phones. This requires us to disentangle two related terms in the current literature: low news usage and news avoidance. Betakova et al. (2024) show that although intentional news avoidance and low news consumption share common motives, there are notable differences. Therefore, we propose a 2×2 typology of news consumption for this study and distinguish between high and low news usage or news avoidance as outcome of intentional and unintentional behavior (see Table 1).

According to our typology, news usage and news avoidance can either be the result of intentional decisions or happen unintentionally (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Indeed, some people intentionally avoid the news because it is perceived as too negative, biased or does not match the sought gratification (e.g., Aharoni et al., 2021; Zerba, 2011). However, according to Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) some individuals with low news usage do not show a dislike for the news or deliberately renounce consuming the news. This unintentional news avoidance can occur when other media activities are prioritized from the abundance of digitalized media environments (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Volk et al., 2024).

However, Palmer et al. (2023) pointed out that intentional and unintentional news avoidance is often vague and difficult to capture empirically, especially with surveys. They argued that participants' stated motivations to avoid news are a poor indicator of actual intentionally, with news usage driven by algorithmic selection, high-choice media systems, and structural inequalities. For instance, Ohme et al. (2022) found that about 40% of low news use could be explained by self-reported news avoidance, with active (intentional) news avoidance often driven by different motivations. Furthermore, the so-called news-finds-me concept highlights that some people do not regularly follow the news because they expect that they will learn about relevant events or information through social media or interpersonal communication (Goyanes et al. 2023; Strauß et al., 2021). On the other hand, some individuals actively follow the news because they enjoy it and find it informative. For them, staying updated is a gratification for consuming news (Recalde et al., 2025). This behavior is reflected in most news repertoire studies which typically identify a group of news seekers or news omnivores (e.g., Edgerly, 2017).

Young people are especially important to study in this context, as other studies have found that they have higher rates of low news use (Antunovic et al., 2018; Edgerly, 2017;

Schwaiger et al., 2022). While young adults have been shown to retain trust in traditional news channels, they almost exclusively obtain their information online (Russmann & Hess, 2020), primarily through news portals or social media. Young adults have been shown to mainly access news via their mobile phones (Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2024; Molyneux, 2018), making this an effective target for research on low mobile news consumption.

Interests in News Subjects

Users turn to the news for different reasons. The uses and gratification approach highlights the role of sought needs and expected gratifications when individuals engage with media sources (Palmgreen, 1984). Studies show that information needs and the social utility of information derived from the news are central motivations for news consumption (e.g., David, 2009; Palmgreen et al., 1980; Recalde et al., 2025; Valenzuela et al., 2019). By offering a variety of topics in their coverage, the news typically satisfies informational needs in different realms. Studies have found that a lack of specific interest in news subjects, especially interest in politics, is likely to be associated with lower news usage (Andersen et al. 2024; Edgerly 2022; Kümpel et al. 2022; Lecheler and de Vreese 2017; Shehata 2016; Strömbäck et al. 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010) showed that politically interested individuals are more likely to seek out news about politics from the media and, conversely, that attention to political news is positively related to political interest. This connection has been explicitly linked to news avoidance (Edgerly, 2022; Goyanes et al., 2023; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) as well as low news usage (Betakova et al., 2024). Edgerly (2022) showed that extremely low news usage is related to a disinterest in politics among US adults. In their comparative study of 35 countries, Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) found that a preference for soft news subjects (e.g., sports, entertainment, and celebrity news) was positively correlated with news avoidance.

Research further supports the relationship between news usage and interest in specific topics beyond politics. In qualitative studies, Klopfenstein Frei et al. (2024) and Schwaiger et al. (2022) showed that perceived individual relevance of news topics is critical for the news use among young adults in Switzerland. However, both studies showed that this relevance strongly depends on personal interest, peer group, personal relevance, and the current news environment. Möller et al. (2019) studied news consumption originating from social media, search engines, and direct website visits. They found that individuals who were interested in politics were less likely to access news via social media and search, but more likely to access news directly on news websites. However, Merten et al. (2022) showed that people with an interest in politics were more likely to be exposed to news content via Facebook. Overall, there is a strong indication in the literature that preferences for specific news topics are associated with news usage. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: How are interests in different news subjects associated with low news usage among young adults?

Political Orientation

Selective exposure theory posits that people will try to avoid information which does not align with their opinions and attitudes (e.g., Garrett, 2009). The selective exposure approach has also been applied to research on news avoidance. Research shows that in some cases individuals will avoid news that is not in line with their opinions and attitudes (e.g., Garrett, 2009). A focus group study by Zerba (2011) found political bias in the media to be a reason for avoiding reading newspapers, particularly among younger people, which has been attributed to a perception that the news fails to represent their viewpoints (Gorski, 2023). However, some studies have come to more nuanced and contradictory conclusions. In a seminal study, Donsbach (1991) found limited effects of ideologically dissonant information on news exposure. Garrett et al. (2013) found that people exhibit a preference for opinion-reinforcing political information without systematically avoiding opposing political views. Many studies stem from the US, which has a highly polarized bi partisan political system, and this raises doubts about the ability of these findings to be generalized to other countries with multi-party systems like Switzerland. A global study by Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) found that right-leaning individuals are less likely to avoid news but also highlighted the importance of country-level factors like political stability, press freedom or the political information environment. Furthermore, a study using web tracking and survey data in Germany found a link between populist attitudes, political extremism, and news consumption, but only for certain types of news media (Stier et al., 2020). Schäfer et al. (2023) documented that political leaning had no effect on avoiding news about the COVID-19 crisis. With no consensus on the relationship between political orientation and news consumption, we therefore ask the following research question:

RQ2: How is political orientation associated with low news usage among young adults?

Trust in the News and Politics

Two key variables in research on news consumption are trust in the news and trust in political institutions, with most studies showing a positive relationship between news usage and the two types of trust (Andersen et al., 2024; Villi et al., 2022). Previous studies have found that trust in news was negatively correlated with news avoidance (Goyanes et al., 2023; Schäfer et al., 2023; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). However, Betakova et al. (2024) found that trust in news is only negatively correlated with low news consumption and not with self-reported intentional news avoidance. Fletcher et al. (2025) found that interest in news was positively correlated with trust in news, and that of different types of news media, television news use was significantly correlated with trust. They found no correlation between online news use and trust in news. Möller et al. (2019) found that trust in media was associated with participants being more likely to visit a news website directly, but less likely to access a news website via social media or internet search.

Trust in government has also been correlated with news use. A cross-national study (Villi et al., 2022) found that perceptions of political corruption strengthen apathy toward the news. In Switzerland, Udris et al. (2022) show that individuals who consume no or low amounts of news have lower trust in political institutions. However, the results regarding

trust in politics are mixed. Betakova et al. (2024) found a significant negative relationship between trust in politics and news avoidance as low news consumption, but not intentional news avoidance. Furthermore, Schäfer et al. (2023) found no relationship between trust in politics and avoiding news about the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with this research, we propose the following research question:

RQ3: How are trust in news and trust in politics associated with low news usage among young adults?

Online Media Consumption

One reason for low news usage can include simply preferring other forms of content to news media (Gorski, 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). An abundance of digital content may lead people to often unintentionally avoid news and turn to entertainment or other non-news sources (Kim et al., 2013; Matthes, 2022; Matthes et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Powell et al. (2021) showed that the presence of entertainment and sports in information-rich environments can increase users' likelihood of avoiding political news. On the other hand, people have been shown to be exposed to news while being online incidentally (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Thus, using social media may be beneficial in redirecting users to online news content (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). This raises the following research question:

RQ4: How are social media use and total time spent online associated with low news usage among young adults?

Offline Media Consumption

Several studies have analyzed different types of news users, grouping them into primarily online, offline, a mixture of both, and neither. One study (Geers, 2020) found that those who consumed both online and offline news were the smallest group, while minimalist and traditionalist (offline) news users and online news users were more common. However, Sormanen et al. (2022) showed those who consumed both online and offline news (news traditionalists, by their definition) to be the most common type of news user. Therefore, the degree to which online news media replaces or supplements offline news consumption among young people is inconclusive. We therefore propose the following research question:

RQ5: How is offline news use related to low news usage among young adults?

Sociodemographics

Previous work has found replicable results on the effects of age and gender on news avoidance, showing that men tend to consume more news than women. Women are more likely to perceive news as emotionally exhausting or stress-inducing (Toff &

Palmer, 2019). Age is also essential, with older people tending to use more news than younger people (Edgerly, 2017). Cultural and linguistic differences could also play a part in news consumption, as evidenced by Villi et al. (2022). In Switzerland, in particular, the differences between the four language regions are relevant. For instance, a recent study showed that interest in news is higher in the country's German-speaking region than in the French-speaking region (Udris et al., 2024). Therefore, we ask the following research question:

RQ6: How are age, gender, and language region associated with low news usage among young adults?

Methods

Tracking news use on mobile devices is a difficult task. Most studies on news use have relied on survey data, requiring participants to estimate their own news consumption, which can be problematic because people tend to over- or underestimate their news use (Reiss, 2023; Valli et al., 2024). Gathering browsing data from devices such as smartphones and desktop computers allows for a more detailed representation of individual news use but does not provide a complete representation of browsing behavior. Other studies have relied on browser extensions to gather web browsing behavior (Mangold et al., 2022; Vermeer et al., 2020), but this only captures some of the behavior from a user's device. Most importantly, it does not capture usage from individual apps, which is essential when measuring news consumption on smartphones.

To solve this problem, we used a method to track mobile news use from a panel of study participants. We built a custom solution to track browsing behavior on participants' mobile phones, which consisted of a modified VPN that would collect and store all network requests sent from a phone on our servers. This gave us access to data from mobile web browsers and apps and thus provided minute-by-minute details of web usage. Participants were recruited primarily over Instagram and their mobile usage tracked for 1 month in 2021. Approval for the study was granted by the university's ethics board at the University of Zürich.

Participants for this study were recruited primarily over Instagram. A total of 1029 people initially signed up for the study, and 772 completed the installation of the VPN and sent at least one point of data. The tracking also slowed down some network connections, most notably to WhatsApp, causing some dropouts. In the end, 382 completed all study requirements by submitting at least 5 days of tracking data and completing two surveys. In practice, all participants who sent at least 5 days of data also sent at least 13, so the least-active participant in the study sent 52 hours of data over 13 active days. The median user sent data for 25 days (min: 13, max: 31) and was active for 423 hours (min: 52, max: 654). Only days in which a participant was actively sending data were included in this study. During the official study period, participants were sent e-mails if they hadn't provided data for 24 hours. Data was collected from September 5th to October 6th, 2021, with the official tracking period from September 15th to October 4th. For a visualization of the daily activity for each participant, see Figure S2 in the online supplement.

The resulting data comprised over 40 million individual network requests and provided a detailed record of the web activity of the participants. These individual network requests were binned into groups of 1 minute; if someone requested data from a website, we assumed that they had spent at least 1 minute on it. This brought the data down to 10 million individual user minutes on websites. However, the level of detail provided by this method also has some limitations. We could only acquire domain-level information but not the individual pages visited (e.g., nytimes.com, not nytimes.com/some/article). Additionally, we could not track news content viewed directly on social media sites, such as Instagram or TikTok.

Because each participant visited hundreds of websites throughout the study, a methodological approach was needed to categorize the sites visited into news, social media, or other. Definitions of news vary among laypeople and experts alike, and we took as broad an approach as possible. A comprehensive list of 3778 news websites was gathered to include any website that could be construed as news, including alternative news websites and news aggregators. The list was compiled from the Swiss Media Quality Yearbook (fög, 2023), ABYZ News Links (www.abyznewslinks.com) and The Media Cloud Project (Roberts et al., 2021). Of these, 497 distinct news sites throughout the study were visited. The list was manually validated for a previous study with the same data (Vogler et al., 2023).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Description
Demographics			
Age	21.09	2.13	Age of the respondents, from 18 to 25
Gender (Women: 241, Men: 141)			Gender, gathered from survey data
Language region (French: 94, German: 288)			Language region, gathered from survey data
Political attitudes			
Political positioning	3.06	0.81	Self-reported positioning on a scale from (1) "very left" to (7) "very right"
Trust in politics	4.97	1.00	Single item. Scale from (1) "No trust at all" to (7) "complete trust"
Trust in media	3.76	1.28	Single item. Scale from (1) "No trust at all" to (7) "complete trust"
Interests in news subjects			
Interest in politics (domestic)	3.38	1.09	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Interest in politics (international)	3.10	1.06	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Interest in science news	3.55	1.01	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Interest in sport news	2.75	1.38	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Interest in crime news	2.95	1.08	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Interest in celebrity news	2.43	1.19	Single item. Scale from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much"
Media use			
Offline media use	2.37	0.84	Composite of three items - Mean of newspaper, TV, and radio use; scale from (1) "never" to (5) "very often"
Minutes online per day	398.02	145.27	Measured from tracking data
Minutes on social media per day	170.90	99.22	Measured from tracking data
Dependent variable			
News user (Yes: 274, No: 108)			Whether the respondent reads at least 1 minute of news per day, measured from tracking data.

Data were complete for all participants.

Data

To measure browsing behavior, we used the number of minutes spent on news websites per participant per day as a measure of news use. For the dependent variable, we split the participants into two groups: individuals with less than 1 minute per day (low news use) and people with more than 1 minute of news usage per day. We also recorded minutes spent on social media per day and total minutes spent online per day. Other variables were gathered from surveys conducted in the first week and at the end of the tracking study. They included questions on demographics, interest in news subjects, political attitudes, and media use. For an overview of summary statistics used in this analysis, see Table 2.

The method used to quantify news use from the individual web requests was an important analytical decision, as the web requests could vary significantly by the website. For example, a static website might only record a web request when a user clicked on a hyperlink, but a dynamically loading page might record dozens of network requests per minute as a user scrolls down a page. To solve this issue, we derived the number of minutes spent on news websites per participant per day; if a person visited a news website at least once a minute, this was considered a 1-minute view. Using the same method, we also recorded time spent on social media per day and total time spent online per day. These minutes could overlap; if somebody visited a news website news app or used social media via an app or website, within the same minute, each would be counted separately. Thus, a minute in which a participant accessed social media and news would be counted as a minute for each. This method was chosen to regularize the data gathered from different types of websites. For instance, a visit to a social media site might require dozens of web requests per minute, whereas a static news page might only load once. For our analysis both cases would be recorded as 1 minute on site.

The threshold over which people were determined to be low news users was crucial. We opted to define participants with low news consumption as anybody who averaged less than 1 minute per day on a news website and compared them to participants who averaged more than 1 minute per day. Only days when participants were online and sending data were counted toward this mean. Due to how news use was operationalized, 1 minute was the minimum time for which a visit to a news website could be measured. A statistical mean of 30 seconds per day could then be interpreted as someone who visited a news website once every 2 days. To ensure that this 1-minute threshold of news exposure would not affect our results, we performed a sensitivity analysis, fitting the same model 12 times, with cutoff points between 10 and 120 seconds. We found that the model results were largely stable between 30 seconds and 90 seconds, indicating 60 seconds to be a suitable choice. Each of the conclusions we reached would hold true for any cutoff point in this range. Outside these bounds, small sample sizes for subpopulations resulted in unreliable estimates. Using our final metric, 107 of this study's 382 participants (27.9%) were categorized as individuals with low news consumption (See figure S3 in the online supplement for further illustration of this sensitivity analysis).

Beyond this sensitivity analysis, we ran additional robustness checks to ensure that the choice of a binary measure itself would not influence results. Using the same independent variables, we constructed several analogous models with different implementations of the outcome variable. For full results of these models, see Table 4 and Figure S4 in the online supplement. First, we tested the linear effect of time reading news. We implemented this as

an integer approximation of the mean minutes per day online, implemented as the mean minutes online per day times 100, rounded to the nearest whole value. We then built a negative binomial model, as the number of minutes per day cannot go below zero (labeled in Table 4 and Figure S4 in the online supplement as "linear model"). Second, we ran a Gaussian model using the natural log of the mean number of minutes per day reading news, to potentially reduce the effect of extreme values ("logged model"). Third, we binned the participants into 5 equal groups, ranked by their news usage, and modeled this as a cumulative logit link model ("binned model"). Fourth, we implemented news consumption by percentiles of news usage and ran the model as a beta regression ("percentile model"). We then compared the outcomes of these models, including the model used in the main analysis ("cutoff model"). The top-line results remained largely the same, with some variations in credible intervals. In this sense, the exact implementation of the model doesn't significantly impact the results of the study.

Despite this being a relatively uncommon measure for news use, we felt it was the most appropriate in this model for several reasons. We initially felt that it removed much of the noise from the data collection method, as any passive data sent from news websites wouldn't affect results as heavily. Additionally, it provides a clear, albeit arbitrary, distinction between high and low news consumption, which aligns with our theoretical framework. Importantly, our robustness checks confirm that the choice of measure does not significantly alter the study's conclusions.

As there were concerns that iPhone and Android usage could be measured differently, we ran an additional check of whether the mobile operating system could affect results. While the VPN system is largely agnostic to the operating system, the installation procedure was slightly different, and privacy settings could potentially have unintended effects on data

Table 3. Posterior distributions for all variables.

Parameter	Median	CI low	CI high	PD	ROPE %	ESS
Fixed						
Intercept	−3.8	−7.6	−0.37	0.98	0.00%	4461
Age	0.51	0.22	0.82	1.0	0.00%	10300
Gender	0.59	−0.046	1.2	0.96	8.58%	10477
Political positioning	−0.25	−0.61	0.11	0.92	35.39%	11255
Interest in politics (domestic)	0.40	0.092	0.72	0.99	5.82%	8360
Interest in politics (international)	0.27	−0.051	0.58	0.95	29.13%	8541
Interest in science news	0.16	−0.13	0.45	0.86	55.93%	9924
Interest in sport news	0.17	−0.051	0.41	0.94	52.67%	9666
Interest in crime news	−0.15	−0.41	0.12	0.86	60.01%	9994
Interest in celebrity news	0.23	−0.041	0.49	0.95	37.13%	10302
Offline media use	0.13	−0.23	0.49	0.77	59.79%	9479
Trust in politics	0.16	−0.13	0.45	0.86	55.76%	10425
Trust in media	0.12	−0.11	0.35	0.86	69.24%	10435
Minutes online per day	0.68	0.25	1.1	1.0	0.00%	7028
Minutes on social media per day	−0.081	−0.51	0.36	0.64	57.55%	7046
Interaction: Minutes online per day: Minutes on social media per day	0.10	−0.12	0.37	0.81	74.07%	8740
Random						
Language region: Intercept	1.6	0.49	7.3	1.0	0.00%	1051
Language region: German	0.98	−1.4	4.1	0.85	7.57%	2914
Language region: French	−0.54	−3.1	2.5	0.71	11.70%	2913

Credible intervals for all credible intervals were set to 0.95. Confidence intervals highlighted in orange indicate those that have credible intervals that do not cross 0. The probability of direction (PD) is the probability that the true result would be positive or negative, and those highlighted in blue indicate a 95% chance of the effect being positive or negative. The region of practical equivalence (ROPE) indicates values that are close enough to the null value to be indistinguishable from null results–in this case 89% of the highest density interval. Variables with few results in the ROPE are highlighted in green.

collection. Among our users, 257 of 384 (67%) were iPhone users. We ran a bivariate regression model of device type against news use, finding no credible effect of phone use ($\beta = -0.05$, 95% CI [−0.79, 0.69]) (see Table 5 in the online supplement).

Statistical Modeling

Due to the moderate size of our participant group and individual variation, a Bayesian modeling approach was chosen to optimize the precision, transparency, and expressiveness of the results. We fitted a Bernoulli logit model using the Brms package in R (Bürkner, 2017). The model was fitted using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo algorithm over four chains with 2000 warm-up iterations and 4000 total iterations. Convergence was measured using the Gelman – Rubin statistic (R-hat) (Gelman & Rubin, 1992), all reaching 1.00. All priors were set to a normal distribution centered on 0 with a standard deviation of 1, indicating no correlation. The effective sample size for all chains was above 1,000 (for further details, see Table 3).

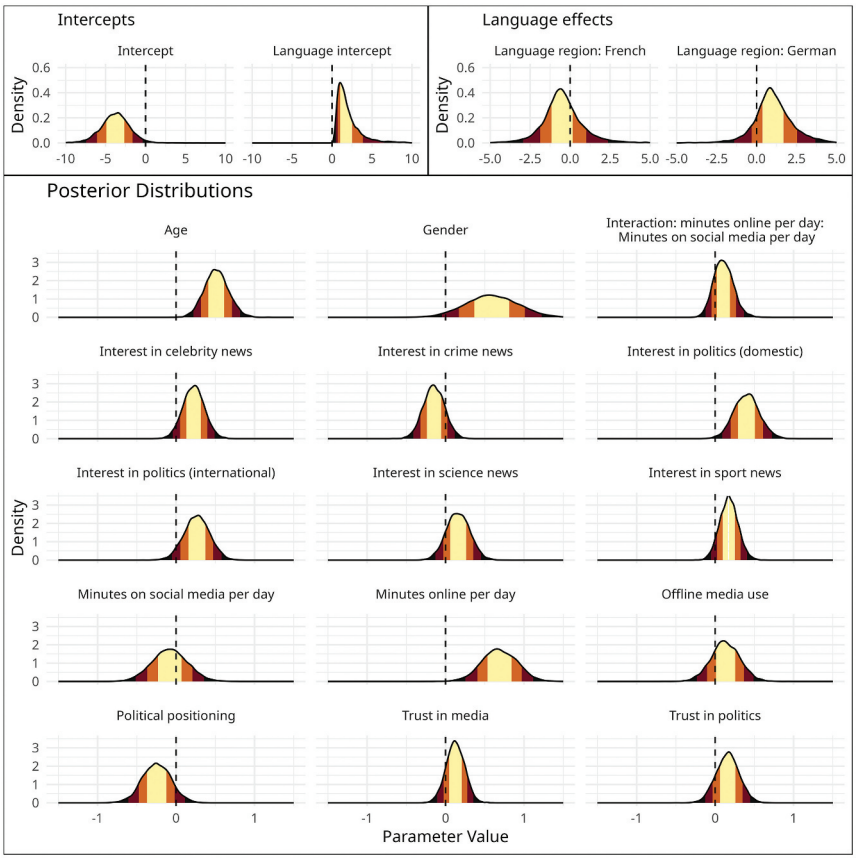

Figure 1. Raw posterior distributions of the model. Zero is considered to be no effect, and distributions further to the left are more likely to be in the low news consumption group. Credible intervals of 50 (yellow), 80 (orange), and 95 (purple) percent are colored in each distribution.

Results

We analyzed the relationship between low news usage and interest in news subjects, political attitudes, media use, and sociodemographic factors, all fitted in the same model. The raw posterior distributions can be seen in Figure 1.

To further clarify our findings, we calculated the marginal effects (or conditional effects for the two categorical variables) of each variable separately, using simulated data for the median participant of our study except for the variable in question (for the gender and language variables, the most common category was sampled). In this way, this posterior sampling represents the effects on a simulated average participant in our study (see figure S5 in the online supplement).

We first asked if interests in different news subjects are associated with low news usage (RQ1). Among news subjects, only interest in domestic politics ($\beta = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.092, 0.72]) was positively correlated with the news use category and therefore less likely to be in the low news user category. Interest in international politics ($\beta = 0.27$, 95% CI [−0.051, 0.58]), science ($\beta = 0.16$, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.45]), sports ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [−0.051, 0.41]), accidents and crime ($\beta = -0.15$, 95% CI [−0.41, 0.12]), and news about stars and celebrities ($\beta = 0.23$, 95% CI [−0.041, 0.49]) offered no evidence for a clear correlation.

Second, we examined whether there was a relationship between political orientation and news usage (RQ2) but did not find any substantial relationship ($\beta = -0.25$, 95% CI [−0.61, 0.11]). Investigating the relationship between individual political attitudes and news usage (RQ3), we found that neither trust in politics ($\beta = 0.16$, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.45]) nor trust in the news media ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [−0.11, 0.35]) was substantially related to news usage.

We then analyzed whether the factors related to individual media use were related to news use (RQ4). Time spent online was positively correlated with news usage ($\beta = 0.68$, 95% CI [0.25, 1.12]). However, unlike the findings of other studies, the time spent on social media ($\beta = -0.081$, 95% CI [−0.51, 0.36]) did not credibly correlate with a propensity to use news media. An interaction effect, representing the ratio of time on social media to time online (i.e., how social-media heavy someone's mobile use was) was also not found to be a credible predictor ($\beta = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.37]). Offline media use for news ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI [−0.23, 0.49]) was also not credibly related to news use (RQ5).

Finally, even among our 18- to 25-year-old participants, older people were more likely to consume news ($\beta = 0.51$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.82]), and therefore less likely to be in the low news use category (RQ6). There was no credible difference between male and female participants concerning the likelihood of being a news user ($\beta = 0.59$, 95% CI [−0.046, 1.24]). People from the German-speaking region ($\beta = 0.98$, 95% CI [−1.42, 4.08]) were more likely to be news users than individuals from the French-speaking region ($\beta = -0.54$, 95% CI [−3.07, 2.46]).

Discussion

Our paper investigated how low mobile news consumption among young adults is correlated with individual interests, political attitudes, and media consumption habits by applying a novel research design based on a combination of a mobile tracking study and standardized surveys. Through this, we addressed two limitations of existing studies: the

methodological challenges of measuring low news consumption and its varying potential causes.

In this study, we treated low news use as a binary variable, as the study focused on separating the users with low news consumption from the rest without placing an inordinate weight on the small group of heavy news users. Because our sensitivity analysis at different cutoff points provided stable results, we can assume that this is a valid measure of low news consumption. Our tracking method captured only visits to news websites on users' smartphones, but not news content delivered through social media websites, so we can say that the content that we measured was accessed with some degree of intentionality; participants had to actively visit a news website to be recorded, rather than merely see a headline on social media. While we cannot measure intentionality via tracking data, it suggests that our measurement of news users in this study focused on those more likely to seek out news actively.

Our results differ from previous research on news avoidance regarding several outcomes, and our findings on the potential causes of low mobile news consumption are relatively conservative. Before starting this study, we expected that interest in various news topics would be relevant to mobile news consumption among young adults (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). However, we ultimately found that only an interest in domestic politics showed a strong correlation with news use. Thus, people interested in politics are more likely to consume news. We also found no distraction from high interest in soft news topics being shown to negatively influence news consumption in other studies (e.g., Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Notably, in our study, interest in soft news was not found to be associated with actual news consumption, although nearly half the sample population expressed an interest in these subjects in the survey.

Likewise, we found no correlation between trust in news media or politics and the likelihood of low news consumption on mobile devices. As we did not differentiate between mainstream and alternative news sources, this finding aligns with Tsfati and Cappella (2003), who did not find a strong correlation between skepticism and overall news consumption. As our results showed interest in domestic politics as a strong predictor of news use, abstract concerns such as institutional trust may be less important than a desire to be informed.

We did not find that other types of media use credibly correlated with mobile news consumption, which contradicts many previous findings from studies on news avoidance (Goyanes et al., 2023; Schäfer et al., 2023; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). While the total minutes per day spent online on any website were a robust predictor of mobile news use, the time spent on social media did not exhibit a credible correlation. On the one hand, this contradicts the assertion by Powell et al. (2021) that time spent on social media can detract from news consumption. On the other hand, it contradicts the idea that social media routinely redirects news users to news websites and leads to incidental news exposure (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Additionally, offline media use of any type, as measured from the survey questions, did not substantially correlate with low news consumption – a finding that contradicts earlier studies by Geers (2020), and Sormanen et al. (2022).

While this study only looked at a sample of 18–25-year-old participants, we found that older participants were more likely to be news users. This supports previous findings (Edgerly, 2017), but on a much finer scale. Young people are often grouped into one cohort, so these differences within the same generation should not be discounted. Our study found

only a weak correlation between news use and gender, as shown by other researchers (Toff & Palmer, 2019). This might be an effect of the sample we drew, which included more students and Instagram users. Finally, German-speaking participants were found to be more likely to read news than French speakers, mirroring findings on news interest in the two linguistic regions reported in the Reuters Digital News Report (Udris et al., 2024).

Limitations

We were able to precisely measure the mobile news consumption of participants. However, we could directly gather only data on participants' phone usage behavior, so information on other news consumption, whether online on other devices or offline through newspapers, radio, and television, could be only collected via self-reported survey data. Many respondents claimed to be regular news users but showed no signs of this on their mobile phones. Younger people overwhelmingly use their smartphones to access news (Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2024; Schwaiger et al., 2022), but not exclusively. This implies methodological imprecision, where only selected devices are observed. However, our analysis found that self-reported offline news use was not a substantial factor in online news use, so it is unlikely that the group with low news consumption relied entirely on offline sources. Similarly, participants' reported reliance on social media for news was not a credible factor for news use, but this self-reported data may have underestimated exposure.

Additionally, we could not capture the individual articles read by the participants. Therefore, we do not know if people actually read the news or used other services on news websites (e.g., raffles, recipes, games). As news websites contain large amounts of non-news information (Reiss, 2023), the total estimate of news exposure may have been overestimated. Conversely, individuals can be exposed to news on non-news websites, with Wojcieszak et al. (2023) estimating that non-news sites contributed more to news content consumption than news sites. To address both limitations, studies that capture full URLs and combine them with content analysis are needed. Innovative approaches to collecting data on content that people are exposed to beyond traditional news platforms, as recently presented by Adam et al. (2024), offer opportunities in this area.

We also could not capture news use within social media, which has been found to contribute significantly and unevenly to news consumption (Merten et al., 2022). Our tracking system registered news usage only when participants clicked on an article on social media and were redirected to a news app or a news website on our list. We therefore could at least capture a part of the news that was accessed on social media with some degree of intentionality. However, many young adults engage in news snacking (Molyneux, 2018) by looking at the headline or a few sentences displayed in their social media feeds. Therefore, this methodological limitation might explain why we were unable to replicate the correlation between news use and time spent on social media reported in previous studies (e.g., Merten et al., 2022). Future research could address this by considering news use on social media platforms particularly relevant to young adults. However, recent restrictions on data access imposed by some of these platforms are making this increasingly difficult for researchers.

Likewise, news consumption on desktop computers could yield useful information, but this is outside the bounds of this study. Additionally, our list of news, which we manually validated and enriched for the Swiss case might still have shortcomings, for instance,

incomplete representation of local news outlets or certain regions (e.g., outlets which are regularly used my migrant populations). Furthermore, while we were able to capture data from both news apps and websites, we were unable to differentiate between the two.

While tracking data allows for a different type of insight into mobile news usage than would be possible through surveys, most of the independent variables were gathered through survey research. The use of tracking and survey data of the same participants is a promising approach for comparing tracked and self-reported news usage and combining this information with attitudinal concepts like trust or political orientation. In several cases, we relied on single-item measures for scores of trust and interest, which are frequently used in studies but may be somewhat simplified measures. While this was necessary to accommodate questions on different topics needed in these surveys, this is an inherent limitation of the study.

Our sensitivity and robustness checks identified a one-minute cutoff as a stable way to operationalize low news use. However, there is still no widely agreed-upon way to quantify this, especially with the different types and granularity of data across different tracking studies. More work is needed to create a recognized definition of news use and how it should be measured.

Although we found that age was a factor in news use, the data from this study cannot reveal whether a higher propensity for news use with age results from a generational change or is a consequence of maturity. Future research could examine a panel of participants over time to determine whether this results from maturation or societal changes.

Finally, this study collected data in Switzerland. Even though we assume some generalizability for Western European countries, the results cannot be generalized to other countries. Similar research could be conducted in other countries, and country-by-country comparisons would be valuable for a deeper understanding of global news use.

Despite these limitations, our novel study design was able to show a nuanced picture of factors related to low news consumption – some in line with previous research, others not.

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