

# A Study on GENZ's Selective Exposure of News on Social Media

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## Abstract:

In Today's generation one has the world news feed right at the fingertips through social media, among which Instagram is one such majorly dependent platform especially by the Genz's to be updated about the current trending affairs, where what's trending is most likely to be known than what needs to be known. Dividing the media consumers based on their selective preferences and algorithm and feeding them the news or when the news is in trend, and how selective exposure, driven by personal preferences and social media consumption patterns, influences their perception of current affairs following which the media can accidentally or intentionally contribute to the formation of stereotypes and entrenched beliefs, generalising one's views and perspective one-sidedly. The research examines how social media curation fosters filter bubbles and echo chambers, potentially reinforcing existing beliefs, fostering polarization, and encouraging self-censorship. Through a quantitative methodology involving structured online surveys administered to 101 participants aged 18–28, the study reveals that a majority of respondents consume content that aligns with their pre-existing views, often avoiding dissenting perspectives and looks at why, even with tons of information available, people might not actually understand world events fully exploring the gap between having access to information and truly being aware of it. The study will also examine the impact of trending topics on their knowledge and the potential for media to shape one-sided perspective.

**Keywords:** “Selective Exposure, filter bubbles, polarization, echo chambers, Gen z, Social media”

## 1. Introduction:

In this contemporary world, never has humanity had access to such vast repositories of knowledge, yet never have we been so divided in our understanding of reality itself. Internet is divided, today's generation majorly dependent on social media. There is this perception among those who are often just rely on social media for sourcing news. They believe that by just being on social media, they will see all the important news they need to know (Gil De Zúñiga, et al., 2017). Generation Z, often referred to as digital natives, literally grew up with Internet and social media as integral parts of their lives. This constant connectivity provides them with access to a vast array of diverse information from around the world, which significantly influences their worldview, attitudes, and understanding of global issues (Chen, et al., 2023). These people are more likely to know issues that are trending based on their personalized beliefs the internet majorly the social media curates it for you to know making everything that trends into a perspective that you would want to consume. The interactions on social media platforms contribute to the curation of content. This curation process is driven by the preferences and behaviors of users, which in turn helps in aligning the content with users' interests and trends (Nie, et al., 2024) Media platforms, search

engines, and optimized content have fundamentally altered how information reaches us. Rather than encountering a shared pool of facts and perspectives, users increasingly inhabit customized information environments tailored to their existing preferences, behaviours, and social connections. The polarization of opinion can come from the selective preference based of various factors like emotional appeal, religious sentiments, peer pressure, engagement behavior and more. This has led to significant changes in public discourse, individual beliefs, and societal polarization. The result is the creation of distinct information universes where different groups of people encounter different versions of reality. These digital echo chambers are not merely spaces of agreement; they are environments where certain types of information flourish while others are systematically filtered out. The same news event can be presented through entirely different frames, emphasizing different aspects, and drawing different conclusions, depending on which information ecosystem a person inhabits. The human mind naturally seeks information that confirms existing beliefs while avoiding information that challenges them a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. Digital platforms have increased this tendency by making it easier than ever to find confirming information and avoid contradictory perspectives. Emotional appeal is a powerful tool in information selection and retention, significantly influencing how content is shared, remembered, and internalized. This phenomenon is evident across various domains, including advertising, social media, and political communication. Whether it be content that provokes wrath, terror, joy, or moral outrage, content that is emotionally charged has a tendency to engage viewers more successfully than content that is just informative. Because of this engagement, the material is more likely to go viral, which in turn has an effect on how consumers behave and how they perceive the brand. There is a significant impact that emotional content has on the choosing of online media. This results in the establishment of an incentive structure in which content that is emotionally charged is disseminated more quickly and effectively than information that is nuanced and balanced. Theories such as mood management and emotions-as-frames highlight how emotions guide media consumption choices. Online platforms, with their unique affordances and algorithms, further amplify the role of emotions in content selection and sharing (Luong, et al., 2023). The infinite nature of digital content means that users can always find sources that confirm their existing beliefs, regardless of how fringe or unsupported those beliefs might be. In the same way that you might always look for a snack that you are certain you enjoy rather than trying something new that you might not like, you also have a tendency to favour news and viewpoints that are familiar and pleasant rather than those that could challenge the way that you currently believe. This is because you are more likely to be comfortable with the things that you already know and enjoy. People tend to avoid material that is in direct contrast to their ideas since encountering such content may result in feelings of being dominated or pressurised. This is because individuals have a predisposition to avoid knowledge that is negative. A sensation of cognitive overload is experienced when the brain is presented with an overwhelming amount of contradictory information. This causes the brain to require greater energy to absorb the information when it is presented with it. To reduce the stress that they are experiencing, this prompts people to reflexively seek for content that validates the notions that they already have in their heads. This has a strong connection to the phenomena known as confirmation bias, in which individuals tend to give more weight to information that is supportive and overlook or justify material that is discordant (Nickerson, 1998). Being ambivalent, on the other hand, is less likely to result in disagreement in circumstances that are contentious. People may be more ready to talk to you and share their perspectives if you indicate that you are open to other ideas and that you are willing to communicate with them. (Cialdini 1973).

## 2. Literature Review:

**2.1 Dahlgren's *A critical review of filter bubbles and a comparison with selective exposure*.** examines the concept of filter bubbles by considering how personalization algorithms on the Internet tailor information for each user based on their past behaviours, resulting in users being exposed predominantly to supporting information while potentially missing out on challenging content. It highlights that this phenomenon is not entirely new, as selective exposure where individuals naturally seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs has long been recognized, yet it also points out that people do not completely avoid opposing views, allowing for incidental exposure to differing opinions through various media channels. The review further explores the dual levels at which filter bubbles operate, noting a distinction between the technological aspect where algorithms narrow the content available based on user interaction and the broader societal implication that such narrowing might lead to increased polarization of opinion. However, the literature warns against overstating the negative effects, arguing that while personalization can lead to a more homogeneous stream of information, it is only one of many factors influencing how individuals consume information and interact within a diverse social network, especially when traditional mass media still play a significant role in providing balanced information. It also underscores that digital choices observed via online behaviours do not necessarily reflect true individual preferences, as decisions may be shaped by situational factors or social desirability, thereby challenging deterministic views of algorithmic control over personal information ecosystems. Moreover, the review suggests that while the United States is often used as a primary case study for filter bubbles and polarisation, its unique media environment and political structure might not be representative of global trends, highlighting potential cultural and systemic differences in how information is consumed internationally. In addition, it acknowledges that while certain network dynamics, such as sharing among like-minded individuals, could intensify polarization, interpersonal exposure to differing viewpoints especially in offline or mixed media contexts continues to occur, mitigating some of the anticipated negative outcomes of algorithmic filtering. (Dahlgren, 2021)

**2.2 Vaccari, Valeriani's *Political filter bubbles and fragmented publics*** examines the emerging conversation surrounding political awareness and new public spheres created by digital media through selective exposure, echo chambers, and filter bubbles as primary concepts to theorize fragmented access to information in the contemporary media landscape. It states that people choose to expose themselves to information that supports their beliefs while purposely ignoring contradictory information that may overload their cognition or challenge their socioemotional well-being. Therefore, this self-perpetuating action compounded by user choice and algorithmic curation lends itself to horizontal polarization, the framing by academics that communities who accept and embody like-minded features become increasingly ideologically entrenched the longer they remain within the same digital room with like others. Simultaneously, vertical polarization occurs as more exist that care about political information and operate partisan news diets than those who choose to ignore politics across their various channels; such findings imply people are either engaged or not engaged but when engaged, they're relying on singularly partisan avenues for engagement as exposure as opposed to encountering information incidentally or accidentally across various channels. To that end, as many academics aligned with the idea of echo chambers sought to determine if they were true within their digitally filled partisan political reality, many studies seeking to use surveys, social media engagement, and web tracking found that echo chambers and filter bubbles were extremes of metaphors that may not necessarily translate into reality for the majority. For example,

a recent study found that 67% of social media users say they encounter politically diverse informational flows frequently, which means that regardless of their politics, they've experienced competing ideas either in person or online; nearly half of those encounter such exposure in neutral or more predominantly oppositional contexts which means social media isn't an echo chamber but a space for diverse voices. On the other hand, 16% of social media users report doing the exact opposite that they create spaces that predominantly reflect their own viewpoints meaning that likelier-than-average power users are more vulnerable to creating such echo chambers through selective action and frequent political discussion on social media. Yet even still, considerations beyond access to the Internet abound; This literature review seeks to explore these findings in relation to new democratic politics and whether such awareness operates at the center of it all. (Vaccari, et al., 2023).

**2.3 Hart, Richardson, Tortoriello, Earl, 'You Are What You Read: Is selective exposure a way people tell us who they are?** suggests that attitude congruent information exposure is a good thing and generates positive affect, it's the identity projection an individual. This literature realm acknowledge it and find these results that support the idea that selective exposure is more than just exposure to information that makes people feel good, but instead, a way in which we all can project to the world who we are – since we have internal cognitive processes and an externally projecting identity. For example, in one of the greatest studies from this literature review, persons who exposed themselves to attitude congruent information to some kind of comfort subsequent findings predicted for attitude consistent transformation, despite not having ever met anyone yet. For example, certain attitudes were formed relative to what kind of information people were exposed to meaning that exposure to such information was important for later discussions about it. However, attitudes were also formed relative to assessment of whether or not the exposure occurred in private or public domains every time meaning that even though people found it easier to align with exposure in one domain or the other, there was still a reflective quality over how exposure to seemingly private information triggered exposure attitudes relative to public domains. Thus, the fact that positive information promotes intentions to expose and negative information promotes intentions to avoid exposure says a lot about what people think others will expect from them and how they want to project themselves, with and without the opportunity of ever having met another person before. Therefore, much of the empirical research spoken about in the literature review which redefines this tremendous potential application used to assess it comes from something else. Only information processing assessed why people chose to expose themselves to selective congenial information and if assessed based on identity projection after, would only be limited to empirically found, real-world implicative meaning. Therefore, reading how identity projection creates a functional symbolic meaning across the literature provides an accurate assessing perspective as to why and how exposure occurs. These findings possess the potential for transferability into new studies to see how private actions, public realities allow for the construction and maintenance of personal identity beyond attitude and non-neutralization pushed for acceptable self-presentation in society. (Hart, et al. 2019)

**2.4 Cardenal, Cardenal, Aguilar-Paredes, Galais, Pérez-Montoro's (2019). Digital Technologies and Selective Exposure: How Choice and Filter Bubbles Shape News Media Exposure.** The study examines how digital technologies specifically Facebook and Google affect the selective exposure to news media with the use of a special web-tracking dataset from Spain. To evaluate their influence on news consumption patterns, the methodology entails examining user behaviour through direct navigation and referrals from these platforms. According to the results, Google considerably lowers selective exposure by about 9% whereas direct navigation tends to increase it, indicating that it encourages more varied media

consumption across ideological boundaries. Facebook, on the other hand, plays a more complicated role; it gives left-leaning users more selective exposure while decreasing it for right-leaning users. The study also shows that users' political ideologies moderate the relationship between news sources and selective exposure, suggesting that digital platforms are not content-neutral and subtly contribute to the development of filter bubbles. Using a web-tracking dataset from Spain, the study examines the effects of various news access origins, particularly direct navigation and referrals from websites like Facebook and Google, on selective exposure to news media. In order to understand users' news consumption patterns, the methodology entails classifying news outlets according to their ideological slant and measuring users' political leanings. At the visit level, selective exposure is operationalised, with visits to media that aligns with one's ideology being coded as 1 and visits to other media as 0. The nested structure of the data is taken into account by the analysis using a multilevel approach, which enables the investigation of individual-level variables like political interest and ideology in connection to selective exposure. According to the results, Google dramatically lowers selective exposure by up to 9%, whereas direct navigation only slightly increases selective exposure (by about 3%), indicating that it promotes media consumption across ideological boundaries. Facebook, on the other hand, has a mixed effect; it gives left-leaning users more selective exposure while giving right-leaning users less. Additionally, the study reveals that users' political ideologies significantly moderate the relationship between news origins and selective exposure, underscoring the fact that digital platforms are not content-neutral and significantly influence users' media exposure. (Cardenal, et al., 2019)

**2.5 Kuflik, Shapira, Shoval (2003). *Stereotype-based versus personal-based filtering rules in information filtering systems*** studies stereotype-based rules which are created by averaging the filtering preferences of a group of similar users—often produce more dependable rankings, even though users expect their own personal filtering rules to be more effective because they are tailored to their own preferences. The stereotypical rules, which reflect the group's consensus on what matters to users with similar profiles, are compared to the explicit preferences that each user has expressed regarding the subject, sender, length, and other aspects of email messages. Interviews were conducted with two user groups: a large group to create shared filtering preferences and generate stereotypes using cluster analysis, and a smaller group to test the system in real time. Cluster analysis, which groups people according to their preferences, was used by researchers to create user stereotypes. To minimise outlier rules with extremely high priority ratings and possibly prevent the negative consequences of less dependable rules in individual profiles, the filtering rules for each stereotype were modified by averaging the values provided by each member. The stereotype-based rules generated by this average approach were more straightforward, consistent, and aligned with the group's values; frequently, only six essential rules were used rather than all the individual's suggested rules. The technology measured filtering performance by grading messages and comparing them to the subjective rankings of users. The startling discovery was that, in comparison to personal rules, stereotype-based rules consistently had a higher correlation with users' assessments. According to analysis, filtering accuracy may be skewed by personal rules that include rules that users disagree with. In contrast to a stereotype profile without such rules, a user's personal profile may contain a contentious "Technical" rule that could reduce filtering accuracy. The study contends that creating stereotypical rules by averaging and removing inconsistencies—creates a more accurate and dependable profile for filtering, as opposed to people defining their own filtering needs. This implies that rather than relying on the user to manually define their filtering preferences, automated systems that assist users in filtering information might benefit from beginning with stereotype-based rules and improving them with



feedback. (Kuflik, et al., 2003)

**2.6 De, Alsharef, Aydemir, Khera's *Social Media Algorithms and Teen Addiction: Neurophysiological Impact and Ethical Considerations*** explains how teen addiction to social media alters the chemistry and structure of the brain and poses moral dilemmas regarding data transparency and privacy. Adolescents are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions because of these neurological alterations that can affect their ability to control their emotions and make decisions. To keep users interested, social media takes advantage of the brain's built-in reward system, which makes us feel good when we engage in healthy activities. The brain develops a difficult-to-break cycle of dependency as it grows accustomed to the artificial stimulation and demands more of it. The review discusses ethical challenges in contemporary social media in addition to neurophysiological effects. It points out that businesses intentionally employ machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to analyse user behaviour, customise content, and maximise screen time without providing clear disclosure about the collection, storage, and use of personal data, undermining informed consent and increasing the risk of exploitation for vulnerable teenagers. Additionally, the review suggests that the algorithms' profit-driven design puts engagement ahead of mental health, further separating technological innovation from social responsibility in the digital age. To benefit the public rather than take advantage of their weaknesses, the paper calls on social media companies to include features that encourage users to form healthier digital habits, like integrated break reminders, customisable content filters, and more transparent data privacy notifications. It strikes a balance between preventative measures to lessen these risks and promote adolescent mental health and detrimental effects like changed dopamine pathways, decreased grey matter volume in important brain regions, and impaired cognitive functions. According to the review's findings, social media platforms present significant risks that need to be handled responsibly, particularly for younger users who may be more susceptible, even though they provide never-before-seen connectivity and information access. Teenage social media addiction is better understood and treated thanks to this thoughtful blending of neurophysiological research and moral discernment. (De, et al., 2025)

**2.7 Treuillier, Brun, Castagnos's *A Multi-factorial Analysis of Polarization on Social Media*** uses multi-factorial analysis to better understand social media polarisation by combining several indicators. Traditionally, the polarisation score and Lack of Diversity (LD) meter have only looked at one facet of user interactions, like the diversity of media sources or a user's community emphasis. By condensing user behaviour into a single number, these metrics oversimplify it and make it challenging to discern between users who are fully polarised and those who are not. To get around this limitation, the authors suggest tri-factor and bi-factor studies. While the source factor indicates the variety of elite users or sources a user connects with, the opinion component shows whether people are pro- or anti-vaccine. By dividing the source factor into pro- and anti-vaccine indicators and adding a directional component to the opinion factor, the tri-factor analysis improves the metrics. Four clusters, representing moderate users who engage with both communities, highly polarised users in one community, and groupings that show a balance of contacts, were found to be optimal by the tri-factor method. This enhanced method finds behavioural classes. The study discovered that more social media polarisation tendencies can be captured by entropy-based metrics that examine source and opinion characteristics. While some users may interact with various communities and act as intermediaries, others who were once regularly divided along traditional lines might now be totally devoted to a single point of view. This fine-grained knowledge is necessary for recommendation systems that increase the range of material available to users, decrease echo chambers and filter bubbles, and potentially avoid polarisation. According to the study, a multi-factorial analysis can assist in the design

of depolarising recommender systems for users with different polarisations and better captures the complexity of social media polarisation dynamics. By correctly differentiating between users who are firmly committed to their opinions and those who are receptive to a variety of viewpoints, this approach can contribute to the development of more impartial and reliable online communities in a contentious setting such as the Twitter debate over vaccines. (Treuillier, et al., 2023)

**2.8 Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, *Effects of the News-Finds-Me Perception in Communication: Social Media Use Implications for News Seeking and Learning About Politics*** examines the "news-finds-me perception," which holds that news will eventually find the viewer through peers, social media, or other digital connections. The notion that people used to actively consume news from TV, newspapers, and radio to meet their daily needs is called into question by this theory. It's challenging to determine whether you're actively looking for news or just stumbling across media habits meant to keep people informed, even if they weren't newshounds, given the complexity of news channels and the internet environment. It is concerning for news diffusion and political awareness, according to some researchers, when people adopt the news-finds-me mentality, they turn to social media rather than traditional news sources. Additionally, the study shows that although social media offers a constant stream of information, it typically offers a more cursory or basic comprehension of political issues than actively seeking out and evaluating news items from reputable sources such as print and broadcast media. This is significant because political expertise, which depended on intentional news consumption, is being eroded by the passive acceptance of information on digital platforms. According to researchers, people who only use the news-finds-me method might not absorb the information, which could result in gaps in political knowledge and a restricted capacity to engage critically with political issues or analyse intricate policy issues. These people might not actively learn about the political landscape by comparing sources or reading in-depth news reports; instead, they might simply be aware of events and issues. People who use social media appear to believe that news will find them, which makes them less interested in traditional news sources. Compared to traditional news sources, consumers are more vulnerable to false information and superficial learning when social media content is fragmented and analytically weak. While passive news consumption can be soothing, it can also impair citizens' political understanding, which is crucial for democratic decision-making. According to research, social media may boost news exposure, but it doesn't bridge the knowledge gap caused by passive news searching, which could erode an informed public. Information accessibility and democratic participation are at odds, according to earlier studies it is claimed that the digital media revolution has led to a change in political education from a conscious, in-depth engagement with news content to a passive, superficial approach. (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2017)

**2.9 Nie, Waheed, Kasimon, & Abas' *Perspective Chapter: The Interactive Perspective in Social Media Usage Studies*** discussed on the social media platforms that have become essential to daily communication because they allow users to create profiles, share text, images, videos, and links, as well as participate in discussions with a diverse range of people. This has had a significant impact on the way social connections are maintained and information is shared. By offering a platform for both direct communications—like messaging and synchronised chats—and indirect communications—like wall posts and status updates—these digital spaces have been seen to have changed social interactions. This has led to the development of a range of relationships, from close friendships to more casual, bridging relationships between friends and acquaintances. Furthermore, a significant percentage of users, particularly younger groups like Generation Z, rely on social media as their main source of commercial information, demonstrating the convergence of social behaviour and economic activity on these platforms. Social media has become an

essential tool for consumers looking for information about brands and products. Even though social media has many advantages, like lower communication costs because of traceable digital interactions, there has been a discernible drop in the trust that people place in social media ads. This is mainly due to concerns about privacy violations, information overload, and the idea that the content may not adequately meet the wide range of user needs. The literature also explores the subtleties of digital interactions, emphasising that human behaviour on social media cannot be fully comprehended by examining discrete functions but rather requires a complex interplay between individual autonomy and collective influence, where behavioural outcomes are continuously shaped by interactions between personal, group, and cultural dynamics. The idea of meta-communication is also presented as a crucial component, in which communication patterns—regardless of the content—act as control mechanisms to preserve social equilibrium while simultaneously permitting adaptive change in response to shifting social contexts. Therefore, this thorough analysis of social media usage shows how these platforms are more than just places for informal conversation; rather, they are complex settings where dynamic social, economic, and communicative processes come together. This highlights the need for more empirical research to fully comprehend these complex relationships in a constantly changing digital landscape. (Nie, et al., 2024)

**2.10 Kroon, van der Meer, Maestro's *Confirming Bias Without Knowing? Automatic Pathways Between Media Exposure and Selectivity*** looks at media exposure and selective news consumption with an emphasis on biased news about Arabic migrant workers. To ensure representativeness, age and gender criteria were applied to the 236 Dutch workers in the initial trial. The 270 participants in the second experiment were recruited in a similar manner. In order to comply with the study's typology of media bias cognitive, emotional, and behavioral both studies used news articles and headlines from Dutch media from the previous ten years. Intergroup and interpersonal outcomes that align with activated biased beliefs can arise from exposure to mild doses of stereotypical news primes, which can reinforce implicit stereotypes and bias news content. Strong bias resistance was suggested by the lack of equivalent effects from high doses of stereotyped news primes. The findings suggest that media message selection is influenced by self-consistency and self-enhancement incentives, which strengthen stereotypes and lessen the media's capacity to advance favourable outgroup opinions. According to the study, news consumption is automatically influenced by media exposure, often without conscious awareness. Two trials were conducted using a between-subjects design to investigate biased selectivity and media exposure in Arabic migrant worker news. To guarantee representativeness, 236 Dutch employees were chosen for the first trial based on age and gender quotas. Using a similar methodology, the second experiment recruited 270 participants and employed attention checks to ensure compliance with the inclusion criteria and participant engagement. The unconscious association test (IAT), which measures unconscious biases, and media stereotype primes were administered to participants. Modified news items and headlines from the Dutch media were subjected to cognitive, emotional, and behavioural biases. According to the findings, even a small amount of exposure to stereotypical news primes had a significant impact on the choice of biased news content through implicit stereotypes, producing interpersonal and intergroup outcomes that aligned with activated biased viewpoints. People may be able to withstand extreme prejudice, as evidenced by the different effects of high dosages of stereotyped news primes. The findings highlight the automatic relationships between media exposure and selective news consumption by demonstrating how prior media exposure, often unconsciously, shapes audiences' biased selectivity. (Kroon, et al., 2021)



### 3. Research Gap

The Gap studies that although some studies recognise that Generation Z uses social media for global communication, there is a conspicuous dearth of focused research on how social media algorithms, emotional content, and participatory features specifically influence their political awareness and opinion formation. (Chen, et al., 2023) Little is known about the cognitive processes by which Gen Z takes in, rejects, or contests skewed or filtered information. Few studies fully integrate affective responses (e.g., to high-arousal content) with cognitive effects (e.g., confirmation bias or decreased critical thinking among younger users). This is since studies like (Kroon, et al. 2021) focus on emotional valence and implicit bias, respectively. This is a conceptual gap in the relationship between political disengagement or extremism and algorithmic emotional manipulation. While some studies (Cardenal et al., 2019) focus on particular platforms or geographies, there is little comparative analysis of how cultural contexts and platform design differences (e.g., TikTok vs. Twitter) influence Generation Z's political cognition. A cross-national understanding of how various algorithmic systems either exacerbate or lessen filter bubble effects is particularly lacking. The subtleties of user agency, media literacy, and resistance tactics may be missed, though, due to the paucity of qualitative research on how young users perceive and react to politically filtered content. Gen Z's "news-finds-me" mentality and passive news consumption are not given enough attention. Although the "news-finds-me" mentality (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2017) is recognised, there is little empirical research connecting it to Generation Z's political disengagement or misinformed engagement. Little is known about how this passive consumption affects civic awareness and democratic engagement.

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Research Design

For this study, a quantitative research design was chosen to offer unbiased, methodical, and quantifiable insights into how Generation Z interacts with news content on social media platforms. Studying media consumption patterns and their effects at the population level is best done with quantitative methods because they are especially well-suited for looking at patterns, relationships, and possible causal links between variables. Generation Z's media interaction patterns are crucial for comprehending current changes in information access, selective exposure, and opinion formation because they are the first generation to have grown up surrounded by digital technology. The specific goal of this study is to assess social media as a major information exposure platform and how it affects users' political polarisation, awareness, and attitudes towards contentious issues that are important to Generation Z. The study gathers information on the frequency and type of social media use, selective exposure to ideological content, emotional engagement with news, and resulting polarisation or attitudinal shifts by using a structured online survey with quantifiable measures. The use of a quantitative approach enables the study to methodically examine patterns and pinpoint the contributing elements to political polarisation, affective engagement, and selective exposure that result from algorithmically filtered content that is customised based on users' prior interactions. The validity and reliability of the results are increased by this design, which makes it easier to test hypotheses regarding the connections between social media use and opinion formation through statistical analysis. Furthermore, because of its scalability and effectiveness in gathering data from a geographically diverse population within Generation Z, a quantitative design was selected. It makes it possible to compile vast volumes of data in a consistent manner, offering a comprehensive picture of behavioural trends as opposed to personal, subjective experiences. This is essential for drawing generalizable conclusions and guiding possible interventions meant to improve med

dia literacy among young digital natives and lessen the detrimental effects of filter bubbles.

#### **4.2 Objectives**

- To examine how personalized content based on emotional appeal, peer influence, and individual beliefs affects the selective exposure of Generation Z to current affairs.
- To explore the extent to which filter bubbles and echo chambers shape Generation Z's understanding and interpretation of trending news topics through social media
- To investigate the impact of confirmation bias on the consumption and acceptance of news among Generation Z on Instagram.
- To assess how digital echo chambers contribute to the polarization of opinions and the potential for self-censorship among Generation Z.
- To identify the differences in perception and opinion among Generation Z regarding selected major current issues as influenced by social media content exposure.

#### **4.3 Research Question**

**R1:** What part do personal beliefs, peer pressure, and emotional appeal play in choosing content?

**R2:** How much does Gen Z's preexisting belief system get reinforced by selective exposure?

What impact do digital echo chambers have on Gen Z's comprehension of important current events?

**R3:** What tangible consequences does confirmation bias have on Gen Z's Instagram news consumption?

**R4:** What role do these factors play in Generation Z's self-censorship and polarisation of opinions?

### **5. Analysis**

#### **5.1 Data Collection**

The survey was disseminated to participants who are frequent users of social media via digital platforms to guarantee that it was pertinent to the study's emphasis on digital information environments. Informed consent was acquired before the survey was completed, and participation was completely voluntary. The survey method included questionnaires based on a Likert scale, one open-ended question, and closed-ended questions. Descriptive statistic and Bar graphs were utilised in order to analyse the quantitative data, and the open-ended responses were analyzed according to the number of responses received for each topic. The purpose of the open-ended question was to gather additional data about the participants' knowledge and attitudes about the chosen contentious issues, as well as to examine

#### **5.2 Sampling Method**

Convenience sampling was used in the study to collect data from participants in Generation Z, who were between the ages of 18 and 28. The main reasons this non-probability sampling method was selected were its effectiveness and accessibility, which enabled the study to reach a large number of participants in a comparatively short amount of time. A structured online survey was used to collect the data, and it was disseminated on social media sites that members of this demographic.

After removing submissions that were ineligible or incomplete, a total of N = 101 valid responses were gathered. Convenience sampling is still a useful strategy for exploratory research, even though it naturally restricts the results' generalizability because it lacks random selection and may introduce bias into the sample. It offers vital early insights into the ways in which Generation Z consumes information and their vulnerability to filter bubbles in the digital world

## 5.3 Data Analysis

### 5.3.1 Demographic Analysis

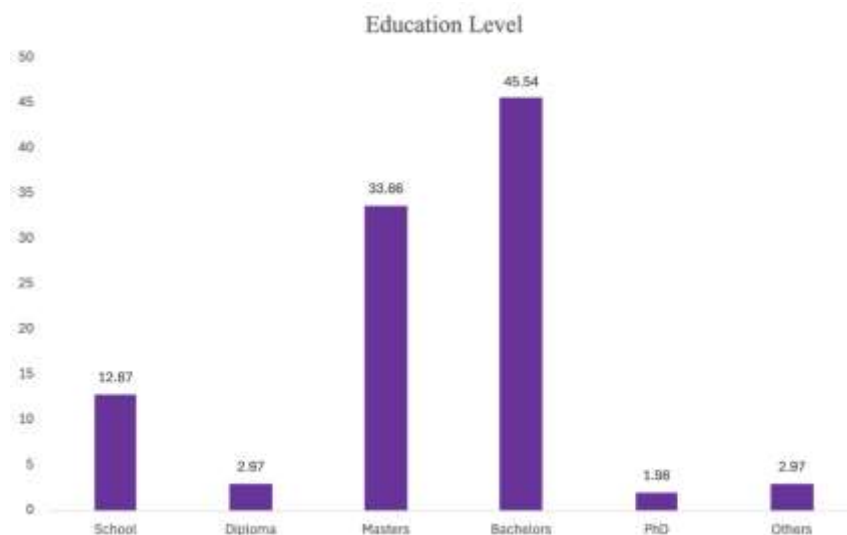
#### 5.3.1a. Gender



**Fig 1: Graph showcasing gender on the responses**

The study sample reveals a significant gender imbalance, comprising 67.32% (n=68) female participants and 32.67% (n=33) male participants, it is important to acknowledge, as gender can influence various factors relevant to the study, including social behavior, political engagement, and patterns of media consumption.

#### 5.3.1b EDUCATION LEVEL



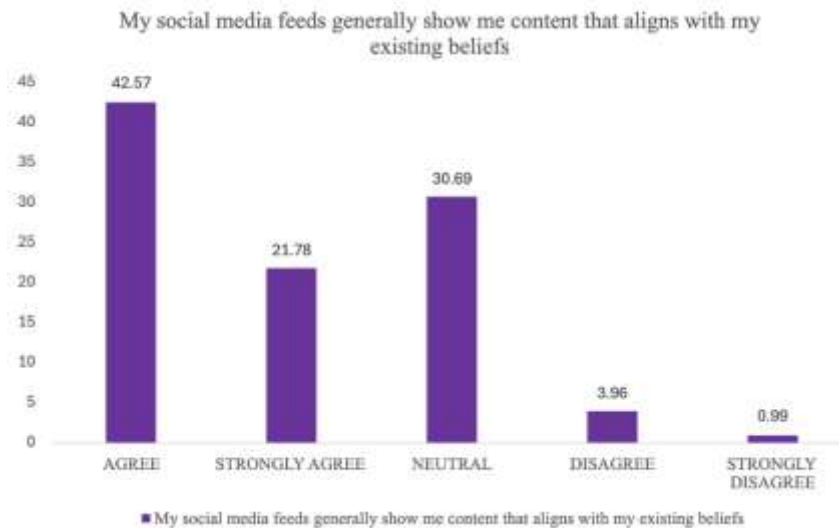
**Fig 2: Graph showcasing education level of the respondents**

The education level data reveals that the majority of participants hold a Bachelor's 45.54% (n= 46) or master's degree 33.66% (n=34), indicating a highly educated sample, while those with Diploma 2.97% (n=3), PhD 1.98% (n=2), and Other 2.97% (n=3) qualifications are significantly underrepresented. Education level has a significant impact on knowledge, critical thinking abilities, media literacy, and how people interpret and interact with information, it is essential to collect education data, particularly in studi

es pertaining to social media use, political awareness, or

## 5.4 Analyzing Respondent's Level Of Agreement

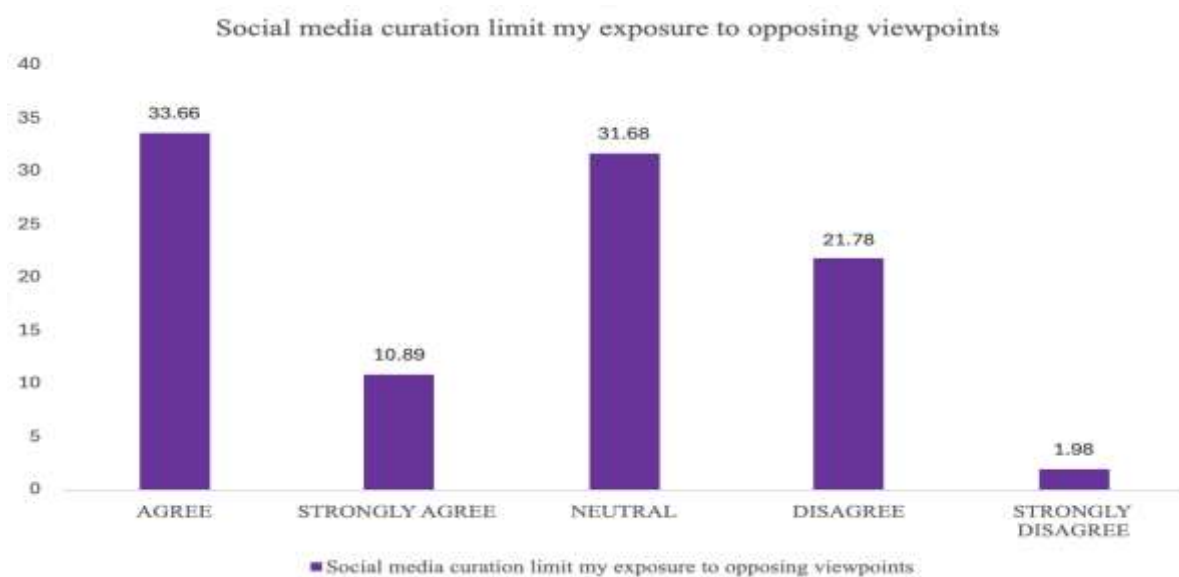
### 5.4.a



**Fig: 3 Graph on scale of agreement on social media curates the feeds based on users' beliefs**

Most respondents 64.78% (n = 65) either agree (n=43) or strongly agree (n=22) that their social media feeds show content aligning with their existing beliefs. Only a small minority 4.95% (n=5) disagrees (n=4) strongly disagrees (n=1), while 30.69% (n=31) remain neutral. This indicates a strong presence of the “echo chamber” effect, where users are primarily exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing views. This aligns with (Pariser, 2011) concept of the “filter bubble,” which describes how personalization social media curation of the feed tailor the contents to an individual’s preference, thus blocking viewers from diverse perspectives.

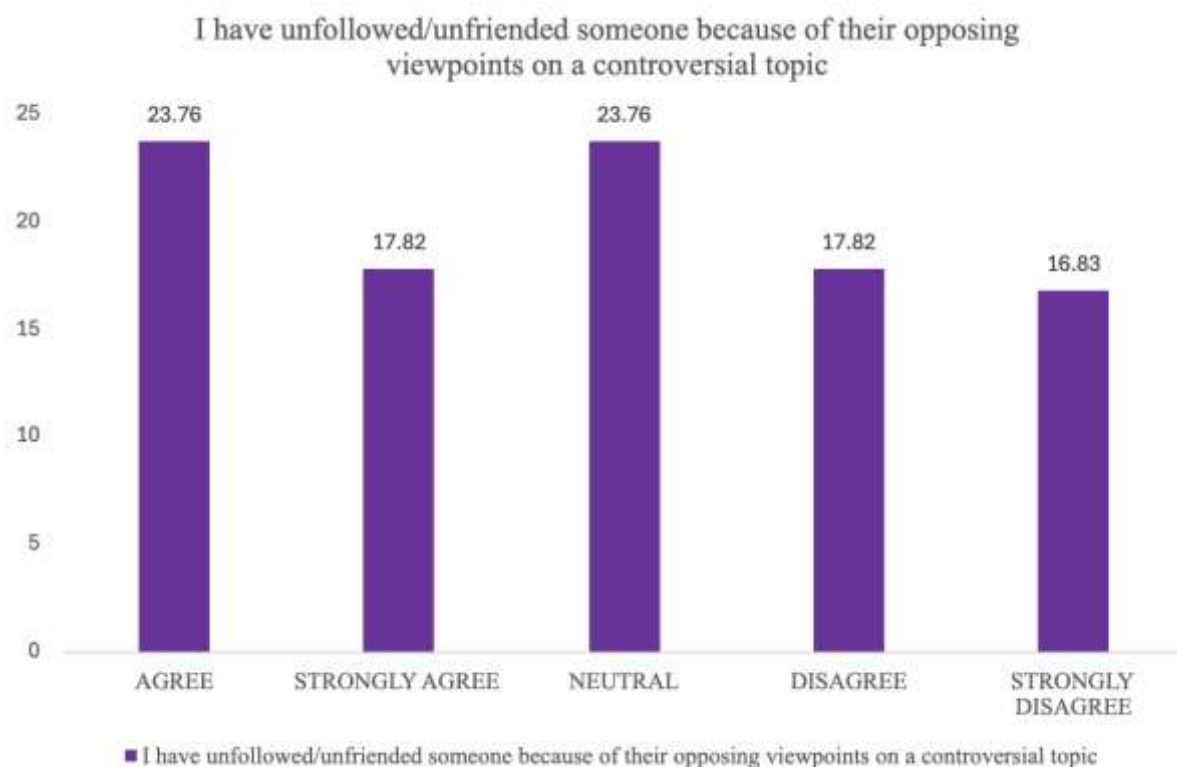
### 5.4.b



**Fig: 4 Graph on scale of agreement on social media curation limiting exposure to opposing views**

Nearly half of the respondents (45%) agree that social media curation limits their exposure to opposing viewpoints, while only 24% disagree, and 32% remain neutral. This suggests a notable awareness among users that algorithm-driven content personalization narrows the scope of perspectives they encounter. This outcome supports theories of selective exposure and confirmation bias, which propose that individuals tend to seek information that aligns with their existing beliefs while avoiding contradictory information (Stroud, 2010). Furthermore, the design of algorithms to maximize user engagement often results in content that confirms users' preferences, reinforcing cognitive biases and contributing to political polarization (Bakshy, et al., 2015).

## 5.4.c

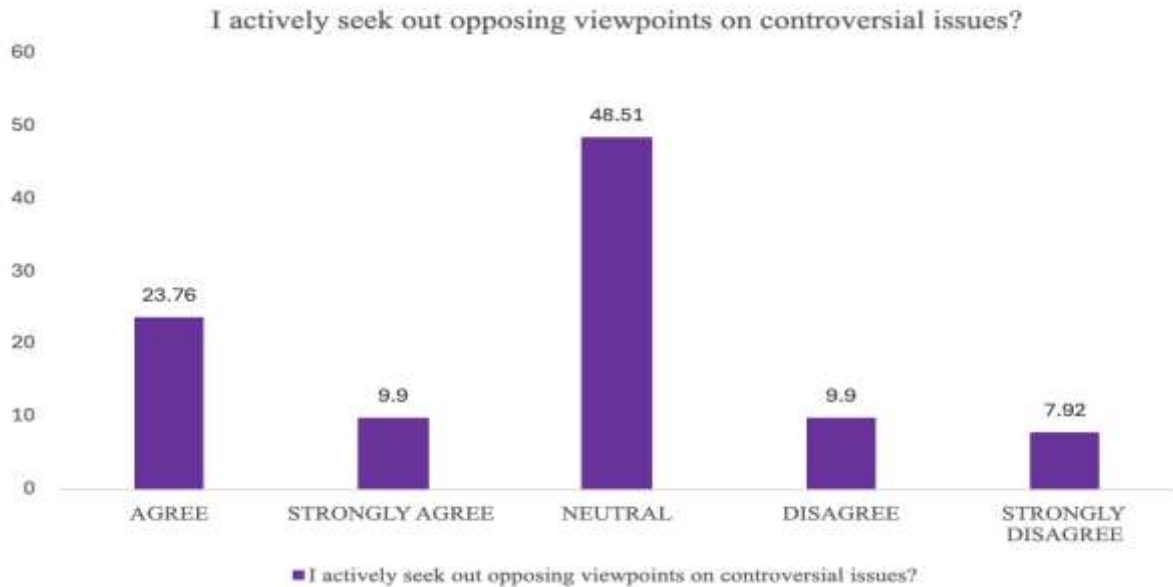


**Fig: 5 Graph on scale of agreement on unfollowing someone based on contradicting views**

A significant portion of respondents 41.58% ( $n = 24 + 18 = 42$ ) report unfollowing or unfriending someone due to conflicting views on controversial issues, while 34.65% ( $n = 18 + 17 = 35$ ) deny doing so and 23.76% (24) remain neutral. This behavior highlights the increasing tendency to curate one's social media environment by excluding dissenting voices. Such actions can be understood through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests that people avoid information that causes psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). It also aligns with social identity theory, wherein people maintain group cohesion by distancing themselves from out-group members with opposing beliefs (Tajfel, et al., 1986). This social self-regulation reinforces homogeneity in users' online networks and deepens ideological segregation.



## 5.4.d

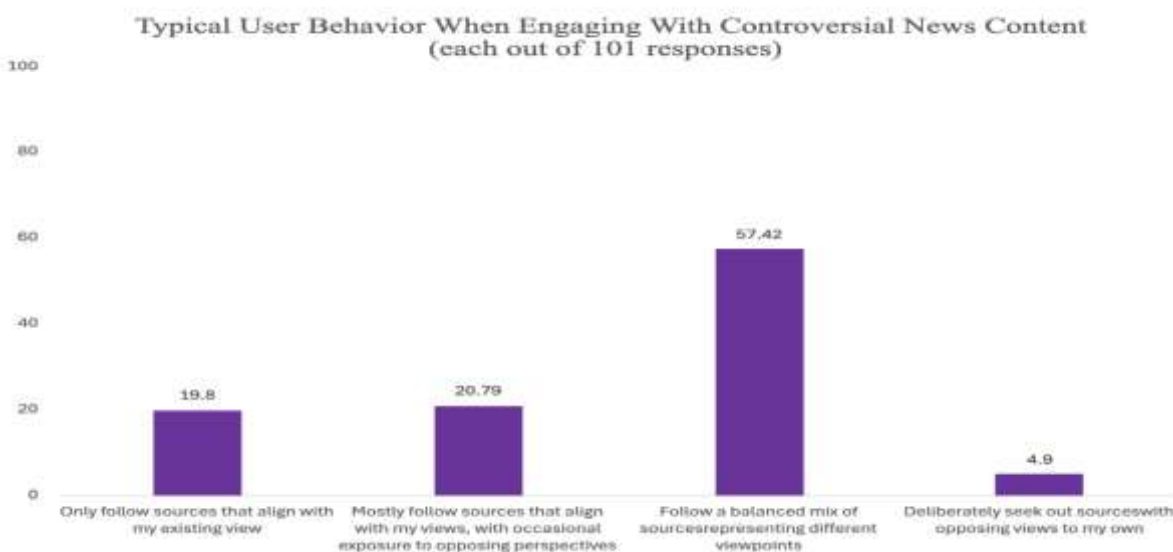


**Fig: 6 Graph on scale of agreement on actively seeking opposing views**

Only 33.66% (n=34) of participants claim to actively seek out opposing viewpoints, while 17.82% (18) do not and 48.51% (n=49) remain neutral. This indicates a relatively low engagement with ideological diversity, suggesting that most users are not motivated to challenge their existing views. This tendency is explained by motivated reasoning theory, which posits that individuals process information in a way that confirms their existing beliefs and avoids cognitive conflict (Kunda, 1990). Additionally, the high percentage of neutral responses may reflect user indifference or resignation in the face of algorithmically curated content. Consequently, limited exposure to diverse perspectives can entrench polarization and reduce opportunities for empathetic discourse and informed decision-making.

## 5.5 User Behaviour While Engaging In A Controversial Issue

### 5.5.a



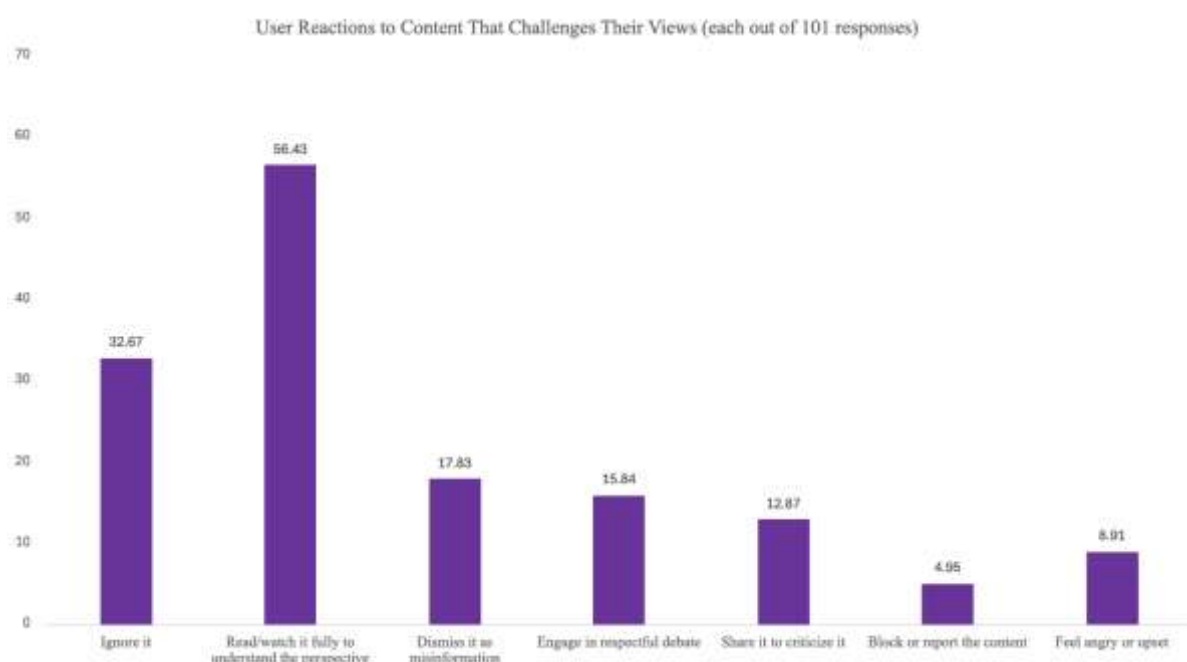
**Fig: 7 Graph behaviour towards controversial issues on social media**

Majority of the respondent have a balanced view about 57.42% (n=58) this indicates that users are open to engaging with multiple points of view, which somewhat challenges the "echo chamber" theory. According to (Cialdini et al. 1973), this behavior is related to the idea of informational social influence. The study asserts that people frequently turn to other people and a variety of information sources to make wise decisions, particularly in situations that are unclear or complicated like controversial news stories. People may be inspired to seek out a variety of opinions, even those that contradict their own, by this desire to be rightfully aware and accurate. About 19.80% (n= 20) of the respondents chose to prefer sources that mostly or completely align with their existing views, while 20.79% (n= 21) of them occasionally considers checking opposing views but stands mostly with their existing beliefs highlighting the presence of confirmation bias and selective exposure. Confirmation bias is the tendency for individuals to seek, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms their existing beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence (Nickerson, 1998).

Similarly, selective exposure theory suggests that people actively choose media and information sources that reinforce their ideological preferences to avoid cognitive dissonance and maintain psychological comfort. (Stroud, 2008) This behavior contributes to the formation of "echo chambers" and can limit critical thinking by filtering out diverse or challenging viewpoints. Together, these theories explain why a significant portion of users prefer ideologically aligned sources when engaging with controversial news. Only 4.95% respondents (n=5) deliberately seek out sources that challenge their beliefs, highlighting a general reluctance to engage with conflicting viewpoints. This behavior is well explained by Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), which suggests that individuals experience psychological discomfort—known as cognitive dissonance—when they encounter information that contradicts their existing beliefs or values. To avoid this discomfort, people tend to ignore, reject, or minimize opposing information, thus maintaining internal psychological consistency.

## 5.6 User Interaction Towards A Challenging Viewpoint

### 5.6.a

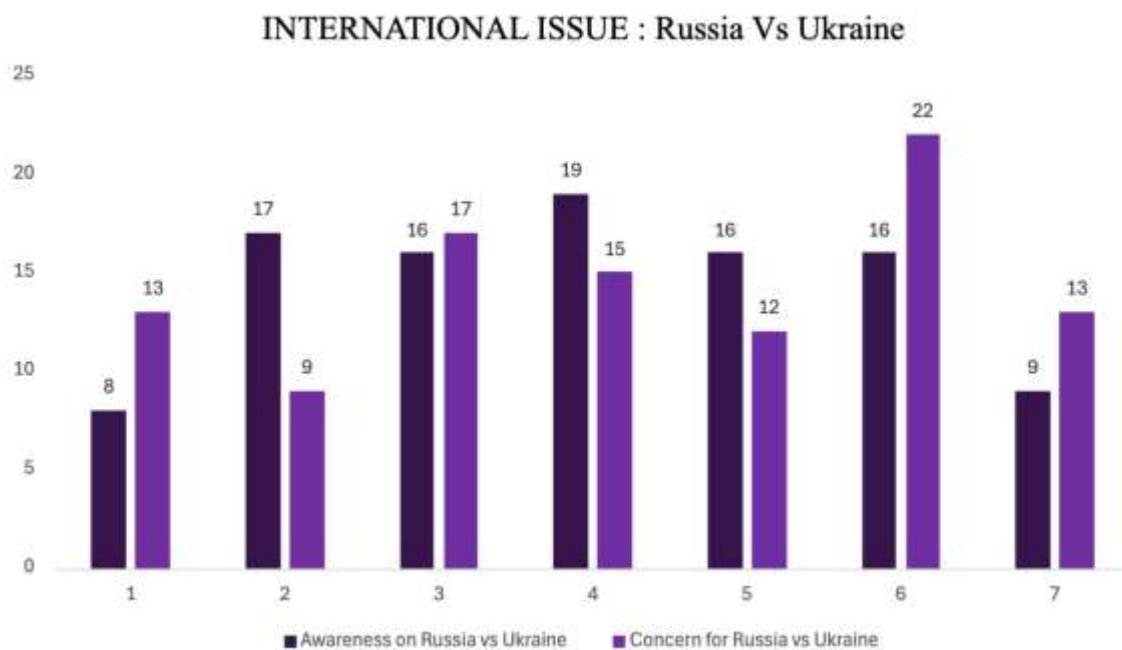


**Fig: 8 User interaction coming across a challenging viewpoint on social media**

The most common response is critical involvement, as 56.4% of users say they “read/watch it fully to understand,” meaning some cognitive openness is met with a desire to avoid false conclusion. On the other hand, 32.7% chose to “ignore it,” a passive avoidance option that suggests an alignment with Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1962), for they want to avoid that disassociation that comes with disruptive and contrary information. Similarly, 16.8% “dismiss it as misinformation,” an action supported by Motivated Reasoning (Kunda, 1990), where the information is measured based on how similar and ideologically compelling it is to one's beliefs instead of an objective perspective. Therefore, it's important to note that only 8.9% say they feel “angry or upset.” However, it seems like many are not open to echo chambers, which support openness to experience and curiosity, which counter components of “Selective Exposure Theory”. The 15.8% who “engage in respectful debate” would also suggest appreciation for tenets of “Deliberative Democracy Theory” (Habermas, 1996), which holds that rational discourse is the critical avenue for all engaged democratic endeavors. Finally, only 4.95% chose to block/report anything against their beliefs.

## 5.7 Awareness And Concern Level For The Following Issues

5.7.a The respondents (n=101) are asked to rate their Awareness and Concern separately on a likert scale: (1=Lowest, 7=Highest)



**Fig: 9 Chart on awareness and concern (Russia vs Ukraine)**

A dramatic escalation pattern is depicted in Russia vs. Ukraine Chart, with the highest engagement group (7) having very high concern (13), but relatively low awareness (9). This is especially noteworthy because it supports your theory that emotional content outweighs informational content in algorithmic feeds by implying that people who are most emotionally invested in the topic may know less about the facts.

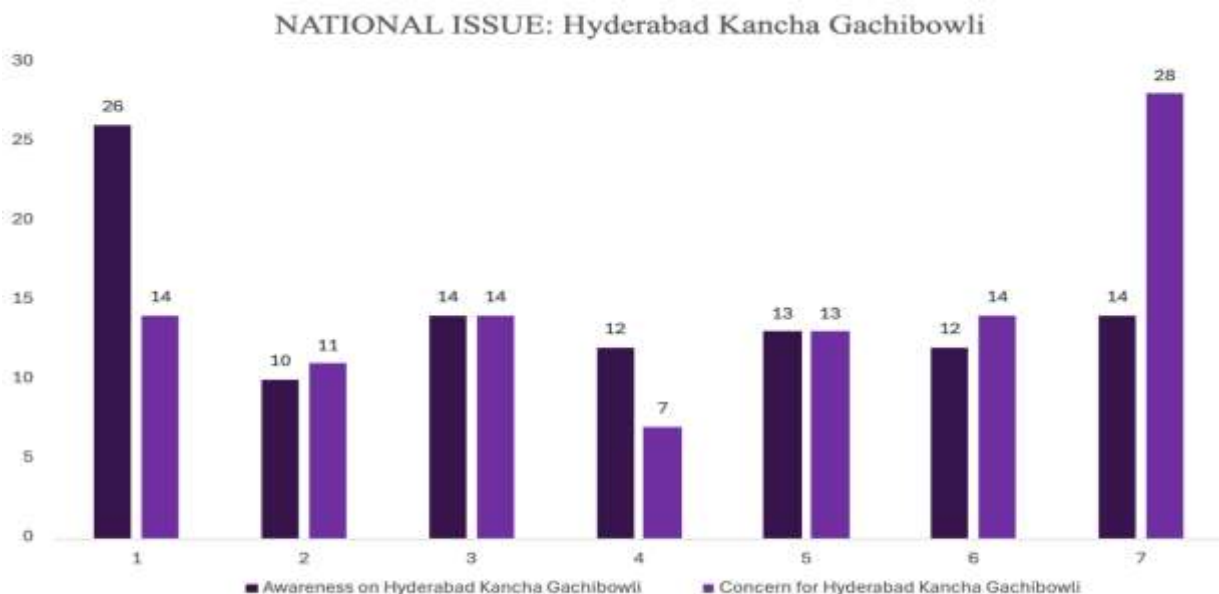
5.7.b The respondents (n=101) are asked to rate their Awareness and Concern separately on a likert scale: (1=Lowest, 7=Highest)



**Fig: 10 Graph on awareness and concern (Israel vs Palestine)**

With the highest engagement group (7) displaying low awareness (10) but exceptionally high concern (19), Israel vs. Palestine Chart exhibits the most extreme polarisation pattern. An example of how algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content can produce strong emotions without proportionate understanding is this almost 2:1 ratio of concern to awareness.

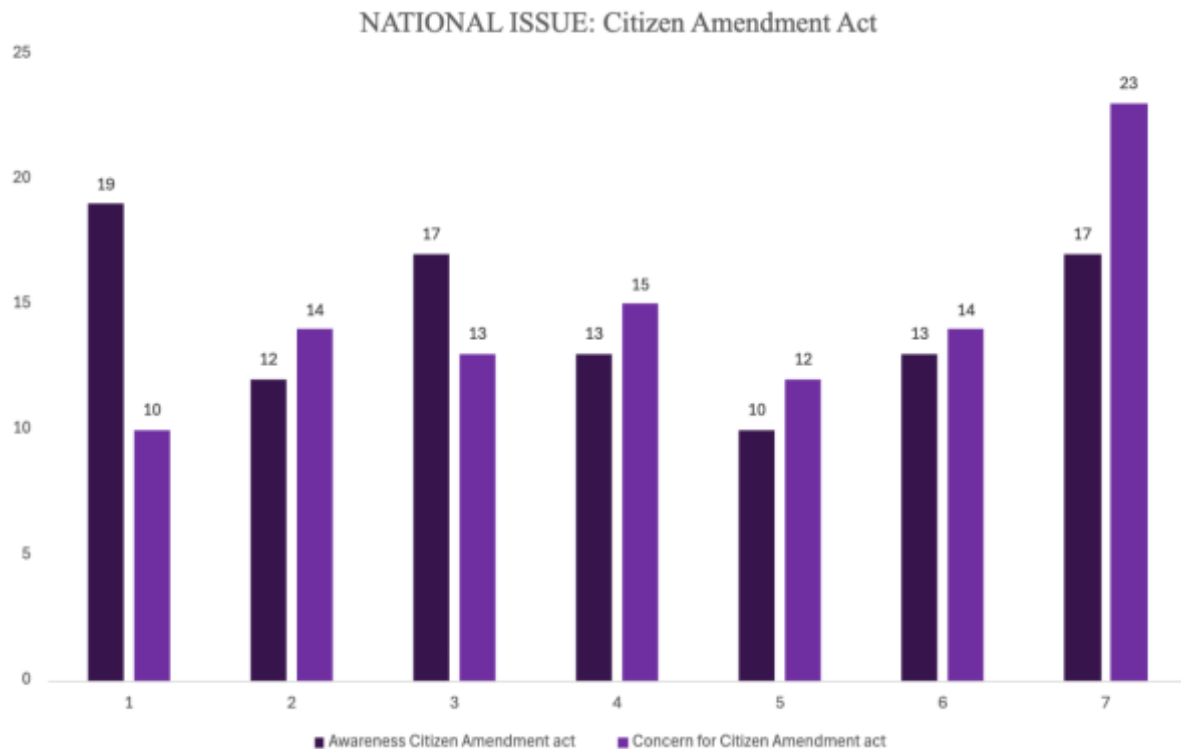
5.7.c The respondents (n=101) are asked to rate their Awareness and Concern separately on a likert scale: (1=Lowest, 7=Highest)



**Fig: 11 Graph on awareness and concern (Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli deforestation)**

The local issue on Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli deforestation chart exhibits the opposite pattern: the group with the highest level of engagement (7) has moderate awareness (14) but a high level of concern (28). This implies that even with little factual knowledge, local or regional issues may elicit even stronger emotional reactions when they affect people close to home.

5.7.d The respondents (n=101) are asked to rate their Awareness and Concern separately on a Likert scale: (1=Lowest, 7=Highest)



**Fig: 12 Graph on awareness and concern (Citizen Amendment Act)**

The Citizen Amendment Act chart exhibits comparable patterns of emotional amplification over informational depth, with a high engagement group (7), moderate awareness (17), and very high concern (23).

## 5.8 Analysis of the Open-ended Responses

The Analysis from the open-ended responses from participants who were Gen Z regarding two international problems (Russia–Ukraine, Israel–Palestine) and two national problems (Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli deforestation, Citizen Amendment Act) reveal interesting patterns of awareness, engagement, and voicing opinion. For example, despite four topics being trending on social media relevance throughout the course of this research, the trends of response manifest an erratic variable of interest and commentary. About only 8 respondents engaged fully and commented on all four options which suggests their awareness of these issues and a comfort with articulating their sentiments based on either political socialization or unmatched digital literacy and confidence to communicate freely. While other participants around 17 chose to comment only selectively and responded on only one or two but not all the four together and opting out on others which suggests that while they might have seen or heard of the other issues, they



did not feel personally connected enough to convey any meaning. Despite the vast availability of information in the digital age, individuals often display uneven awareness of global and national issues. Around 7 participants only responded to international conflicts like the Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine, while others around 3 are just attuned to national matters such as the Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli Deforestation controversy or Citizen Amendment Act. This variation can be effectively explained by Selective Exposure Theory (Stroud, 2008), which suggests that people actively choose to engage with information that aligns with their interests, values, or perceived relevance. However, each issue whether collectively or separately had their own responses, Russia–Ukraine (18), Israel–Palestine (19), Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli Deforestation (17), Citizen Amendment Act (16). For instance, those with a global political interest may prioritize international news, while others may resonate more with local issues that directly impact their community or identity. This self-directed media consumption leads to selective awareness, where individuals filter content not based on availability but on personal motivation and emotional connection, thus explaining why some remain unaware or disinterested in issues outside their preferred scope. Interestingly, several participants either responded minimally to show "N/A" or left blanks. This is not silence in the sense that it can reflect ignorance because these issues were so virally present on social media majorly by the same Gen Z crowd who interacted with and spread them. It is possible that the people have opinions but do not share them for concern that what they have to say will not be well-received and remaining digitally mute suggests that there is great fear of backlash, cancel culture, misconstrued, judged, or shunned due to a perception created of what is acceptable and to avoid isolation, it addresses the theory Spiral of Silences (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). If people think their opinions won't matter or they won't communicate effectively based on anticipated social sanctions or rejection, it's easier to be silent than put oneself at risk. Within each issues the ways in which Gen Z engaged is highly variable, while some people support either Russia “I think Russia is just protecting its power and position” commented by a respondent support of Russia. While another respondent commented “I'm not so aware of this conflict but Ukraine doesn't deserve the damage happening in their country” in support of Ukraine, similarly some support either Israel with responses like “What saddens me the most was Palestine was playing the victim card over here, and people sitting in different parts of the world who know nothing about history are shouting at the top of their lungs without even bothering of knowing what has actually happened and why has it happened and just wanted to hope on the trend” which expresses emotional attitude and expresses concern for lack of historical literacy while some who supported Palestine are majorly based on Humanitarian ground respondent stating “Israel’s actions in Palestine are nothing short of barbaric. The relentless bombing of hospitals, schools, and innocent children screams of state-sponsored terror, not self-defense” Also, there are people who protest the Hyderabad Kancha Gachibowli deforestation or place blame on politicians “Environmental degradation at the cost of urban expansion—classic short-sighted development. Forests are lungs of the earth, and losing them risks ecological imbalance, local livelihoods, and climate resilience. We need smarter, sustainable planning before it’s too late”. And with the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) - some support it with statements like “Yess it is necessary for our country”, while others oppose it stating, “Not beneficial & It is disadvantage for indigenous tribes”. The factors of such varied engagement despite a similar context of experience speak to the general awareness of personal values, group memberships, and social variables. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, et al., 1979) states that people are more inclined to advocate for the in line with their personal cultural, religious, and ideological affiliations. The Selective Exposure Theory (Stroud, 2008) supports the idea that people protect their ideologies or identity through what information they expose or

elect to share and thus, why some are vocal, and others silent. For example, with the deforestation project, there was a combo of protestors and others who simply turned a blind eye whether out of care and connection or trust in political endeavors. Awareness of social stigma mixed with anticipated outcomes provides credibility to whether someone would speak up or stay quiet. Regardless, these theories asserts that Gen Z involvement was not merely a byproduct of access to information about 21st-century pressures, but psychological processing, systematic emotional connections, and identity preservation that generate responsive inclination to controversial socio-political issues.

## 5.9 Analysis of Factors Determining the Mindset of an Individual on the Aforementioned Issues



**Fig 13: Graph on factors determining mindset on aforementioned issues**

The most notable finding is that "Seriousness of the issue" had 54.44% (n=55) of the 101 responses and "Humanitarian concern" 52.47% (n=53) responses dominate respondents' mindset formation. This indicates that Gen Z uses moral and emotional frameworks more often than analytical ones when addressing important issues. The clustering of "Mental wellbeing" at 30.69% (n=31), "Cognitive behaviour" 30.69 % (n=31), "Trending" at 27.72% (n=28), and "Religious or Demographic sentiments" at 29.70 (n=30) in the 28-31 range reveals how personal identity factors interact with social media dynamics. Both mental health and cognitive behaviour are equally weighted (both at 31), which implies that users are aware that their involvement with these problems has an impact on their psychological state but still engage in them. "Peer pressure" at 21.78 (n=22), "Feeling of Missing out from the generation" at 19.80 % (n=20), and "Going against ideologies" 19.80% (n=20) represent the conformity mechanisms you identified in your theoretical framework. These factors, while lower than emotional drivers, still influence roughly one-fifth of respondents, indicating significant social pressure to adopt positions on issues. The fear of "going against ideologies". In highly polarized and performative media environments, this associates to the notion of self-censorship.

## 6. Findings

A sizable percentage of participants admitted that social media algorithms select content that supports their opinions, and many of them said they avoid opposing views, unfriend people who hold different op

inions, and feel uneasy when confronted with contradicting information. These actions support the existence of self-reinforcing information environments, where dissenting viewpoints are not only ignored but also viewed as unacceptable, resulting in online conflict or silencing opposing view. On the other hand, respondents who behaved neutrally or uninterested were more likely to interact with different points of view, indicating a higher degree of cognitive flexibility and resistance to algorithmic polarization. This pattern supports the idea that, while a smaller group of users is receptive to cross-cutting discourse, filter bubbles and echo chambers have a substantial impact on user behaviour on social media and fuel ideological polarization. Users enter "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011) when they surround themselves with content that is like their own. In these "filter bubbles," conflicting information is filtered out, which reinforces cognitive closure and reduces tolerance for disagreement (Sunstein, 2001). This results in ideological rigidity and the possibility of conflict when perspectives that are contrary to one's own are confronted, on the other hand, is a representation of users who are either neutral or open-minded; they are less attached to a particular narrative and are more inclined to engage in cross-cutting exposure. The end effect is an atmosphere in which visibility, rather than validity, is the determining factor regarding whether narratives are successful, which contributes to the stifling of minority ideas and the illusion of unanimity. Confirmation bias and selective exposure theory are relevant because the study's results show that Generation Z frequently engages in selective exposure, with most respondents favoring information that supports their preexisting opinions (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2010). According to this theory, people's thoughts can be influenced by the media, but their depth of thought is not always affected. This results in selective exposure to popular but context-light content, giving the impression of knowledge without any real comprehension. Consequently, the study emphasizes the need to differentiate between "being exposed" and "being informed," stressing the importance of critical engagement as opposed to passively consuming viral information. Self-censorship was also common, as participants expressed a hesitancy to express minority views for fear of negative reactions. This was consistent with the Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974)

## **7. Conclusion**

A paradox is brought to light by the findings that although the age group of Generation Z believe they are well-informed as a result of their constant connectivity, their informational intake is frequently influenced more by content that is emotionally appealing and aligned with their peers than by sources that are diverse or balanced. This selective consumption adds to the polarization of opinions, fosters confirmation bias, and discourages anyone who disagrees with the majority opinion. The personalization and systematic curation of content have led to the establishment of selective exposure, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, which have narrowed the informational landscape for Generation Z. Additionally, the research reveals that the level of emotional intensity, social identity, and fear of judgement are significant mediators in the way Generation Z interacts with content. This restricts constructive speech and encourages self-censorship, particularly when it comes to expressing viewpoints that are held by a minority. In conclusion, whereas digital media platforms offer a huge array of chances for participation and expression, they also carry the potential of reinforcing ideological silos and exposing people to information that is only superficially relevant. As we move forward, it will be vital to cultivate critical media literacy, algorithmic transparency, and inclusive digital spaces to combat the consequences of polarisation and to promote digital citizens who are more informed, empathic, and engaged. The results of this study provide evidence for this. Users prefer content that is ideologically compatible and often avoid content that presents contradictory opinions

that may cause cognitive discomfort, according to the study's findings, which are in line with the confirmation bias theory (Festinger, 1957) and motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). The existence of these phenomena was confirmed by majority of respondents who admitted that their feeds represent their personal opinions. This conduct aligns with the idea of social identity theory. (Hart, et al. 2019). Thus, the results of this study show that while members of Generation Z are socially active and have a high degree of digital literacy, the information environment they are exposed to often prevents them from being able to think critically and with a variety of opinions.

## 8. Limitation And Recommendation

The study's investigations limits the breadth and depth of its conclusions. First off, convenience sampling (N = 101), which mostly takes place on Instagram and similar platforms, limits the study's generalisability. This sample approach under-represents the diversity of the broader Gen Z population and disproportionately represents women and highly educated people. Additionally, there isn't a longitudinal approach that would track changes in selective exposure over time, especially during important social or political events. The study did not assess related psychological effects like anxiety, echo chamber fatigue, or polarization-induced stress, even though cognitive mechanisms like confirmation bias were examined. To fully understand the effects of selective exposure, these results are necessary. A cross-cultural comparative approach will enhance comprehension by examining how national ideologies, press freedom, and media trust affect Generation Z's exposure behaviour regardless of the geopolitical context in which it is observed. Moreover, experimental or quasi-experimental approaches can be used to investigate how exposure to opposing viewpoints, whether intentional or inadvertent, affects one's capacity to change one's perspective or to withstand misinformation. Finally, measuring the success of media literacy interventions and algorithmic transparency technologies will be crucial to figuring out how to empower Generation Z to diversify their media consumption and counteract confirmation bias in algorithm-driven environment and opinions.

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