Young Adults' Information Needs, Use, and Understanding in the Context of Instagram:

A Multi-Method Study

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Abstract

The use of information has changed in recent years—particularly among young adults, for whom social media are now the most important gateway to engage with news and various other types of information. Focusing on Instagram, this multi-method research project takes an audience-centered approach and investigates how young adults use the platform for (which kind of) information, the information needs that guide their use, and the contextual dynamics that shape their understandings of 'information (use).' Empirically, the study builds on a combination of a seven-day diary study with semi-structured qualitative interviews with 48 German Instagram users aged 18 to 24. Analyzing the diaries in conjunction with the interview transcripts allowed us to gain rich insights into information usage practices and how these are influenced by the characteristics of (audiovisual) social media platforms as well as the motives and needs of using them. The findings suggest that Instagram is an integral part of young adults' information repertoires, although information is usually not actively sought. Moreover, platform characteristics and affordances not only shape possible and actual information behaviors but also matter for whether participants understand their Instagram use as information use.

Keywords: social media, mobile media, information use, Instagram, diary method, qualitative interviews

Young Adults' Information Needs, Use, and Understanding in the Context of Instagram: A Multi-Method Study

With more than 1 billion monthly active users, Instagram has grown into one of the most important social media platforms worldwide (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). Starting as a photo-sharing app, it originally had a strong focus on personal, more private interactions with users attending to pictures of their friends or posting selfies and snapshots of their avocado toast (Hu et al., 2014). Yet, having undergone a similar transformation as its parent site Facebook, the platform has become central to engaging with all kinds of informational content and news as well (Newman et al., 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Especially among 18- to 24-year old online users—the age group commonly denoted as young adults—audiovisual social media such as TikTok and Instagram are not only an increasingly important gateway for current affairs information, but also for interacting with products and services by companies, or content provided by (online) personalities such as celebrities and influencers (Hasebrink et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2021; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Moreover, they "can often be seen as a guiding step towards engaging in civil society" (Peters et al., 2021, p. 5).

Several survey-based studies have already addressed the general motives behind Instagram use and found that users turn to the platform to find information about their social environment (Aillerie & McNicol, 2018; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), their interests (Huang & Su, 2018), or for undirected browsing and entertainment (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2019). In contrast, news-related motives seem to be less important drivers of Instagram use. Standardized surveys, however, cannot address how motives relate to the use of specific Instagram content or whether, for example, a need for diversion ultimately leads to exposure to content that is perceived as instructive.

It thus seems crucial to take "people's experience as point of departure" (Groot Kormelink, 2019, p. 14) and study the informational use of Instagram with an audience-centered approach. Relying on a social definition of information (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2010)—that is, conceptualizing it as being new and useful/valuable from a *subjective* perspective—this research project investigates what kind of information is used by young adults on Instagram and which information needs guide their use of the platform (*RQ1*). Furthermore, we are interested in users' personal understanding of 'information (use)' in the context of Instagram (*RQ2*), as this has important implications for understanding the association between individual platform perceptions and users' evaluations of their information use practices.

To address our research questions, we relied on a multi-method design that combined a seven-day visual diary study with semi-structured qualitative interviews with 48 young adults from Germany. By contextualizing the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts with an overview of 1,897 screenshots submitted by the participants, the results provide fine-grained insights into the use of Instagram for informational purposes. Depending on personal interests as well as the contexts and motives for use, different types of information—about friends, hobbies, or current affairs—are used on Instagram, but often incidentally. In addition, many young adults do not perceive their Instagram use as *information* use, which is due to both normative assumptions about what 'information' is and perceptions of the Instagram information environment as entertainment-focused and superficial.

Information Use on Instagram

We situate our research within theoretical assesments of how overarching characteristics of social media environments shape user behavior (e.g., Kümpel, 2022; Papacharissi, 2009; Thorson & Wells, 2016). This theory perspective is especially valuable in shifting the focus

away from viewing user characteristics as the only crucial variable: From a sociotechnological

perspective, the nature of information use on Instagram depends not only on individual

preferences, but also on the interaction with core platform elements, associated affordances, and

the overarching characteristics of information use on social media (Kümpel, 2022). Therefore,

we first discuss what characterizes information use on Instagram on a broader level. Based on

this, we examine in more detail the role of information needs and how they—in combination

with platform elements and the general conditions of social media information use—can

influence usage practices and understandings of 'information (use).'

Characteristics of Using Information on Instagram

The relevance of studying information use comes from both its crucial role in the lives of

young adults and the general characteristics of using information on the platform. Even if

Instagram becomes irrelevant or is decommissioned in the future, insights related to its high-

level attributes and features will still be valuable for social media research, as they not only

describe information environments, but also enable systematic comparison of platforms with

respect to (the effects of) information use (Kümpel, 2022, p. 3). However, despite the plethora of

research on information use on social media, systematic evidence on how platform

characteristics shape (understandings of) information use remains limited. Drawing on prior

conceptualizations (e.g., Bayer et al., 2020; Kümpel, 2022; Leaver et al., 2020; Soffer, 2019), we

aim to tackle this research gap and center our theoretical framework around five characteristics:

visuality, personalization, incidentalness, non-exclusivity, and sociality.

Visuality

While videos and images play an increasingly vital role on all social media platforms

(Brantner et al., 2020), Instagram is often characterized as an image-focused or "highly-visual"

(Marengo et al., 2018) platform. Although text-based communication is possible, all Instagram content "is still predicated on the visual" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 75), as the posting user always needs to choose a 'canvas' for their message. This has important implications for how information is perceived and processed—images can capture users' attention better than text, are processed faster and remembered longer, and can have a powerful impact on emotional responses (e.g., Keib et al., 2018; Stenberg, 2006). Indeed, information recall on Instagram seems to be superior to that on Twitter (Arceneaux & Dinu, 2018). However, not all visual content on Instagram is of photographic nature or picture-focused. Especially in the context of more complex political information, messages are now routinely conveyed in the form of quote cards, infographics, or news memes (Haßler et al., 2021; Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020). In addition, video posts or Instagram stories offer ample opportunities to share (audio-)visual content, with the latter being increasingly used by political actors, social activists, and the news media (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Although the specific Instagram aesthetics have changed over time and are dependent on the communities or niches users are navigating (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 39 ff.), *visuality* thus clearly influences how information on the platform is communicated, perceived, and acted upon.

Personalization

As a fundamental aspect of social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), all information encountered on Instagram is personalized—both due to processes of explicit (e.g., users customizing their information environment by subscribing to accounts) and implicit personalization governed by algorithms trained on individuals' behavior (Thorson, 2020). Such algorithmic curation can help users manage information overload or locate relevant content (Merten, 2021), but it also inherently restricts the array of information people encounter.

Research suggests that both selective exposure and selective avoidance are common on Instagram, which can hinder pluralistic opinion-formation (Parmelee & Roman, 2020). Interestingly, young adults appear to have diverse perceptions of implicit personalization, viewing social media algorithms as neutral calculators, useful and time-saving guides, or malevolent entities that censor information or pressure them to buy unnecessary items (Swart, 2021, p. 6; see also Hargittai et al., 2020). Such findings underscore the importance of considering users' personal experiences in social media information environments: As each user is presented with a unique selection of content and evaluates it differently (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2022), *personalization* processes must be considered when studying individuals' social media use.

Incidentalness

While Instagram enables users to have significant control over the information they are exposed to, the platform also increases the probability of encountering information *incidentally*. Frequently discussed in the context of current affairs information, incidental exposure refers to a situation where "citizens unexpectedly encounter news or political information without actively seeking it, often as a result of other unrelated online activities" (Kwak et al., 2020, p. 4). While research has often explored the potential positive effects of incidental exposure on information use (e.g, Bode, 2016; Kwak et al., 2020), it is also associated with "news-finds-me"-perceptions (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), inequalities in news exposure (Thorson, 2020), and may even lead to social media users unintentionally avoiding news (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). On Instagram, incidental exposure can occur not only when users are being exposed to unexpected (e.g., political) information from accounts or hashtags they follow, but also in the 'Search & Explore' section, which features trending content from

accounts users do not yet follow (Goyanes & Demeter, 2022). Although it is possible to encounter counter-attitudinal information or content unrelated to one's interests in this section, it is heavily shaped by algorithmic curation, as "[p]osts are selected automatically based on things like the people you follow or the posts you like" (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). Nonetheless, Instagram certainly features a high degree of serendipity that not only shapes what kind of information is used but also how it is evaluated.

Non-Exclusivity

Social media environments—and Instagram in particular—are inherently diverse information environments, "in which political information mixes with updates about pets and babies" (Bode, 2016, p. 29). This *non-exclusivity* has mostly been studied in relation to news and political information, specifically investigating how the mix of content affects attention to and engagement with current affairs information (see Kümpel, 2022; Wieland & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2020). For example, users develop the habit of "snacking" news on the platform—rather than engaging more deeply with a specific topic, they continue browsing through the colourful social media feed (Molyneux, 2018). This non-exclusivity likely shapes Instagram users' information practices: not only is each bit of information constantly competing with other, possibly more exciting pieces of content, the mix of different information may also influence their evaluation (see below).

Sociality

Engaging with information content on Instagram is by default a *social* experience—posts are connected with popularity cues such as the number of likes, accompanied by comments from other users, or even combined with personal recommendations. Accordingly, information on Instagram does not only contain cues about the original source (e.g., the account that shared a

post), but also several types of social cues that can influence users' perception of the content, for example, regarding its credibility (Mena et al., 2020; Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020). Sociality, in particular, is likely to interact with users' basic information needs: If a user primarily turns to Instagram with the goal of acquiring knowledge about their own social environment—which is, as mentioned above, one of the main motives for using it (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016)—they may be more attuned to social cues than a user interested in current affairs.

Users' Information Needs and Understanding

Instagram and Information Needs

As outlined in the beginning, we follow a social definition of information and conceptualize it as being new and useful/valuable from a *subjective* perspective (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2010). This understanding of information assumes that a message or piece of content has no objective informational value but that this value is perceived differently by different people. Notwithstanding this focus on individual experiences, some overarching *information needs* can be derived that shape the information behavior of all users. Following Hasebrink and Domeyer (2010)—who build their systematization of information needs both on research on (active) information seeking as well as on a more global uses and gratifications perspective— four levels of information needs can be distinguished.

Undirected information needs are the most universal need and capture users' general need for information and surveillance—for example, to stay informed about news and current events. Thus, the considerable share of Instagram users who turn to the platform to learn about what goes on in the world or to keep up with the news (e.g., Newman et al., 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019) can be understood as being motivated by undirected information needs.

Topic-related information needs can be conceptualized as active orientations toward certain subject areas. As Bengtsson (2023, p. 11) points out, especially young adults are often driven by "unique topic interests about which they want to know everything." Be it CrossFit or classism—a user that mainly turns to Instagram to acquire knowledge about their interests or hobbies would be guided by topic-related information needs.

Group-related information needs refer to information from and about the reference groups relevant to an individual. Users that mainly log into Instagram to learn about what goes on in their personal social environment (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) can be seen as motivated by group-related information needs. This can also entail turning to influencers, who are usually not personally known by the users but are often perceived as being part of one's social circle or even as equal interaction partners (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Problem-related information needs involve seeking information to solve a particular problem. These needs arise from specific situations and are focused on acquiring specific knowledge. For example, a user might open Instagram with the goal of finding a quick recipe for lunch or checking the new collection of a clothing brand.

It is important to note that the information needs do not imply any specific understanding of information. It can be assumed that all four of these needs are relevant to young adults' information use on Instagram to varying degrees and with different empirical outcomes. For instance, users might associate different kinds of information with the respective needs and rank their relevance differently. Therefore, individual perspectives on these information needs provide a useful analytical tool for understanding Instagram information use practices.

Definitions of 'Information (Use)'

The discussed characteristics of the information environment on Instagram are likely to influence which content young adults perceive as information at all and to what extent they understand their own Instagram use as information use. While, to our knowledge, there are no studies that explicitly address understandings of 'information (use),' previous work has at least briefly dealt with users' definitions of *news* (use).

On the one hand, this research has shown that individual news definitions are shaped by assumptions about reputable sources and genre conventions "one might find in a journalism textbook" (Craft et al., 2016, p. 151). On the other hand, the studies highlight the challenges of determining what counts as news in the context of social media—particularly due to the non-exclusivity of a single content type, the incidental nature of information exposure, and the overlap of sources that arises from sociality (e.g., Peters et al., 2021; Rulyova & Westley, 2017; Swart et al., 2017b). For example, a study by Sveningsson (2015) shows that while young adults often use social media for content that can be classified as news from a researcher's perspective, users often do not perceive it as "real news" (p. 9, see also Peters et al., 2021; Peters & Broersma, 2017; Swart et al., 2017a). Available interview data suggests that this results from social media being perceived as a trivial pleasure or dull entertainment, which cannot be connected to something as normatively important as news (ibid.). Edgerly and Vraga (2020, p. 420) have coined the term *news-ness* to describe "the extent to which audiences characterize a specific piece of media as news."

Since the term information is often understood as a synonym for news (Kümpel et al., 2022), we might expect similar sentiments when studying users' definitions of 'information (use).' In this case, *information-ness* would highlight the focus on users/the audience and also

emphasize that characterizations as information are not binary, but made in relation to specific

pieces of content, the Instagram environment they appear in, and the individual preferences and

current information needs of the user. For instance, users might have difficulties associating their

Instagram use with 'information (use)' if they primarily see the platform as a source of

entertainment, self-presentation, and social activities.

As Case (2007, p. 42) highlights, the term 'information' is ordinarily used "without much

concern for its definition; we know what we mean when we use the word." Despite—or precisely

because of—this lack of clarity in everyday use, it is vital to study what users have in mind when

they refer to something as 'information (use)' and the factors that influence their perceptions.

Summary and Purpose of the Present Research

Especially among young adults, Instagram is increasingly important for accessing

informational content. Like many recent social media platforms, it has specific characteristics

that shape both individuals' information usage practices and their perceptions of these practices.

To understand why, how, and what information is used—and what content is perceived as

information at all—it is necessary to adopt an audience-centered approach that takes into account

the Instagram information environment shaped by visuality, personalization, incidentalness, non-

exclusivity, and sociality. Against this backdrop, our research project was guided by the

following questions:

RQ1: What kind of information is used by young adults on Instagram, and which

information needs guide their Instagram use?

RQ2: What do young adults understand as 'information (use)' on Instagram?

Method

Design

To address our research questions, we relied on the messaging app diary approach (Kümpel, 2021), which is a primarily qualitative, mobile self-report data collection method aimed at investigating everyday practices of information use with established messaging apps. The approach is multi-method by design and consists of a *documentation phase*, during which participants are asked to keep a multimedia diary of relevant experiences by answering to daily prompts of the researchers and a *discussion phase*, during which participants are asked to further contextualize their (documented) experiences in semi-structured qualitative interviews.

For the study at hand, participants were asked to send screenshots of encountered public[1] Instagram content that qualified as 'information' for them. For seven consecutive days in winter 2019 (Dec-16 to Dec-22), around noon, they received a WhatsApp message that reminded them to take screenshots of relevant Instagram posts or stories throughout the day. In the evening, they then received another WhatsApp message that asked them to send the screenshots to the researchers and, if desired, make additional comments or remarks. In the briefing prior to this documentation phase—which was also realized via WhatsApp—, participants were familiarized with the data collection process and our concept of 'information' as being new and/or personally useful. While this may have primed the participants, it also *enabled* a more unbiased glimpse into their information practices, since, as mentioned above, they may have otherwise understood 'information' as 'news' without considering their self-concepts (Kümpel et al., 2022).[2]

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[1] To ensure that no content from third parties was shared without their consent, participants were specifically asked to not send screenshots from *private* accounts (e.g., accounts from their friends or family).

[2] Investigating users' definition of 'information (use)' unavoidably creates a dilemma: On the one hand, there is the risk of some interviewees merely repeating the concept that was offered to them during the briefing. On the other hand, refraining from a briefing might introduce other problems: Particularly if participants associated 'information' with 'news,' this may have been a reflection of their self-concepts *or* of their perceived duty to be an "informed citizen" (e.g., Hartley & Pedersen, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018).

The discussion phase, which involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the participants, took place in January 2020. During these interviews, participants were asked about their general Instagram and information use, the information needs guiding their use (including a card sorting activity), and their personal understanding of 'information (use).' Moreover, selected screenshots sent during the documentation phase were discussed in more detail to determine why the depicted content was perceived as new/useful, whether participants did something with the information, and how their relationship with the posting account can be characterized.

To ensure the transparency and accessibility of our study design, we share all instruments (e.g., the used WhatsApp messages incl. the briefing, interview guide), study materials (e.g., codebooks with detailed coding rules, definitions, and examples), as well as the data and code for the quantitative analysis of the screenshots in a repository on the *Open Science Framework* (OSF: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/WS3PB).

Participants

Considering our interest in Instagram usage practices of young adults, recruiting was primarily based on participants' *age*, specifically targeting those between 18 and 24 years old at the time of recruitment (sample: $M = 21.45$, $SD = 1.60$). In addition, we aimed to reflect the distribution of *gender* among German Instagram users[3] (sample: 59.6% ♀) and to include participants—all of which were college students—from a diverse mix of study programs. While this focus limits the generalizability of the findings, we deliberately chose this population to ensure that participants' horizon of experience and lifeworld is comparable. Participation in the

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[3] According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 (Newman et al., 2019), 26% of female and 20% of male German online users used Instagram for any purpose in 2019. Likewise, 8% of female users, but only 4% of male users indicated to use Instagram for news. Thus, the goal was to recruit slightly more women than men for our study.

study was based on freely volunteered informed consent; participants were aware of their right to refuse participation and were told about how the (anonymized) data would be used and who would have access to it. Overall, 48 German young adults participated in the documentation phase, and all but one participant (P-4[4]) also participated in the discussion phase.

Data Analysis

The data generated in this study consists of a total of 1,897 screenshots of Instagram content provided by 48 participants and the transcripts of 47 semi-structured interviews. To better understand the relationship between participants' information needs and understandings and their actual information practices, we first conducted a quantitative content analysis of the collected screenshots (data and code available on OSF). This allowed us to contextualize the findings of the interviews by examining the types of content and sources that participants were actually exposed to on Instagram. Building on a broad systematization of the screenshots with regard to their content, type (e.g., post, story), and source, we then developed a codebook that differentiates between various (1) *content categories* and (2) *source types.* For the first category, we coded what kind of information was featured in the screenshots, for example *news* (e.g., politics or sports), *advice* (implicit and explicit tips/guidance, e.g., cooking tutorials), or *trivia* (facts unrelated to current affairs, e.g., about history or animals). For the second category, we coded the originating account, with subcategories such as *legacy media* (e.g., newspapers), *public institutions* (e.g., universities), or (non-media) *companies* (e.g., car manufacturers). In line with our audience-centered approach, all collected screenshots were treated as 'information' and no further filtering was performed.

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[4] When referring to participants, we use the letter P for participant and the number assigned to each participant according to the document Overview-Participants.pdf provided on OSF.

To analyze the interview transcripts, we used a qualitative content analysis approach that combines inductive category formation and deductive category assignment (Mayring, 2014). We developed a codebook that includes categories such as *information needs* and how they are (not) fulfilled on Instagram, partipants reflections on their *understanding of information,* as well as inductively developed categories that capture their experiences with and evaluations of *personalization*, the *'Search & Explore'* section, or *incidentalness*. During the coding process, which was conducted by one of the authors for both the screenshots and interviews, the transcripts were thoroughly read and text segments were assigned to one or more categories. Finally, both analytical steps were brought together to get a complete picture of how and why Instagram is used for informational purposes—first for each participant and then for the entire sample to uncover overarching patterns.

Results

RQ1: Instagram Information Use and Needs

Motives for Instagram Use and Usage Habits

Before turning to the importance of specific information needs and associated usage practices in more detail, we give a brief overview of the diary findings and general usage habits and motives. During the documentation phase, the participants sent a total of 1,879 screenshots, with a range of nine to 69 per person ($M = 39.1$, $SD = 14.4$). The number of submitted screenshots decreased over time, going from 307 on the first two days of the study to 230 on the last day. Some participants mentioned that they were preoccupied with family or university exams during the "very stressful period" (P-5) before Christmas, which may have contributed to their reduced Instagram usage.

This already hints at the contexts in which people use Instagram: For many, it serves as a 'gap filler' in moments of boredom or waiting, and is often visited "automatically" (P-33) and "without thinking" (P-5), in "situations where you have nothing to do at all" (P-46)—for example, in public transport or a boring lecture. Satisfying information needs does not seem to be the primary purpose of using Instagram for many participants, rather, it is "part of larger social media habits" (Boczkowski et al., 2018, p. 3534). They are more interested in entertainment, passing the time, and escapism. Sometimes the young adults do open Instagram with the vague intention of getting information, wanting to see "what's new" (P-32) or "find something interesting" (P-10). However, they are not looking for specific information: Once in the feed or in the 'Search & Explore' section, encounters with information are often incidental, as P-15 illustrates:

> "I wouldn't necessarily say, well, I go on Instagram because […] I want to get information. That's a side effect but never the main reason. And everything flows in subconsciously, therefore, I wouldn't necessarily classify it as information gathering."

Information Needs

Although information is only rarely sought actively, our participants were able to confidently rank their information needs in the card sorting activity—with **group-related information needs** emerging as the most important (see Table 1). Instagram is used in order to know "what's going on in people's lives that I don't really keep in touch with" (P-7), that is, acquire social surveillance knowledge (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Again, the intentionality is usually limited: While many participants recognize that when they open Instagram, they will also see "what my friends are actually doing" (P-46), the primary interest is not necessarily in learning about a specific friend's current experiences.

Looking at the submitted screenshots, content containing advice (33.6% of diary entries) and trivia (22.6%) seems especially popular, pointing to the relevance of **topic-related information needs** when using Instagram (see also Bengtsson, 2023). On the one hand, this is based on the motives and contexts of use: Users seeking a "pleasant diversion" (P-1) may be drawn to content that interests them and is not too cognitively demanding. For instance, this means learning something new about "which rocket started" (P-12) or "cooking recipes for Christmas" (P-22). On the other hand, participants consider Instagram especially suitable for encountering information about their interests, as it offers not only a broad range of topics but also *depth*. For example, one interviewee noted that for art illustrators, "the whole scene is on there" (P-22), indicating topic-centered community-building processes that have been described as "communitainment" (Stollfuß, 2020). On Instagram—with the appropriate personalization, whether through following accounts or through algorithmic curation—there is "just really the general information much greater […] than on the Internet" (P-16). Therefore, for some, Instagram is "the primary way" (P-24) to get information about their hobbies and interests.

Most participants, however, have a diverse usage pattern, which is also reflected in the variety of sources and content categories present in their screenshots. They do not have an "explicit area" (P-30) of interest on Instagram but prefer a mixture of topics. For example, the cited young man sent in screenshots from 14 different content categories, including topics such as politics, recipes, and gaming. In reaction to this diverse content, participants often described feeling stimulated or motivated to further explore a topic or issue. This is, as observed elsewhere (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022), repeatedly referred to as "inspiration." As P-18 illustrates:

> "In terms of inspiration [it's] really fashion or lifestyle bloggers where you just look a
> little bit at what their lifestyle is. Or at the moment, I also explicitly follow people who

have a beautiful visual design and aesthetic. So in terms of photography, they just have

that down and I like to look at that."

In contrast to explicit personalization through the accounts they follow, some participants

find the algorithmic customization (implicit personalization) of the 'Search & Explore' section

particularly useful. There, "Instagram only shows you things that you like or at least that are

somehow related to it" (P-32). All the user has to do is click on a picture and "then you get more

and more and more on the same topic. So, there is no long search and you get to see a lot of

interesting things" (P-17). For these participants, this "info page," as P-37 calls it, offers a more

controllable and accessible way to find information, as they are not limited to the content posted

by the accounts they follow. Thus, somewhat counterintuitive, participants who visit Instagram

with specific interests in mind sometimes rely more on the 'Search & Explore' page than on

accounts they have selected to follow.

Correspondingly, the 'Search & Explore' section is sometimes also visited to satisfy

problem-related information needs, because "they [Instagram] remember it somehow and then

it's just easier than me googling or something" (P-47). However, this is used more for problems

that do not need to be solved immediately, such as buying a new piece of clothing. But if the

young adults are looking for business hours or the illness to their symptoms, Instagram is too

unspecific: In the absence of a keyword search, it is difficult to find particular information.

Although it is possible to search for hashtags or follow them, most participants do not use this

"because anything can pop up there" (P-34). This need also does not fit well with the mood and

motives with which most use Instagram. If one is "just on there to pass the time, then I don't feel

like searching so much" (P-17). According to the card sorting activity and the interviews,

problem-related information needs are the least important. Our findings suggest that people do

not typically go to Instagram with the intention of *actively* seeking solutions to specific (and somewhat urgent) problems.

Participants have more mixed opinions on **undirected information needs**. While 31.1% of the screenshots were categorized as news, undirected information needs ranked only third in the card sorting activity. Some participants even reject news consumption on Instagram due to concerns about "clickbait" (P-30) and misinformation: "I believe that the information shown on Instagram can also be false, so I almost don't follow any news providers or anything else" (P-40). However, most participants do consume news on Instagram, although often incidentally: even those who do not follow any news providers receive facts from friends or learn about news when influencers or celebrities cover a topic (pointing to the sociality of information use). For instance, several interviewees reported that news about the bushfires in Australia was "all over Instagram" (P-21) and "impossible to avoid" (P-27) during the study phase.

Participants who follow news providers on Instagram do so because they find it "really cool" (P-19) to (also) read about current events when scrolling through their feed. This is often reported by participants who do not typically consume news elsewhere. They use news accounts on Instagram "to see a little bit at a glance 'What's going on?'" (P-35) and appreciate that the news is free, "always very condensed" (P-11), and that they "don't have to watch it elsewhere" (P-3). Additionally, they have the freedom to "just read exactly what interests me" (P-28), which corresponds to the above-mentioned 'news snacking' habits (see also Goyanes & Demeter, 2022). Interestingly, participants tend to rely on legacy media in this case, with 55.3% of news posts and 30.6% of trivia posts originating from this source type.

RQ2: Understandings of 'Information (Use)' on Instagram

Although we relied on a broad concept of information for the documentation phase, it becomes clear in the interviews that not all participants share this concept. Some participants view 'information' as synonymous with *news*, something "that brings me up to date on world political issues" (P-26). Relevance does not arise subjectively, but "when it has an impact on society" (P-37). Furthermore, the content must be "based on facts" (P-30) rather than "an emotion or a single opinion" (P-9). Separating information from entertainment, these young adults do not understand their Instagram use as informational use: While they follow news-focused accounts that are informative for them (as was pointed out with regard to undirected information needs for RQ1), other posts predominate. As P-26 illustrates:

> "the real information—or the real knowledge—gets a bit lost in all the entertainment and all the rubbish I see on Instagram all day. That means I can't take credit for saying that I use Instagram for information. But it's like this: I use it 90% for entertainment purposes and 10% for information, but that's really just an accessory."

However, this narrow understanding of 'information' appears only infrequently. Coherent with the diversity of information needs uncovered when answering RQ1, most participants seem to share the social concept of information and judge the information content *subjectively*, that is, based on their own interests as well as on the novelty and usefulness for them personally. P-28 explains:

> "I know something I didn't know before. It doesn't only have to be in the sense of news or politics, but also simply information about events. Or I also find it informative when I know what my sister is doing [...] So, in itself, Instagram is full of information."

Adding to this perception that Instagram scores high on 'information-ness,' participants also derive informational value from visuals and aesthetics, viewing pictures of others' meals or outfits as stimulating guidance for themselves. For many, tips, tutorials, or trivia, with which one can "simply improve my general knowledge" (P-38) are just as much information as posts from friends or fun facts, "because it's funny and I can communicate it to others" (P-27). These contribute to a shared reality and integration into one's social environment (see also Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), showing that sociality is not only central to using social media, but also for definitions of information. Consequently, these participants are more likely to state that they use Instagram for information, because for them, ultimately, "everything that is posted on Instagram is information" (P-46).

Discussion

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that Instagram is an integral part of young adults' media-related routines (see also Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Hasebrink et al., 2021). For many, opening the app is an almost automated behavior that happens without thinking or specific intentions in mind (see also Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022). Notwithstanding this, a large part of the usage can ultimately be classified as information-oriented. When asked about information needs, the majority of the young adults report *group-related* information needs (i.e., acquire knowledge about their personal social environment) as most important, followed by *topic-related* (i.e., acquire knowledge about own interests or hobbies), *undirected* (i.e., acquire general knowledge/staying informed about current events), and, lastly, *problem-related* information needs (i.e., solving a specific problem with information). An analysis of the 1,897 screenshots provided by 48 German young adults during the documentation phase shows that most of the content classified as 'information' by the participants—that is, being new and/or

personally useful to them—can be categorized as *advice* (i.e., [implicit] guidance on improving

one's life or skills), *news* (i.e., information about current events) and *trivia* (i.e., facts or bits of

information not related to current events and/or useful in a practical sense). Taking into account

that most of the content categorized as news can be considered soft news (see also Parmelee &

Roman, 2020), it seems that the young adults derive the most personal benefit from rather 'light'

information and that there is a strong connection between entertainment and information in the

context of Instagram.

On a more global level, our findings show how high-level platform attributes can be

applied to understanding information use (on Instagram), which is especially relevant in light of

the "moving target" problem of social media research (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Specifically, the

results of this study provide insights into how five central characteristics—visuality,

personalization, incidentalness, non-exclusivity, and sociality—shape information usage

practices both on the investigated and other social media platforms. These overarching

characteristics can therefore be considered as a framework for systematically investigating

(understandings of) information use on different (future) social media platforms.

With regard to *visuality*, the screenshots show that users derive personal value not only

from the aesthetic of the content, which serves as inspiration and implicit guidance, but also from

fact-oriented formats like infographics or quote cards which seem to be well suited for both

quick 'information snacking' and entertainment. From a journalistic perspective, this suggest that

especially on visual-oriented platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, users endorse many news

outlets' strategies of posting fact-oriented content, rather than restricting themselves to "funny

and silly things" (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022, see also Hase et al., 2022).

The inevitable *personalization* of social media experiences played an important role as well. While the young adults were generally aware of the implicit (i.e., algorithmic) personalization of their feed and mostly seemed to value it (see also Swart, 2021), they also used the possibility to 'intervene' by engaging in explicit personalization (Merten, 2021) or, as observed in the context of even more algorithmically curated platforms such as TikTok, 'training' the algorithm according to their preferences (Siles González & Meléndez Moran, 2021). Indeed, some have built feeds that mostly center around one specific topic, while others use Instagram as an information kaleidoscope.

Despite this control about one's information environment, encountering relevant information without planning to do so—that is, *incidental exposure*—is widespread; which, especially in the context of news, favours a "news-finds-me"-perspective (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Participants believed that if something important happens, they will get to know about it, be it in the 'Search and Explore' section or because an influencer shares it. Further work could focus on the role of these specific social media information providers, particularly on their part in facilitating incidental exposure to more 'hard' content and what it means for users' evaluation of information when influencers address topics outside of their core area.

However, one's Instagram contacts and friends not only influence what content a user encounters but also make information use on the platform an inherently social experience. While Instagram does not have a 'Share' function that is comparable to the ones offered by Twitter or Facebook, *sociality* plays an important role, especially behind what can be seen on the platform or, in our particular case, in the screenshots provided by the participants. The interviews illustrated that content is often shared with friends via the Instagram messenger or, even more often, in other messaging apps. This finding also highlights the need for cross-platform studies

that combine different types of data—including media diaries and tracking data that provide detailed insights into overarching usage practices.

Last, the implications of the *non-exclusivity* (i.e., the mix of different types of content under one roof) of the information environment became particularly apparent when the young adults were asked about whether they perceive their Instagram use as information use (see below). In addition, many participants remarked that 'good' information might easily get buried on Instagram due to the sheer amount of available content, but also due to platform affordances: especially the high ephemerality of the platform (see also Bayer et al., 2020; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019) and the perception of the search function as inadequate contribute to the low visibility of content.

Looking at the question of what the young adults understand as 'information (use)' in the context of Instagram (RQ2), our findings suggest that it can be hard for some users to connect their entertainment-oriented approach to using the platform as using information (see also Edgerly & Vraga, 2020; Peters et al., 2021). This results from equating 'information' with 'news,' but also from characteristics of the platform, especially the non-exclusivity. Statements in some interviews indicate that the surroundings of a post seem to rub off on the post itself: Thus, a single news post amid memes and food pictures leads to doubts about its relevance or even credibility. From a journalistic perspective, this points to the importance of "brand-building news" (Hase et al., 2022), for example with behind-the-scenes-content. In order to ensure that their content is identified and remembered as information, it is crucial for news media to establish an image as a trustworthy and familiar source of information among their social media audiences. This is particularly relevant in the context of the above-mentioned low visibility of content, which may be even more pronounced on heavily curated platforms like TikTok: Given

the difficulty of rediscovering specific pieces of content, it becomes all the more important for news outlets to build a dedicated audience that visits their social media accounts or websites regularly, rather than relying only on the content they encounter in their feeds.

The findings also illustrate that users' understandings of 'information' are not only influenced by their *individual* information environments, but also by the characteristics and logics of the used social media platforms. Future research could explore whether users have distinct understandings of 'information (use)' across different social media platforms, such as being more news-focused on Twitter or more entertainment-oriented on TikTok.

Overall, the results suggest that a social media site's specific *platform vernacular*— defined as the "unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257)—matters for users' (assessments of) information behavior. An open question is whether this also affects the processing of information. Does it make a difference for learning effects or similar outcomes whether a user approaches a social media platform as a source of entertainment rather than a source of information? The design of Instagram, which encourages quick scrolling and swiping, the prevalence of snacking on information in an 'en passant' mode, and the vast amount of available content may all favor a more heuristic processing of information. Further research is needed to understand the impact of these factors, especially as smartphones are usually the primary device for accessing and using Instagram (see also Wieland & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2020).

Current developments in the use of news and information also call for methodological innovations. The present study has highlighted the importance of multi-method designs, combining insights about encountered content with users' perceptions of said content. Moreover, using existing information infrastructures for data collection had a positive effect on the ability

and willingness to participate (see also Kümpel, 2021): Most young adults appreciated the "pleasant" (P-32) and "very easy" (P-12) way to provide the screenshots via WhatsApp, because this kind of data sharing has already been part of their daily routines before the study. However, our approach is not without limitations either. To protect the privacy of non-consenting third parties, the participants were asked to submit only content from public accounts. Accordingly, content from friends and family that might have qualified as information was not investigated. Thus, it not only remains an open question whether the expressed importance of group-related information needs corresponds to the information actually used but also which kind of private Instagram content meets the threshold of being informative. Furthermore, issues related to reactivity need to be considered. For instance, some participants admitted that they 'cleaned' their feeds due to being observed. However, our approach revealed multifaceted understandings of information (use) that also hint at a need for improving our standardized measures of information and news (use) in order to create a 'shared reality' between researchers and researched.

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Table 1

Ranking of the Information Needs According to the Card Task

Rank	Undirected	Topic-Related	Group-Related	Problem-Related
1	12	10	25	0
2	9	23	13	3
3	19	13	7	8
4	7	1	2	36

Note: During the interviews, participants were asked to rank the information needs according to their importance. For example, 25 participants indicated that group-related information needs are most important for their Instagram use.