New voters, new platforms: How first-time Generation Z voters used social media in the 2019 Canadian federal election

By

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Abstract

Low levels of civic participation and political engagement among young people are persistent problems in many Western democracies, including Canada. Young voters are increasingly less politically aware and less likely to vote, and demonstrate lower levels of civic awareness than previous generations. Compounding this challenge, many young people either ignore news or they consume news found through social media. This qualitative study contributes to the literature in this field by exploring these issues through a Canadian lens focused on first-time Generation Z voters. Two focus groups involving nine participants aged 18-24 were conducted in Durham Region, Ontario to find out how they used social media to inform themselves about the political parties, leaders, and issues in the lead up to the 2019 Canadian federal election. Key findings point to a general avoidance of political news on all platforms during the election campaign and a preference for reading comments attached to political news stories, rather than the stories themselves, as an information source. Future research could be expanded to explore both of these phenomena. Although the findings are limited to a small geographic area in suburban Ontario, they confirm previous studies on news consumption, social media use and voter behaviour among young people. Additionally, the findings contribute to the wider literature that speaks to the need for journalists and civics educators to help young people understand the connections between themselves and the political news stories about issues that impact them.

Keywords: *Generation Z, news consumption, voting, voter turnout, social media, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, political socialization, agenda-setting, network media logic*.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2015 Canadian federal election, many news headlines focused on the sharp increase in youth voter turnout. Roughly 57% of youth and first-time voters cast a ballot in that election compared to 39% in 2011 (Elections Canada, 2016)[1]. Journalists described the surge as "unprecedented" (Grenier, 2016) and an "awakening" (Delacourt, 2016), with young people "primed to become the most powerful voting bloc in the country" (Press, 2016, para. 1). Four years later, youth voter turnout rose again – by 1% – in the 2019 Canadian federal election (Elections Canada, 2020).[2] While on the surface this is a good news story, first-time voters continue to vote at much lower rates than older generations and do not vote with more frequency as they get older[3] (Nielsen Consumer Insights, 2016; Smets, 2012; Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte & Nadeau, 2003; Johnson, Matthews & Bittner, 2007; Pammett & LeDuc, 2003).

At the same time, many young people are disengaging from politics and political news. They report feeling abandoned by politicians and the political process, struggling to understand political conversations and issues, and questioning the efficacy of their vote (Bastedo, 2015; Amfo, 2019; Nielsen Consumer Insights, 2016). They also have lower political knowledge, a declining sense of political duty, and a preference for alternative forms of political participation, such as taking part in online social movements (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2012; Vercellotti & Matto, 2016; Blais et al., 2004). Moreover, many young people also either ignore news

[1] There is a discrepancy between Elections Canada and Statistics Canada over the youth voter turnout in 2011. Elections Canada states 57% of 18 to 24-year-olds voted whereas Statistics Canada's records show 55% of people in this cohort voted.

[2] By comparison, 71% of 25 to 34-year-olds, 75% of 35 to 44-year-olds, 78% of 45 to 54-year-olds, 81% of 55 to 64-year-olds, 85% of 65 to 74-year-olds, and 79% of voters over the age of 75 voted in the 2019 federal election (Elections Canada, 2020).

[3] Research on voter participation considers the "life-cycle effect" which suggests young voters will vote in greater numbers as they get older. Since 2004, there has been a downward trend in this number in Canada and, although more young people voted the 2015 and 2019 elections, youth voter turnout was still well below the Canadian average of 77% in both elections.

(Edgerly et al., 2018; Taras, 2015) or consume news found on social media (Newman et al., 2020)[4] where facts often compete with misinformation in a high-choice media environment (Nee, 2019; Edgerly, 2017) and where, on some platforms, stories are told in image-heavy, text-light formats that cater to shorter attention spans (Švecová, 2017). Almost two decades ago, Pammett and LeDuc (2003) stated the trend in lower youth voter turnout had "potentially serious implications for Canadian democracy—for the extent of a democratic mandate that governments might claim, for the kinds of candidates who are elected and even for the types of issues that are discussed." The picture is no less dire today.

The innovation of social media has disrupted many fields, few more so than journalism. Those aged 18-24, known as Generation Z, are more than twice as likely to access news via social media than older generations (Newman et al., 2020) and, in Canada, 59% of people aged 18-29 report getting their news from social media (Mitchell et al., 2018). There are several consequences of this shift from traditional media to social media as a news source. Young people are more likely to come across news *incidentally* rather than *intentionally* (Antunovic, Parsons & Cooke, 2018) with the result that they may not be exposed to, or do not read news stories about, political issues that affect them (Choi & Lee, 2015). Similarly, social media users tend to prefer "soft" news stories, which has resulted in some media organizations shifting their editorial focus on social media to build younger audiences, a move Larsson (2018) warns could "shortchange" democracy. Additionally, based on the logic of algorithms, the media logic of social media and the influence of personal choice on what users are exposed to on social media, it is less beneficial as a political learning tool since it offers "more personalized, issue-specific, and attitude-

[4] Newman is the lead author of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 and 2019. The Digital News Report is compiled annually based on surveys of more than 80,000 people in 40 countries across five continents. These reports are referred to frequently throughout this paper as they provide the most up-to-date snapshot of news consumption and trends globally.

consistent learning rather than general political and current affairs learning" (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2018, p. 17).

The literature shows a clear relationship between news, knowledgeable citizens, and democracy (Head, DeFrain, Fister & MacMillan, 2019; Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2017; Kim & Yang, 2016; Boyd, Zaff, Phelps, Weiner & Lerner, 2011; Quintelier, 2015). Yet, although youth voter turnout has increased over the past two federal elections in Canada, it remains much lower than previous generations and election officials and scholars are concerned the 2015 and 2019 increases may be one-offs due to the issues and leaders—or competitiveness—of those elections. Moreover, young voters have not shown the same resurgence in voting provincially or municipally. The challenge is to find ways to engage young people in political issues that affect them to sustain their interest in the political process in the long-term. In other words, how do we ensure they have the knowledge upon which to make informed voting decisions on issues that affect *all* of us now and in the future? Achen (2019) states "when turnout falls, both the representativeness of the electorate and the legitimacy of the election outcomes come under scrutiny" (p. 2). It is important to consider all facets of voter decline, including the impact of consuming political news on social media, to ensure a healthy, robust democracy.

1.1 Purpose of Study

This study's research objective is to explore the news-seeking behaviour of the youngest eligible voters in Canada, Generation Z, when it comes to political news. The purpose is to understand how they use digital media, particularly social media platforms, to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues. Of particular interest is how they track, verify, and share political news sourced from social media and how that influenced their information gathering approach in the 2019 Canadian federal election.

Much of the current literature on young voters and news consumers focuses on Millennials. While they share some similarities with Generation Z, there are also marked differences between the two cohorts. A key characteristic of Generation Z is that they are the first of the so-called "digital natives with no memories of the pre-internet age" (Newman, 2019, p. 54), constantly tethered to their smartphones and social media. There are gaps in the research concerning their use of Snapchat and Instagram, particularly as it relates to political news consumption, and especially in a Canadian context.

The results of my research may contribute to the wider literature on news consumption, social media use, and voting behaviour, which in turn may inform newsrooms trying to reach this audience, media literacy curriculums aiming to help young people make sense of the information bombarding them, and civics course that are attempting to help young people understand the political process.

1.2 Literature preview

While less has been written about Generation Z specifically, there is no shortage of literature on these topics. I have chosen to draw on three theoretical fields for this study: political socialization theory, agenda-setting theory, and network logic theory. The primary question of how young people use digital media to learn about political issues, parties, and leaders through news stories is explored over three themes. First, theories related to news consumption and voting behaviour are discussed to understand how young people decide what information is important to them, the influence of media logic on how news is shared on social media, and the role of media in the political socialization process. Second, the theme of news consumption habits is explored to understand how Generation Z defines, finds, and engages with news stories.

Third, the impact of social media on news consumption is discussed. Attention is also paid to its impact on the public agenda.

This study is inspired by several reports and studies. First, Milner and Lewis' (2011) examination of the effect of mandatory civics education in Ontario. They found the effectiveness of the curriculum—or whether students voted later in life—was contingent on the "experience, approach and attitude" of the teacher and the importance given to the course within the wider educational setting. This raises the question of whether young people feel connected to political issues and whether news stories could help them better understand those issues. Second, "Not 'one of us': understanding how non-engaged youth feel about politics and political leadership" by Bastedo (2015) is one of few Canadian studies on this topic. Third, Edgerly's overview of the strategies used by young people to obtain information on current events (2017) guides the approach to my focus group discussions.

1.3 Methodology preview

This study uses a descriptive case study approach to understand how young people used social media networks to inform themselves about the candidates, political parties, and issues that impacted them in the lead-up to the 2019 Canadian federal election. Two focus groups were conducted, which enabled rich discussion and allowed the conversation among participants to reveal new ideas. The data collected was transcribed, codified, and analyzed for themes using thematic analysis. One-on-one interviews were contemplated but rejected in favour of focus groups because I was interested in understanding the phenomenon of how this generation uses social media to access, verify, and share political news. I hoped the rich interaction between participants would spark a discussion that would draw out topics or explore trends. Quantitative

methods were not considered as I was concerned more with discovering "why" and "how" than undertaking a content analysis of social media usage related to political news consumption.

The findings are not necessarily generalizable to all first-time Generation Z voters in Canada since they are the result of focus groups conducted in one suburban community in Ontario. Further, participants were asked to recall their news-seeking behaviour seven months after the October 2019 federal election which may have influenced the completeness of their memories.

1.4 Conclusion

Voter decline is a pressing concern in many democracies, including Canada. As such, there is interest among scholars, election officials, politicians, educators, and journalists about how to better engage people with the political issues, leaders, and parties that affect their lives. This is particularly true for young voters who have a lifetime of elections ahead of them. "Disengagement is a real concern," in the words of Kahne and Middaugh (2012).

Currently, there is a lack of research about how Generation Z engages with political news stories, especially in a Canadian context, and what impact that has on their engagement and understanding of political issues, as well as their ability to make an informed choice. This study attempts to address these gaps. Chapter 2 examines the existing literature on news consumption habits of young people, theories related to news consumption and voting behaviour, and the impact of social media use on news consumption. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the research design and methodology, including an overview of the philosophical worldview and theoretical framework that guide this study. The findings are presented, with analysis and discussion, in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the study and provides recommendations for future research as well as insights for journalists and educators.

The following chapter provides an in-depth examination of the literature related to the three themes mentioned earlier, as well as a discussion of the key concepts that emerged. The chapter concludes with the four research questions that guided this study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter will provide a preview of relevant studies that have looked at issues related to news consumption, social media use, voter behaviour and, in some instances, the intersection of the three. The goal of this chapter is to provide a discussion of the existing literature on these topics and to identify gaps as they relate to the research question at the heart of this study. The chapter opens with an overview of the problem, followed by a description of the cohort under investigation, Generation Z. It then provides an explanation of the literature review search methodology, followed by a discussion of the literature regarding the intersection between political socialization, news consumption, social media use, and voter engagement through three major themes: 1) theories related to news consumption and voting behaviour; 2) the news consumption habits of young people; and 3) the impact of social media on news consumption.

Following this discussion is an analysis of the literature findings that connect these themes to social media use by young voters in relation to political news and the 2019 Canadian federal election, the focus of this study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and how they informed the approach used to explore this topic.

2.1 Introduction

Voter turnout among young people is a persistent problem in many Western democracies, including Canada, where first-time voters represent the smallest demographic of voters and are less likely to vote later in life compared with generations before them (Elections Canada, 2019). Elections Canada has identified “striking gaps” in their knowledge of politics and suggested “a significant number of young voters go to the polls without the necessary tools to make an informed decision” (Library of Parliament, 2016, p. 7).

Equally significant, although current literature shows a strong connection between news consumption and political participation (Boyd, Zaff, Phelps, Weiner, & Lerner, 2011; Drok, Hermans, & Kats, 2018; Kim & Yang, 2016; Martens & Hobbs, 2015; Quintelier, 2015), fewer young people are reading or listening to the news. In Canada, almost one-third of people under the age of 24 do not follow the news closely (Earnscliffe, 2019), with the number of 15 to 34-year-olds who said their rarely or never follow the news doubling from 11% in 2003 to 21% a decade later (Statistics Canada, 2016). Young adults are accused of being news 'snackers', news avoiders or 'news-less' altogether (Browning & Sweetster, 2014; Edgerly, Vraga, Bode, Thorson, & Thorson 2018b; Taras, 2015).

At the same time, young people are increasingly turning to platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, both of which focus more heavily on photos and videos than in-depth text (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019; Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi & Gillespie-Lynch, 2018); Švecová, M., 2017). This is particularly true of Generation Z, those born after the mid-1990s.

It is important that we understand how this generation is engaging—or not—with news stories about politics and current events in a high-choice media environment susceptible to misinformation, algorithms, and filter bubbles, where social media platforms are starting to influence editorial and publishing decisions (Dwyer & Martin, 2017; Bright, 2016). As argued by Boulianne (2016), "[T]he more a citizen knows about the world, the more likely the citizen will find something that interests them to become engaged in the political process" (p. 1843).

The members of Generation Z are just coming of age—many voted for the first time in the last federal election—yet little is known about how they are using news consumed via social media platforms to make political decisions.

2.2 Generation Z Defined

The literature is consistent with defining this cohort as those born after the mid-1990s, with 1996 often cited as the cut-off point (Dimcock, 2019; Duffy et al., 2018; Parry and Battista, 2019). The oldest members of this generation are now aged 18-24. In Canada, almost 10.6-million people, or about 28% of the population, fall within Generation Z (Statistics Canada, 2019a).

Members of this cohort are characterized as the "connected" generation because they have "always lived in a virtual and physical reality" (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 7), which has provided them with an immediacy and worldview like no generation before them. For their book *Generation Z Goes to College*, Seemiller and Grace (2016) surveyed 750 college students across the U.S. to gain insight into this generation, including their perspectives on politics and communication. They explained that "[P]revious generations heard about the impact of war, tragedies, and disasters in faraway lands, whereas Generation Z students can easily find detailed information, watch videos, and see pictures, making a distant experience close to home" (pp. 8-9) in large part due to their unfettered access to technology.

In an essay for the journal *College & University*, Beck and Wright (2019) also addressed the role of technology in a summary of the defining features of Generation Z: tethered to smartphones and constantly online (especially on social media). In Canada, 57.5% of 15 to 24-year-olds check their phone at least every thirty minutes, compared to 39.5% of people ages 45 to 64 (Statistics Canada, 2019b). Moreover, 72.6% of younger people report checking their phone as the last thing they do before they go to sleep compared to 45.4% of people in the older generation (Statistics Canada, 2019b). Pew Research has found almost half (48%) of 18-29-year-olds report being online "almost constantly"—a figure that rose 9% between 2018 and 2019

(Perrin & Kumar, 2019). By contrast, 36% of people ages 30 to 49, and 19% of those ages 50 to 64 report using the internet with the same frequency (Perrin & Kumar, 2019). Younger generations are also more likely to purchase smartphones, with 96% of 18 to 29-year-olds and 92% of people ages 30 to 49 having them in contrast to 79% of 50 to 64-year-olds and 53% of those 65 and over (Pew Research Center, 2019a).

In an Ipsos MORI Thinks report, Duffy et al. (2018) suggested this easy and constant access to information has made Generation Z "binary" by opening them up to a wider variety of possibilities. They are less entrenched in their attitudes on everything from risk-taking to social action, technology use, privacy, political views, social attitudes, sexuality, and trust because of their unfettered access to a wide array of opinions, ideas and beliefs.

2.3 Methodology

Defining Generation Z was important to the search strategy used for this literature review, since the topic areas at the heart of this study are dominated by research on Millennials. Thus, I began by developing a list of keywords associated with Generation Z, including *Gen Z*, *iGeneration*, *iGen*, *Post-Millennials*, *Net Generation* and *Zoomers* to exclude articles focused on Millennials only.

Four questions were also developed to assist with exploring the major themes of news consumption, social media use, and voter behaviour. The literature review research questions were:

LRQ1. How do young people consume news about current and political events?

LRQ2. How has social media impacted their news consumption?

LRQ3. What is the current state of youth voting and political participation?

LRQ4. How has social media influenced how they participate in democracy?

A systematic library search protocol was developed to answer these questions. Using databases within the University of Alberta library and Google Scholar, a preliminary survey was first completed to identify keywords by theme, including:

- News consumption: news, journalism, news media, news literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, agenda-setting, information seeking, political news, political journalism
- Social media: social networks, social networking, SNS (social networking service), social media platform, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, smartphone, internet
- Voter behaviour: voting, youth voting, political socialization, political participation, political awareness, political learning, political activism, civic education, election
- Generation Z: students, voters, young people, youth, Gen Z, iGen, iGeneration

Search terms were adjusted over time to reflect the discovery of new terms, such as those for Generation Z. For example, political participation is also defined as political engagement, political activism, civic engagement, and voting in the literature. From there, a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria were added.

Year of publication. Since digital media is evolving quickly, and because the eldest cohort of Generation Z is only about 24-years-old, I initially limited research to the past five years for articles related to Generation Z, news consumption, and social media. I extended this timeline to a decade or longer for themes related to theoretical or historical context, such as voting habits, political participation, and the public agenda.

Peer review. The initial search focused solely on peer-reviewed articles to ensure the quality of the research. However, journalism and social media platforms are evolving faster than the peer-review process allows, so academic articles are not always on pace with changes in the

digital landscape. Thus, I turned to respected research institutions such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Pew Research Center.

Grey literature. In addition to the sites mentioned earlier, I also turned to Elections Canada, Statistics Canada, journalism institutes, and industry reports to find relevant and recent statistics.

Cultural relevance. I initially tried to limit research to Canada and the United States, given the similarities between Canada and the U.S. and the influence of U.S. media on Canadian youth. However, the majority of recent literature in these topics is coming from Europe, so the search was broadened.

Research design. Emphasis was placed on qualitative research, particularly where focus groups were employed, to align with my intended methodology. Some quantitative research was included where the topic was relevant, such as articles involving news consumption surveys.

2.4 Literature review

2.4.1 Theories Related to News Consumption and Voting Behaviour

The first major theme to emerge from the literature can be categorized as theories related to news consumption and voting behaviour, the theories that provide a lens through which news-seeking behaviour and voting actions among young people can be understood.

Agenda-setting theory. Agenda-setting theory was first defined by McCombs and Shaw (1972) who observed that the media strongly influence issue salience, especially during elections. They argue that in deciding what issues to cover and how to broadcast or publish them, journalists, editors and broadcasters shape political reality. “Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (p. 176). This was the case in the pre-internet, low-choice media

environment where major media organizations controlled the flow of information and acted as the professional gatekeepers of information (Burkey, 2018; Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). However, many scholars argue that traditional news organizations no longer have the same influence over audiences they once did (Bright, 2016; Cardenal et al., 2018; Wohn & Bowe, 2016; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In today's high-choice digital media environment, users select what is important, reframe it through their own comments, and decide whether to recommend it to friends and family (Hermida et al., 2012). Burkey (2018) contends that with digital and social media networks increasingly the first place many people, especially younger audiences, turn to for information, they can "privilege their own user-generated content, advance their own interpretations of current events, or determine what they think is newsworthy" (p. 3). Wohn and Bowe (2016) even term younger people who consume news on social media as "micro agenda setters" since social media has moved issue saliency from mass media to "the self" by virtue of personally curated news feeds and the algorithms that feed them. This may hold true for certain news stories but, in contrast, Dejerf-Pierre and Shehata (2017) argue little has changed from the low-choice days since even in a high-choice media environment, the more coverage given by the media to an issue, the more likely citizens are to consider it important.

This new gatekeeper role has the potential to reduce news diversity, since the user privileges the content he or she prefers and, in doing so, facilitates algorithms filtering news recommendations based on personal preferences, search history, and interactions with friends. However, Van Damme et al. (2019) find although young people are aware of filter bubbles, they see it "as an advantage not a threat" (p. 12) since algorithms result in news they feel is more relevant to them.

Network media logic. Linked closely to agenda-setting theory is the influence of network media logic in political communication. Altheide (2004) states that media logic refers to "assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium" (p. 294). In other words, the medium influences the way the message is produced, distributed and, ultimately, consumed. Klinger and Svensson (2015) contend that social media has altered this logic by enabling "immediate, more horizontal and interactive, highly personalized communication generated by laypeople" (p. 1247). Politically speaking, they suggest network media logic has seen politicians change their communications approach since they can no longer direct their message to mass audiences and must instead befriend voters in a more personal way. Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) demonstrate this with their study of the way Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau successfully used the affordances of Instagram to cultivate and manage his image as a youthful family man in his first year on the job. He was able to bypass traditional media using this platform to speak directly to young voters.

Similarly, network media logic also influences how users engage with political news and political conversations on social media, though the literature is conflicting. On the one hand, Raynauld and Greenberg (2014), through an examination of Twitter in the 2010 municipal election in Ottawa, find social media opens up political participation to those who have traditionally been sidelined. On the other, a study of Twitter in the 2015 Canadian federal election by Hodson and Petersen (2019) suggests social media does not level the playing field because it gives a louder voice to more influential people. Some have suggested this has the potential to create echo chambers (Söderberg, 2017) though in Canada, at least, Hodson and Petersen find issues meaningful to diverse groups still gain attention on Twitter during an election.

Political socialization theory. To understand these theories in context, it is critical to also understand what guides young voters' interest—or *disinterest*—in political news in the first place. Political socialization is the process by which people develop their political values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, affiliations, and opinions (McDevitt, 2018; Quintelier, 2015). Families, school, peer groups, religion, workplace, and mass media are considered the "agents" of influence (McDevitt, 2018; Quintelier, 2015; Amnå, 2012), with family long considered foremost among these influences. However, more recently, increased attention is being paid to mass media with recognition that socialization takes place beyond childhood and adolescence (Andersson, 2017) and that young people are agents in their own political upbringing (Moeller & de Vreese, 2013) – all against the backdrop of evolving technology that gives them unfettered access to information through digital media (Genner & Süss, 2017).

Political knowledge is a critical piece of political socialization. The literature shows reading and discussing the news with family has a positive effect on news consumption and political knowledge among young people (Vercellotti & Matto, 2016), as does regularly consuming news (Moeller & deVreese, 2013; Hao, Wen & George, 2014). Media literacy also strengthens political and civic engagement in some circumstances (Boyd et al., 2011; Kahne, & Bowyer, 2019. Quintelier, 2015) and current literature finds a connection between journalism-related courses and future political engagement (Head et al., 2019). Finally, studies show interpersonal discussions about the media and higher interest in the news both predict higher civic engagement (Erentaite, Zukauskiene, Beyers, & Pilkauskaite-Valickiene, 2012; Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2017).

Yet, many scholars, educators and election officials posit there is a lack of political knowledge among young voters today (Taras, 2015; Milner & Lewis, 2011; Nielsen, 2016)

though some of the literature demonstrates the opposite. For example, Pich et al. (2018) finds British youth actively used Twitter to discuss the U.K. Brexit referendum and to reach out directly to politicians. Likewise, Bosch (2013) argues that while youth may not be participating in democracy in traditional ways, many are using new media for political action, such as joining a cause or signing a petition. Moreover, many young people report feeling left out of the political process. Bastedo's (2015) study of 170 young Canadians from coast-to-coast suggests many young voters' political knowledge and engagement is limited by the fact they feel ignored by politicians. This is especially true for young people from less engaged communities who are also less likely to consume the news.

Taken together, the theories impacting news consumption and voting behaviour suggest young people today have alternately more *and* less control over the news they consume about issues of importance in their lives, yet this information is critical to the development of their political identity, values, and behaviour.

2.4.2 News Consumption Habits of Young People

A second theme to emerge from the literature focuses on the news consumption habits of young people and the factors that influence what kind of news they consume, how they access it, and what they do with it.

Finding news. The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*[5] finds social media to be the main way 38% of people aged 18-24 find their news with only 16% going directly to a news website (Newman et al., 2020). Underscoring this shift, about 58% of in this same age group

[5] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism releases a Digital News Report annually based on online questionnaires. For the 2020 report, the survey sample size was just over 80,000 people in 40 democratic countries around the globe. A similar sample size comprised of over 38 countries was used for the 2019 report. Both are relied on throughout this literature review as they paint the most up-to-date picture of digital media usage worldwide.

reported using their phones to access their first news of the day compared to 39% of Millennials and 19% of population over 35. They are also most likely to access news through their mobile phones rather than television, radio, print publications or desktop computers (Edgerly et al., 2018b; Newman et al., 2019). More significantly, members of Generation Z appear to expect news to come to them incidentally rather than searching it out (Antunovic, Parsons & Cooke, 2018) and often by way of friends or celebrities sharing it. For instance, Bergström and Belfrage (2018) explored how young people encounter news on social media and the role of opinion leaders in how it is shared. They find that if something big happens in the world, young people expect it to show up in their social media feeds and they are more likely to take an interest in a story if it is shared by opinion leaders.

Consuming news. The decline of news consumption has been well documented, especially among young people. Many are news avoiders (Browning & Sweetster, 2014; Edgerly, 2017; Taras, 2015) or "grazers" who skim the headlines rather than investing deeply in the content (Pew Research Center, 2010). About 29% of Canadians avoid the news "often or sometimes" with many seeing it as a "chore" (Newman et al., 2019). They also report being "worn out by the amount of news there is these days" (Brin, Leclair, & Charlton, 2019, para. 2).

Yet more than half of 18 to 24-year-olds in Canada report having a "strong interest" in news (Vividata & Kantar, 2018). Of those who do follow the news, more than three-quarters report using the internet to follow issues and current affairs (Statistics Canada, 2016), with most of them getting their news from social media platforms (Earnscliffe, 2019).

The literature shows distinctions between education levels and news consumption. For example, using in-depth interviews with 21 young people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, Edgerly (2017) finds that young adults from college-educated households were

more likely to turn to credible news sources than those from non-college-educated households, who frequently turned to Google or friends and family instead. Another study suggests the strongest predictor of news consumption by young people is still modeling by parents who regularly consume news and who are often more highly educated (Edgerly et al., 2018).

Some of the research puts the blame squarely on news organizations for not delivering what younger audiences want. For example, the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* finds young news consumers want "on-demand and algorithmically curated/personalised" news (Newman et al., 2019, p. 54), not necessarily the news as determined by editors and publishers. Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2014) argue the affordances of the internet should make "tailor-made news" possible. However, in contrast to their hypothesis and the *Reuters* data, these authors find most news consumers—though not young people specifically—still prefer to have access to a wide variety of news so long as they have the ability to control their choices.

Several scholars have also considered the role of storytelling formats on news consumption among young people. Kleemans, Schaap, and Suijkerbuijk (2018) built on previous work that suggests young people better process information when it is told using a chronological (narrative) approach rather than the inverted pyramid (most important to least important information). They find that while all audiences are more likely to understand and retain information using the narrative approach, that does not necessarily translate to increased news consumption because younger people simply do not appreciate hard news—regardless of the format. By contrast, Emde, Klimmt and Schluetz (2016) find that although narrative storytelling could lead to deeper engagement with young audiences, the effectiveness of that format depends on the medium in which it is used and the recipient's own background knowledge of the subject.

Current literature has also explored alternate journalism models and their impact on news consumption among young people. Clark and Marchi (2017) examined the concept of "connective" journalism where young people share opinions and experiences about issues over social media rather than through traditional news stories, and find "whereas traditional journalism is associated with the practices of building an accurate *story*, connective journalism is associated with the practices of building a collective and individual *identity*" (p. 16). Similarly, Gentilviso and Aikat (2019) find there is "less concern about accuracy and more attention toward entertainment and interaction" (p. 151) among Generation Z news consumers.

Additionally, research by Reuters demonstrates a preference for "explainer" stories, such as the point-form fact checks found on BBC, along with new formats and voices, such as BuzzFeed or Vice, which rely more heavily on quizzes, Top 10 lists and videos to reach audiences (Newman et al., 2019). Other studies suggest that video is the preferred platform of Generation Z, where they "live within an 8-second world" (Brodeur Partners, 2018, para. 9) of video and audio bites. They are drawn to visual news formats rather than longer text articles with a preference for "news access to be easy, and entertaining—but they also want it to be authentic, fair, and meaningful. They certainly don't want it to be dumbed down" (Newman et al., 2019, p. 58).

While numerous studies have been done on where and how often young people consume news on social media, there is little comparative research that looks specifically at how young people engage with news stories, especially around politics and current events, and there is little distinction within most studies between international, national, regional, and local news. Drok et al. (2018) offer one of few examinations of this topic and find a connection between social

engagement and national news but not to regional or local news, suggesting news organizations are doing a poor job of reaching younger generations through "citizen-oriented" stories.

Finally, although young people tend to consume most of their news on social media, they do not see the information they receive through social media as "real" news (Svennington, 2016). Trust in news is down overall (Public Policy Forum, 2017), dropping from 52% in Canada in 2019 to 44% in 2020 and even lower when it comes to social media at just 19% (Newman et al., 2020). Meanwhile, 61% of Canadians are also concerned about misinformation and disinformation on the internet when it comes to news (Newman et al., 2019), especially when it comes to coverage of politicians and elections on social media where 66% of Canadians say they trust it less (Vividata & Kantar, 2018). Fletcher and Nielsen (2019) find people have a "generalized skepticism" about all news they receive online—whether from traditional sources or social media—and they don't necessarily accept it uncritically even if they don't understand how it is selected.

In sum, there are many factors influencing news consumption among young people, particularly Generation Z, from the way they are exposed to news to how they access stories to what determines whether they engage with it and what they ultimately do with it.

2.4.3 The Impact of Social Media on News Consumption

The final theme to emerge from this literature review considers the impact of social media on the news-seeking behaviour of Generation Z, the generation most tethered to its phone and most reliant upon social media for information.

Social media snapshot. Instagram is the fifth most popular social media platform in Canada, while Snapchat is not among top six, which include Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp (Newman et al., 2020). By comparison, Pew Research (2019b)

finds Instagram to be the third most popular social media platform in the U.S., with Snapchat fifth after Pinterest and LinkedIn. Among those aged 18-24, YouTube is most popular at 90%, with Instagram and Facebook nearly tied at 75% and 76% respectively, and Snapchat following closely behind at 73%. It is worth noting, as well, that with Facebook under fire for breaching privacy, encouraging hate speech, and spreading misinformation, about 31% of publishers now see Instagram as important, while 8% see Snapchat as a key platform (Newman et al., 2019, p. 56).

Social media takes over traditional news. As discussed earlier, social media platforms are increasingly displacing traditional news websites, especially among younger audiences. Not only is Generation Z less apt to visit news websites, it is also less inclined to use news apps. In fact, no news apps were found in the top 25 of a group surveyed for the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, whereas Instagram was found on most phones and also accounted for the most time spent online by 18 to 24-year-olds (Newman et al., 2019).

Facebook and Twitter are the focus of most of the current literature with little study of Instagram or Snapchat, the platforms used by Generation Z. Švecová (2017) is one of few to explore these new platforms through an examination of so-called Stories, ephemeral images that disappear within 10-15 seconds and entirely from the platform within 24 hours. Švecová contends that Instagram and Snapchat Stories cater to Generation Z's desire for visual communication and their increasingly shorter attention spans. The affordances of social media and their influence on users have been considered by some scholars, though rarely in the context of news consumption. Shane-Simpson et al. (2018) reveal some insights in their study which underscored the role of social media affordances in why and how young people interact on

particular platforms. For example, people who favour photos are more likely to choose Instagram as their main platform whereas those who seek news are more often drawn to Twitter.

Sharing and 'liking' news stories on social media. The literature shows that the kinds of stories people consume and share on social media are different than traditional news (García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018; Olteanu, Castillo, Diakopoulos, & Aberer, 2015; Sveningsson, 2015). For instance, when looking at climate change, Olteanu et al. (2015) find news media are more likely to cover natural disasters whereas Twitter is more likely to feature personal stories of people taking action. Likewise, García-Perdomo et al. (2018) find stories about government and politics are more likely to be shared from traditional news sources, while articles about lifestyle and sports are more frequently shared from online sites. Similarly, Bright (2016) finds stories about politics, crime, and disasters much less likely to be shared on social media because news users want to avoid complex stories or sharing those that could damage their reputation. However, few studies distinguish the degree to which these findings vary among age groups.

Connected to the concept of sharing news stories is verification and trust. Research suggests social media users are more likely to trust and recommend stories shared by friends, family, celebrities, and public figures than by news organizations alone (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016; Sterrett et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2019; Sterrett et al., 2019). Meanwhile, some scholars find Instagram and Snapchat users are also less likely than Facebook and Twitter users to verify information and there is no significant difference in trust if a story comes from a "fake" news site rather than a real one (Nee, 2019).

Impact of social media on the news and public agenda. Cardenal, Galais and Majó-Vázquez (2018) posit that social media has led to fragmentation and polarization of audiences

with the result that they less frequently identify the same issues as the news media as important. Some scholars suggest that fragmentation is, in part, influenced by the algorithms mentioned previously that have decreased news diversity (Dwyer & Martin, 2017) and increased the likelihood of political heterogeneity since information is both consumed and disseminated by the consumer (Choi & Lee, 2015). While the literature on filter bubbles and echo chambers is inconclusive, Cardenal, Aguilar-Paredes, Cristancho, & Majó-Vázquez (2019) find that selective exposure does increase with increased news consumption. Dwyer and Martin (2017) assert that social media is undermining the quality of public service journalism and warn that "while journalists' attention is rightfully on the dubious uses of news analytics to value them and their work, it may be less alert to the consequences of social media sharing gradually re-shaping newsroom practices and resource allocation across the globe" (p. 1095).

By way of example, in an analysis of how Norwegian news outlets present stories on Facebook versus their websites, Hågvar (2019) finds the quest for likes and comments influences journalistic norms on everything from the stories they select to the language they use. Equally significant, Larsson (2018) reports that social media users prefer to like and comment on "soft" news and cautions news organizations to be mindful of prioritizing content based on what audiences are most likely to engage with on social media. Furthermore, Ekström and Westlund (2019) suggest that while journalists have traditionally been seen as the providers of accurate and verified public knowledge, the industry's increasing dependence on social media has weakened this claim.

Impact of social media on political engagement. Social media has changed the dynamic between politicians and voters, especially among young people. Ohme (2019) finds politicians and political parties are more likely to reach and mobilize first-time voters directly on

social media. However, the extent to which they influence voters is dependent on political efficacy, or how much people believe their vote makes a difference (Amfo, 2019). With social media's emphasis on visuals, Hultman, Ulusoy and Oghazi (2019) find candidate image, not necessarily ideology, is becoming increasingly important to voters. This mirrors the findings of Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) whose demonstrate social media is allowing politicians to circumvent traditional media and speak directly to voters, redefining how the public evaluates politicians.

Some research shows social media can help first time voters make sense of information. For instance, a study of Dutch first-time voters finds they were "slightly better equipped" by consuming election news on social media but acknowledges that "a certain vote does not indicate how well-informed their vote choice actually is" (Ohme, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2018, p. 3257). In contrast, Shehata and Strömbäck (2018) find no evidence that social media helps people learn about politics, though they observe that most people do not rely on social media alone for and still turn to traditional media for supplemental information. Moreover, there is evidence that social media users may actually feel more well-informed than they are simply due to the quantity of news they are exposed to online (Müller, Schneiders, & Schäfer, 2016).

In conclusion, the research demonstrates the increasing reliance of younger generations on social media for important information and points to challenges with regard to filter bubbles and news diversity. Additionally, the literature points to several ways in which social media is impacting newsrooms and the public agenda.

2.5 Conclusion

Overall, young people are consuming less news and the news they do consume often comes to them serendipitously through smart phones via social media platforms. The affordances

of those platforms influence the depth and complexity of the stories that are shared, while algorithms impact what kinds of stories are shared and with whom. This has the potential to limit the diversity and depth of news young people consume about issues that affect them.

At the same time, young people are voting in lower numbers than older generations, and where parents were once the most significant agent of political socialization, mass media—and in particular, social media—is now having a greater impact. Widespread use of smartphones, the pervasiveness of all forms of media, and reliance on social media as a first source of information all have a strong influence what young people know and *don't* know.

Yet, little is known about Generation Z specifically when it comes to agenda-setting theory, network media logic, and political socialization specific to political news consumption, and more particularly in a Canadian context. Much of the literature on young people is focused on Millennials and often undertaken in Europe and the United States. To fill the gap in this research, this study aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do Generation Z voters use digital media generally to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues?

RQ2: How did Generation Z voters use social media to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ3: How did Generation Z voters track, verify and share political news sourced from social media in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ4: To what extent did Generation Z voters rely on political news from social media to decide their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

In the next chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology used in this study to examine these questions.

Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methods

The decline of voter turnout among young people in many Western democracies, including Canada, is concerning for the future health of democracy. While there is significant evidence that news media consumption is critical to the process by which young people develop political and social orientations (Östman, 2014; Boulianne, 2009; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013), evidence from a large number of studies also demonstrates a consistent decline in news consumption among this age group, particularly related to political news (Ha et al., 2016; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Newman, 2019). Some have argued that regular social media use has actually disengaged younger audiences from "significant" news, such as politics (Bauerlein, 2008; Thompson, 2014), while others suggest social networks can bolster political participation (Hao, Wen, & George, 2014). Thus, Valenzuela, Bachmann, and Aguilar (2019) have argued, "studying how younger citizens acquire and develop the habit of consuming news is becoming ever more pressing" (p. 1096). To understand the impact of this news-seeking behaviour on voter engagement among first-time Generation Z voters, this research explored how young people use social media networks to inform themselves about candidates, political parties, and issues that impact them. This study uses the 2019 Canadian federal election as a case study to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How do Generation Z voters use digital media generally to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues?
- RQ2: How did Generation Z voters use social media to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

- RQ3: How did Generation Z voters track, verify and share political news sourced from social media in the 2019 Canadian federal election?
- RQ4: To what extent did Generation Z voters rely on political news from social media to decide their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

This chapter provides an overview of the research design, which received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta, to conduct this study. The chapter begins by exploring the philosophical worldview and theoretical framework that informed this design. The next section offers an overview of the research methodology including a discussion of the logic behind this descriptive case study design. The following section provides an explanation of the research methods, including the use of focus groups to collect qualitative data related to how young voters access political news. The fourth section then provides an overview of how thematic analysis was used to analyze that data.

3.1 Philosophical Worldview and Theoretical Framework

This research takes a pragmatic worldview. Creswell states that pragmatism "arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions" (2014, p. 39), a point underscored by Biesta who asserts that knowledge gained through a pragmatic view is "always about relationships between actions and consequences, never about a world 'out there'" (2010, p. 20). In other words, pragmatism places emphasis on the practical over the abstract with the ultimate value derived by how well it works in practice (Denscombe, 2014). This research considers the real-world challenge of how Generation Z voters use social media to gain knowledge about political issues, events, and leaders, and how that impacts their interest in political stories, their ability to make sense of the issues, and, ultimately, their desire to participate in politics, including voting.

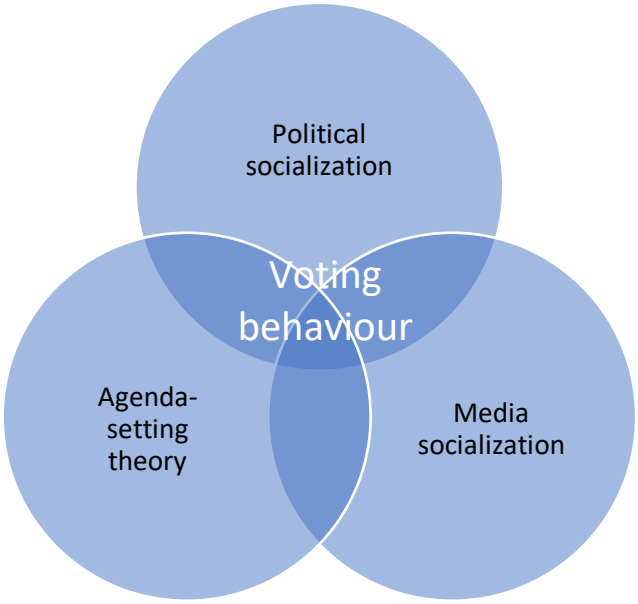
This investigation is guided by political socialization theory, which Gimpel et al. define as "the process by which new generations are inducted into political culture, learning the knowledge, values, and attitudes that contribute to support of the political system" (2003, p. 13). The advent of the internet and social media has seen scholars shift their research focus from how young people are a socialized to politics to how they develop the capacity to "meaningfully" and "effectively" participate in the democratic process and the outcomes of their participation (McLeod & Shah, 2009; Östman, 2014). This theory fits well within the pragmatic worldview by looking at how the process of political development is influenced by the use of social media platforms and how that impacts democratic outcomes such as political awareness and voting.

Adoni (1979) states that forming a political identity is a basic need in adolescence and that mass media is a socializing agent through which this happens. She argues that media consumption develops political values and attitudes, which are reinforced through "the structuring of social context in which the adolescent can exercise these newly acquired orientations" (p. 89) with parents and peers. Research has shown that media not only plays an important role in identity development but that young people are also "active agents" in their socialization through the discussion and sharing of information (Genner & Süss, 2017; Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009). Moreover, media socialization, described as an ongoing "mediatization" process, considers the "interrelation" between changes in media and communication and change in society (Genner & Süss, 2017), the phenomenon under study in this research.

Similarly, this research is equally informed by agenda-setting theory, which considers how issue salience is established among media, policy makers, and the public (Kiousis, McDevitt, and Wu, 2005). Kiousis et al. (2005) describe agenda-setting theory as a "core

activity" within the larger process of political socialization that asks the question: How do youth decide what political issues are important to them? Kiousis et al. (2005) have demonstrated that issue salience leads to stronger opinions, partisanship, and ideology, which therefore leads to political identity and a stake in the political system. Agenda-setting theory informs this research, which also seeks to understand how news consumption on social media influences political identity and, ultimately, political efficacy. Figure 1 demonstrates the overlap of the theories that inform this study.

Figure 1
Overlap of Theoretical Frameworks



3.2 Research Strategy

This study used a case study research strategy to look at the relationship between news-seeking behaviour and voter engagement. Denscombe says case studies are "not only interested in *what* goes on in a setting, they are also interested in explaining *why* those things occur" (2014,

p. 55, emphasis in original). He notes that while outcomes are important, the real benefit to a case study is the ability to "unravel the complexities of a given situation" (2014, p. 55) due to the focus on relationships and social processes. This fits with the goal of this research, which is aimed at understanding how first-time Generation Z voters accessed political news on social media to inform their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election. Yin (2009) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.18). He adds that case studies are appropriate when the focus of the study is to answer "why" or "how" questions and when the researcher has little control over the conditions (2009). This research aims to understand the phenomenon of why young voters use social media to access political information and how that influences their ability and desire to make an informed vote. Moreover, this research uses the most recent Canadian general election, thus the case is a "fairly" self-contained entity with "distinct" boundaries (Denscombe, 2014).

This research used a descriptive case study approach to describe the events, processes, and relationships related to understanding this phenomenon (Yin, 2009; Denscombe, 2014). This type of case study allowed me to understand the process of news consumption or, more specifically, how young voters used social media to access political news, as well as the process they used to verify information and share it with peers. Additionally, this approach allowed me to make sense of how those processes were influenced by events during the election period. As stated by Edgerly (2017), qualitative research is "better suited to highlight the types of complex understandings that individuals hold about the media environment and how this informs their future decision making" (p. 359).

This study undertook qualitative analysis based on findings gathered from focus groups using thematic analysis to make sense of the data. Focus groups offer a flexible and open-ended way to "generate discussion, and so reveal the meanings surrounding an issue—both the meanings that people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings" (Lunt & Livingstone, p. 97). Focus groups are an efficient and economical way to gain insights from a number of people simultaneously that allow for more dynamic interaction among participants (Wilkinson, 2004). Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest they are also less threatening to participants, which allows for richer discussion. Lloyd-Evans (2006) states that focus groups do present risks, including the possibility of "groupthink" and dominant voices preventing the exchange of controversial or contradictory views. However, they also provide an environment for understanding "collective social action" as well as group beliefs, understandings, behaviour, and attitudes, all of which are the aim of this study.

3.3 Method

The original research method and design called for two focus groups to be held. I attempted to keep in mind the optimum size of six to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000), a size large enough to yield diversity yet not so large that people might feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences and opinions (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). The first focus group was to consist of people who were either attending or had attended college or university, with a second group consisting of people with no formal post-secondary education. This sampling frame fits with the literature which suggests there is a strong link between education and voting (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2003). The intention was two-fold: to mitigate against power dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and to allow me to understand how education may impact attitudes, experiences, and opinions when it comes to accessing, verifying,

sharing, and using political news on social media. While Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend three to four focus groups for each audience category to reach saturation—the point at which no new information is elicited—that was not my objective. O'Reilly and Parker (2013) have argued that saturation is rooted in grounded theory but not appropriate for all qualitative research. They suggest saturation cannot be applied in all cases since "sufficiency" varies depending on the data collection method used. They also remind us that Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) state the goal of qualitative research as gathering enough rich information to explain a phenomenon.

Purposeful sampling was used to determine that participants had voted for the first-time in the 2019 general election and used social media regularly to ensure they were knowledgeable about the topic (Twohig & Putnam, 2001). Pre-focus group screening interviews further refined the make-up of the groups to ensure gender and ethnic diversity (see Appendix A). Participants for the first group were recruited through my network of contacts at Ontario Tech University and Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario. Attempts to recruit for the second group were made through my connections within the local business community in Durham Region (in which Oshawa is located), as well as snowball sampling by asking selected participants for referrals to other people who fit the sampling frame criteria (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). Participants were told that the study would be about how they obtained news on social media.

Participants fell within the age range of 18 to 25-years-old, which recognizes what researchers now call "emerging adulthood" (Amnå et al., 2009), that period of time when young people have still not taken on professional or family responsibilities, potentially including voting. Additionally, this age range captures Generation Z voters, the first of whom were born in the mid-90s, and the target of this study. Participants were offered $20 gift cards for 1.5 hours of

their time, an amount that is consistent with similar studies (Wohn & Bowe, 2016; Edgerly, 2017). The initial design called for the focus groups to be held in a classroom on campus at Durham College to accommodate student schedules and transportation, and to provide a neutral location (Krueger & Casey, 2000). However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to move the focus groups online using Zoom videoconferencing technology.

The focus groups were used to answer questions about how young voters use social media networks to consume news, particularly political news. Additionally, the questions focused on how they consumed news on social media during the lead up to the federal election. The aim was to understand how they used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues. A discussion guide was created based on similar questions in previous research on news consumption, voting and/or social media use among young people (Edgerly, 2017; Wohn & Bowe, 2016; Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2016; Head, DeFrain, Fister, & MacMillan, 2019; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Wong & Burkell, 2017; Antunovic, Parsons, & Cooke, 2018; Sveningsson, 2015).

At the start of each session, I provided information about the purpose of the session, procedures, and confidentiality. As well, participants provided informed consent (see Appendix B) to ensure their identities would remain confidential. They were also assured they were not required to respond to any questions they were not comfortable discussing (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Prior to commencing the discussion, I asked participants to define news, specifically political news. Following the discussion, a "simplified but stringent" definition of news and social media was provided to ensure agreement around these concepts, as suggested by Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage (2018). The protocol included a core of questions about news and social media consumption; personal motivations and methods of verifying and sharing news

on social media; and questions specific to consumption and sharing political news in the 2019 federal election campaign. The sessions also included a discussion of current political stories featured on mainstream news websites and on social media networks.

The focus group discussion guide was divided into four themes: news consumption (RQ1), social media consumption (RQ2, RQ4), verifying and sharing news stories (RQ3), and the federal election (RQ4). Figure 2 provides sample focus group questions (see Appendix C for the full discussion guide).

Figure 2
Sample focus group questions

Discussion topic	Sample question
News consumption	How often do you read political news or stories about politics?
Social media consumption	If required to swipe up (Snapchat) or refer to a link in the bio (Instagram) for the full story, how often do you read the full story on these platforms?
Verifying and sharing news stories	What steps do you take to verify a news story found on social media?
Federal election	How often did you access election news on social media?

Consideration was given to conducting one-on-one interviews in addition to the focus groups. The aim of in-depth interviews was to uncover more explicitly how young voters used social media networks to find, verify, and share political news stories. My intention was to present interviewees with three hypothetical vignettes loosely based on events of the 2019 general election campaign and ask where they would go to (1) verify information found on social media about a political scandal involving a party leader, (2) find 'credible' information about a political party's policy on gas pipelines, and (3) find information about an issue of personal

importance in the election. This approach was used by Edgerly (2017) to investigate how young adults seek out news and was based on previous research by Perrin (2006) who states that how people respond to hypothetical situations reflects "what is possible, important, right, and feasible" from their perspective (p. 2). Edgerly (2017) noted that the goal of this strategy was not to compare responses but rather to "holistically identify common strategy patterns that emerge across the vignettes" (p. 365). However, upon considering the focus group discussion guide, I felt this type of data collection was repetitive and may lead to similar insights. I was also concerned that without the dynamic of other participants, my questions may not yield fresh insights or new topics.

There were some difficulties with data collection. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, recruiting for focus groups was challenging and, as a result, they were not equally distributed. The first focus group included six participants, while three participated in the second. The early research design called for another focus group comprised of young people with no post-secondary education. However, this proved challenging since recruitment coincided with the first few weeks of Ontario's provincial lockdown. Attempts to reach potential participants through community contacts, as well as snowball sampling among the first two focus groups' participants, resulted in only one person being identified, so this focus group was abandoned. While research has demonstrated a connection between education and propensity to vote (Edgerly, 2017), the focus of this research was aimed more broadly at how young people in general use digital media to connect with political news. Thus, I felt the results would not be harmed without analysis of this one factor.

3.4 Analysis

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Within the original design, I had intended to use a grounded theory approach which asks "What is happening here?" (Glaser, 1978) and uses a three-stage constant comparison analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, the COVID-19 pandemic altered the nature, timing, and recruitment of the focus groups, making two of the most significant tenets of grounded theory approach unattainable: constant comparison and theoretical sampling. Thus, I was compelled to alter my approach and settled on using thematic analysis, a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed me to reach a similar goal of finding major themes within the data but without the demand of generating theory, which I felt was impossible due to the challenges related to the focus groups. The decision for choosing thematic analysis is explained in detail in Chapter 4.

Reliability and validity are a concern for qualitative research since the data is not empirical. Reliability focuses on the generalizability of the data and validity is tied to its representativeness of the data, both of which are difficult to measure where data is concerned not with how often someone said something but what that person said. Many scholars argue these tools are inadequate for assessing qualitative research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and turn instead to concepts such as transparency, communicability, and coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which I used to test the strength of my data.

A limitation of my analysis is that I did not use a second coder to review the codes for validity and consistency as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). An independent reviewer would have been able to test the compatibility of the sub-themes and major themes that emerged from the data.

3.5 Conclusion

This study takes a pragmatic worldview and is based in political socialization theory and agenda-setting theory. It used a descriptive case study approach to data collection and analysis that included focus groups with 18 to 24-year-old voters to understand how young people use digital media, particularly social media, to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders, and related issues. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the conversations and interviews and identify phenomena within them.

In the next chapter, I discuss the research findings, including commentary from the focus group participants, and provide a summary of initial insights as they relate to the research questions.

Chapter 4 – Findings

As discussed in the Literature Review, young people in many democracies are voting in declining numbers, for all levels of government, a crisis also being seen in Canada. While there was a slight uptick in the number of young voters in the 2015 and 2019 federal elections, youth voter turnout remains the lowest in the country at all levels – federal, provincial, and municipal (Statistics Canada, 2020; Library of Parliament, 2016; Gludovatz, 2014). This segment of the population is also consuming much less news than older generations, especially political news, which has been demonstrated to increase political participation (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft., 2017). Yet, little is known about how the news-seeking behaviour of young people, especially on social media platforms, impacts their voter engagement.

Using the 2019 Canadian federal election as a framework, this study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Generation Z voters use digital media generally to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues?

RQ2: How did Generation Z voters use social media to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ3: How did Generation Z voters track, verify and share political news sourced from social media in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ4: To what extent did Generation Z voters rely on political news from social media to decide their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

The findings of this qualitative study represent data generated through two focus groups, which included nine people in total from Durham Region in Ontario. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24; were attending or had attended Durham College or Ontario Tech

University; had voted in the 2019 federal election; and were regular users of social media. As mentioned in Chapter 3, due to the COVID-19 pandemic I ended up with one focus group comprised of six participants and a second focus group with three.

The focus groups took place over password-protected Zoom calls in May 2020 that lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. The calls were recorded, downloaded to my laptop, and saved to an external hard drive.

Four themes emerged from the data that will be analyzed in relation to the research questions in the discussion of the findings. These themes are as follows:

- Dissatisfaction with the current news landscape;
- Limited interest in politics and political news;
- Desire for a personal model of news seeking;
- Conflicting attitudes about the role of parents and family in political knowledge.

This chapter features five sections: (1) data analysis (2) data presentation and findings (3) reliability and validity concerns; (4) a discussion of the results, including insights and limitations; and (5) a final summary.

4.1 Data Analysis

4.1.1 Method

The original research and design method planned for the use of grounded theory to analyze the transcribed focus group conversations. However, as mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all facets of the focus groups from recruitment to timing, making constant comparison and theoretical sampling impossible.

Constant comparative analysis entails an iterative process in which data collection and data analysis happen in tandem, involving “the systematic choice and study of several

comparison groups" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One of the intended focus groups—those without post-secondary—did not happen due to a lack of potential participants. Additionally, the first focus group was split into two because of participants' last-minute schedule changes and required the second focus group to be held the day after the first.

This left the second, related challenge of theoretical sampling or "the process of collecting data for comparative analysis" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 9). Fortunately, the 24-hour window between the two focus groups did allow me to take a cursory examination of the first transcript and associated notes made during the conversation, which led me to ask about two fresh ideas in the second focus group. However, the process was not nearly rigorous or aligned closely enough with the true grounded theory approach to be considered theoretical sampling.

A number of scholars have been critical about the misuse of grounded theory by qualitative researchers (Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018; Cho & Lee, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006), especially novice researchers. Braun and Clarke (2006) even go so far as to suggest "grounded theory seems increasingly to be used in a way that is essentially grounded theory 'lite' – as a set of procedures for coding data very much akin to thematic analysis" (p. 8). Without being able to apply the core principles of grounded theory, and with a short time frame to collect data, I was concerned about the ability to generate credible and valid theory from the data. The initial decision to use grounded theory analysis was rooted in the desire to take a pragmatist worldview with a focus on solving a problem: how to increase awareness of, and interest in, political news and issues among young people so that they may be more inclined to vote and engage with political topics affecting them.

Thematic analysis offered the ability to use a similar approach of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) that, while not producing theory,

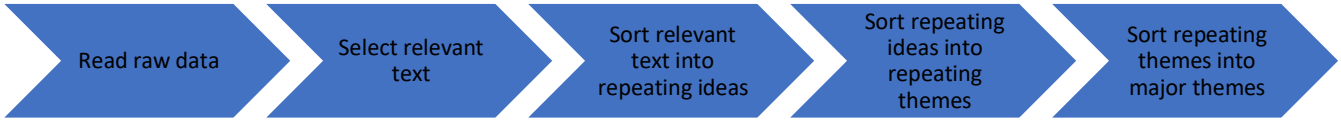
could still achieve the aim of my study by providing insight into this phenomenon and potentially lead to further refinement of my research questions or other lines of inquiry. Since the aim of my study was examining a phenomenon—the political news-seeking behaviour of young people on social media—I was not concerned with the frequency counts of specific words or phrases associated with qualitative content analysis (Denscombe, 2014). The assertion by Boyatzis (1998) that thematic analysis allows researchers to go beyond organizing and describing their data to actually interpreting various aspects of their topic assured me that thematic analysis would allow for a rich understanding of the data. I felt further supported by Braun and Clarke (2006) who consider that "(w)hat is important is that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognize them *as* decisions" (p. 80, emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, a criticism leveled at thematic analysis is that it lacks clear and concise guidelines and is therefore too flexible in its approach (Antaki, Billings, Edwards, & Potter, 2003), thus raising questions about the validity and reliability of the data. As a result, the interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach of grounded theorists Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Their coding technique relies on an iterative process that is "continually revised to reflect the researcher's evolving interpretation of the text" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 145) as well as the use of notes or memos that capture the researcher's thoughts while engaging with the data. I felt justified in my decision based on Sandelowski (2000) who suggested qualitative studies may have "hues, tones, and textures" of other approaches, including grounded theory (p. 337).

4.1.2 Procedure

The focus group conversations were first transcribed using a password-protected account on Otter.ai, a web-based transcription service. The transcriptions were downloaded to a personal hard drive, rather than a cloud-based file, to protect the participants' personal data. Figure 3 provides a summary of the coding process that was followed, which also aligns with phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; and (5) defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I started by reading the transcripts several times, making notes on themes and relationships between ideas. I then identified all relevant text, selecting only text that related to my research questions. Within this list, I looked for repeating ideas, which were moved to a new document and eventually categorized into repeating themes. Finally, the repeating themes were sorted into major themes. Throughout the coding process I used the participants' text to name the repeating ideas and themes. This kept me closer to the data because it reminded me of their sentiment, not only their words. Additionally, the use of memos to capture emotion, to document why I felt X should be clustered with Y, and to write down moments of insight that could be tied to a theme later allowed me to take a recursive approach where I could move back and forth between the steps as needed. This also forced me to be intentional about how I coded and categorized the data.

Figure 3
Steps Taken to Analyze Data
Adapted from Auerbach and Silverstein (2003)



4.1.3 Reliability and validity

In the words of Morse et al. (2002), research without rigour is "worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility" (p.14). For this reason, reliability and validity are critical to producing trustworthy data. In qualitative research, reliability deals with the question of whether another researcher would arrive at the same results and conclusion (Denscombe, 2014), while validity refers to how accurately the findings represent the phenomenon to which they refer (Schwandt, 2007). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) opt to use different language, focusing not on validity and reliability but rather on transparency, communicability, and coherence as measures of rigour.

To be transparent, I have explained in detail in Appendix D how I arrived at the major themes using an inductive approach in which the themes I have identified are linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990). To test for communicability, or whether the research makes sense to participants and other researchers, I sent the final document outlining the major themes, sub-themes, and repeating ideas to the participants for feedback. I asked whether they understood the data and felt it represented their thoughts. Five of the nine participants replied to say they agreed. In terms of coherence, my data yielded themes that connect to tell a coherent story of how young people access news, how this impacts their political news-seeking behaviour, the role that social media has played in their personal choice of news, and to what degree family influences that overall behaviour when it comes to seeking, verifying, and engaging with political news.

Efforts were made to avoid sampling bias, which occurs when the sample population is not representative of the overall target population (Morgan, 1997). I wanted to ensure there was gender and ethnic diversity, as well as a range of ages and education levels among both the participants and their parents. I reached out to professors and instructors across 13 different

programs at two institutions—one a university and the other a college—and asked them to forward my request to the largest number of students possible to limit response bias (Denscombe, 2014). Additionally, I used a pre-focus group telephone survey to ensure the broadest choice of people to include in the sampling frame (Denscombe, 2014). As a result, the sample population was comprised of 5 females to 4 males, with an age range between 19 and 24-years old. Two of the nine participants identified as Black, and all others as Caucasian. Six participants had just completed either a college diploma or university degree within the past month, with three still in the midst of their post-secondary education. As well, two-thirds of participants came from families where one or more parents had completed a university degree or college diploma, while two had parents with no post-secondary education with another "unsure" of her parents' schooling. Figure 4 provides a summary of the participant profiles.

Figure 4

Participant Profiles

Focus Group	Initials	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest level of education	Parents' post-secondary education	Social media accounts
1	TS-M	19	M	Caribbean/ Black	College diploma	Mother – college diploma Father – some university courses	All
1	JR	24	M	Caucasian	University degree	Mother – college diploma Father – college diploma	All
1	MH	22	M	Caucasian	Second year of college	Mother – college diploma Father – no post-secondary	All
1	SL	21	F	Caucasian	First year of college	Mother – some college courses Father - unknown	All
1	TS-F	24	F	Caucasian	College diploma	Mother – no post-secondary Father – no post-secondary	All
1	MS	21	F	Caucasian	Advanced college diploma	Mother – college certificate	All

						Father – no post-secondary	
2	NM	21	M	Caucasian	University degree	Mother – university degree Father – university degree; professional designation	All
2	SB	19	F	Caucasian	College diploma	Mother – no post-secondary Father – no post-secondary	All
2	BB	24	F	Caribbean/Black	Second year of university	Mother – college diploma Father – no post-secondary	All

Note: Social media accounts include Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. Participants with diplomas and degrees graduated from their programs in the spring of 2020.

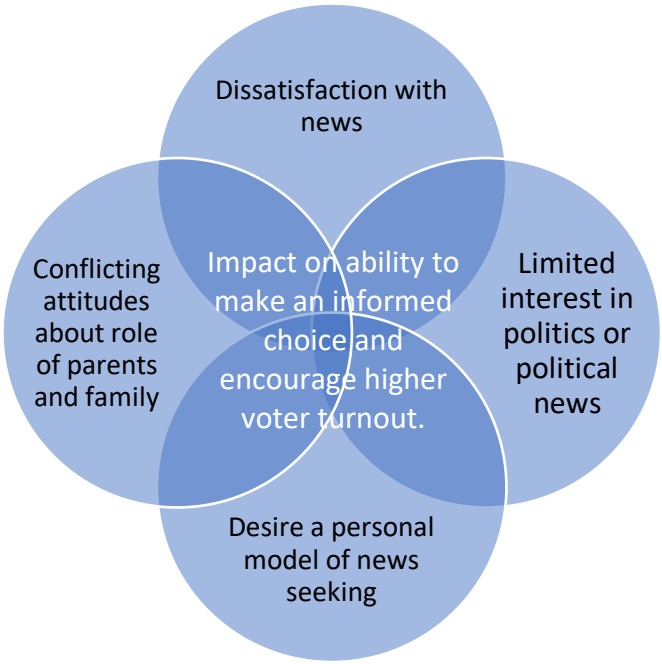
As mentioned earlier, although I did not achieve my goal of two focus groups comprised of distinct groups (post-secondary education and no post-secondary education), I am satisfied that the data generated is trustworthy. Some scholars argue the goal should not be the number of participants but rather the depth of the information gathered and its ability to fully describe the phenomenon under study (Fossey et al., 2002). Others have argued a greater quantity of data does not necessarily lead to greater information (Mason, 2010) and that saturation, or the point at which no new information is generated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), should not be the goal since "different qualitative perspectives have different indices for quality assurance" (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 191).

4.2 Data Presentation

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, four themes emerged from the data: (1) dissatisfaction with the current news landscape, (2) limited interest in politics and political news, (3) desire for a person model of news seeking, and (4) conflicting attitudes about the role of parents and family related to both news consumption and political knowledge. While on the surface these themes do not appear to answer how young voters use social media to engage with

news about political parties, leaders, and issues, they do lay at the crux of the challenge of encouraging young people to stay informed and participate in the political process, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Overlap of Major Themes



The data findings are organized below by major themes, followed by an analysis of the results and how they relate to the research questions.

4.2.1. Key findings

Dissatisfaction with the current news landscape

Mainstream media is generally not trusted. The data revealed several contradictory attitudes toward the current news landscape by participants. On one hand, they do not trust mainstream media. The following comments reflect some of that sentiment.

- It's usually negative stuff...I can never tell the full story. (Focus Group #2)

- I don't particularly like mainstream media because it all seems to be that they're promoting themselves. (Focus Group #1)

- ...they're biased and sometimes it's not as accurate as you want it to be. (Focus Group #2)

- ...you see a lot that like they're biasing their stories to make some people feel good...or make them look better, I should say just because they pay them. Or because there's someone high up there who's friends with them or something like that and they don't want that person to look favourably, or unfavourably. (Focus Group #2)

- They want something that's going to catch your eye, and that's going to make you want to look into that article, so sometimes they don't give you the whole story. (Focus Group #2)

However, three of the participants who had taken journalism courses were slightly more forgiving of mainstream media though as one participant noted, "You never know. One news organization could get it wrong and if one of them gets it wrong, I like to double check to see if it's actually wrong or like what's happening with that." (Focus Group #1)

Social media cannot be trusted, especially for political news. There was an even greater level of mistrust for social media, particularly when it comes to political news, yet that is where participants expect to "run into" news for the first time. They said there are several reasons to mistrust news found on social media.

- I find the problem is it's not always just posting 'check out this story'. It's 'check out this story and here's my opinion on the story'. So, you always have your bias if you just read that and go into it. (Focus Group #1)

- ...everyone has their own bias and has their own opinion. So sometimes that can factor into the information they're sharing as well. (Focus Group #2)

- Kind of like the way Facebook has evolved and kind of makes us question everything. So, if it's not from a mainstream place, it's kind of hard to believe. Because you never know if it's going to be from the Onion or the Beaverton...it just makes me skeptical of things that aren't mainstream. (Focus Group #1)

Mainstream media is used to validate social media. Despite their apparent mistrust of mainstream media, this is the source participants rely on to verify information first seen on social

media. Most said they “Google it” first to see if the same information can be found on a mainstream news site, then often check to see if they can find it on a second or third mainstream news site as well.

- ...if it's something big, I would always go check it up. Like Google it, double check, and see if any mainstream platforms did publish something on it. (Focus Group #1)
- ...if I'm scrolling through Twitter and I see CBC has done something about it, or the Toronto Star has done something about it and Global has something about it, then I know that something has happened. (Focus Group #1)
- I'd rather Google it for myself. I don't know, for me personally, I don't really get any news from social media and trust it 100%. (Focus Group #1)
- ... I also double check the information, because social media isn't always reliable, as we all know. I go and double check just to see what other facts are out there and what maybe other news sites might be posting. (Focus Group #2)
- I start to believe it more so when I see it multiple places, multiple sites and they're showing the same information, the same news. (Focus Group #2)
- I always like to make sure three different news organizations tweet about it at first...I want to make sure it's CBC, Toronto Star, Global News, those big ones. If they're tweeting about it, then that's kind of when I know it's official. (Focus Group #1)

Political news and information is difficult to find. Participants also held contradictory opinions about political news coverage. On one hand, several said political news, particularly when it comes to local issues, is difficult to find. One participant, who lives in the town of Whitby, said, “I couldn't even tell you what the municipal news is in Whitby, at least regarding anything politics, and it doesn't feel like there's a lot of channels unless I'm searching them out, that I can actually read about it” (Focus Group #1). The sentiment was shared by most participants who admitted they had better knowledge of the issues facing Toronto, about 50 kilometres away, than their own communities. As another participant, who lives in Scarborough noted, “...going east, there isn't much news, maybe in Pickering, but it's kind of where it stops.

After that you have to go digging" (Focus Group #1). An Oshawa-based participant called Durham Region a local news "desert" in the shadow of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

However, several participants said the general absence of any political news stories—local, national or international—on social media, particularly on Snapchat and Instagram, outside of election time was welcome.

- I find I don't really use social media much for political uses, just because I find it's often people our age who are using slang and not really, it's not like real political conversations. (Focus Group #1)

- I actually kind of like that there's no politics on my social media. I'm not going to social media for politics, I want to see pictures of my friends. You know, I want to see all these different things. (Focus Group #1)

A final contradiction exists with participants' dissatisfaction with the presentation of news stories, including political news, particularly on Snapchat and Instagram. They said they are "insulted" by attempts to reach them in snappier, more social-media friendly ways on Snapchat and Instagram, such as using bulleted lists or more heavily image-based stories. The following commentary explains how they felt about news organizations' efforts to reach them here.

- ...sometimes I feel like when we're being marketed to on Snapchat or Instagram, I feel like they feel like they have to dumb things down for us. Not just because of the condensed platform and how it has to be smaller, but I feel like people dumb things down because of our generation. And that bothers me. (Focus Group #1)

- ...they think we're dumb sometimes and it is frustrating. (Focus Group #1)

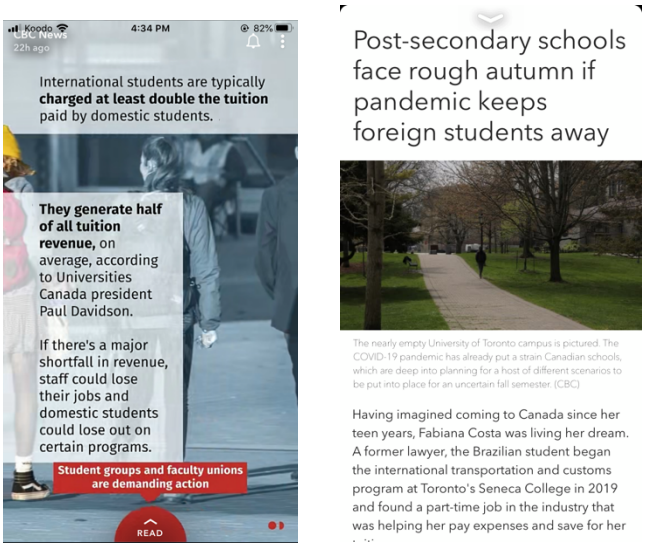
- As a new voter, it was kind of beneficial for me because I still, I don't really know too much about anything to do with that. So like, it was interesting to have it dumbed down for someone but like it was kind of a little too dumbed down. (Focus Group #1)

Yet several participants expressed reluctance to make the extra efforts required to access the full news stories on those same platforms. Snapchat, for example, requires users to swipe up for a detailed story as shown in Figure 6, while Instagram asks readers to either swipe up, click

on the comments section, click to start a video, or return to the news organization's bio for the full version as shown in Figure 7. Referring to Instagram, one participant she generally reads the headline, the photo caption and the first few comments from other users "and if that catches my eye, then maybe I'll read more information, or I'll swipe through the rest of the pictures, or like the information that they've put on there. But otherwise, I'm not really sure" (Focus Group #2). Only one participant, also a journalism student, said she would swipe up on a Snapchat video at CBC Discover. On Instagram, she said something "really has to catch my attention" to the bio. Another participant said she almost never reads a news story on either platform, preferring to stick to reading the comments noting "it would have to be something really crazy for me to actually go to the link" (Focus Group #2).

Figure 6

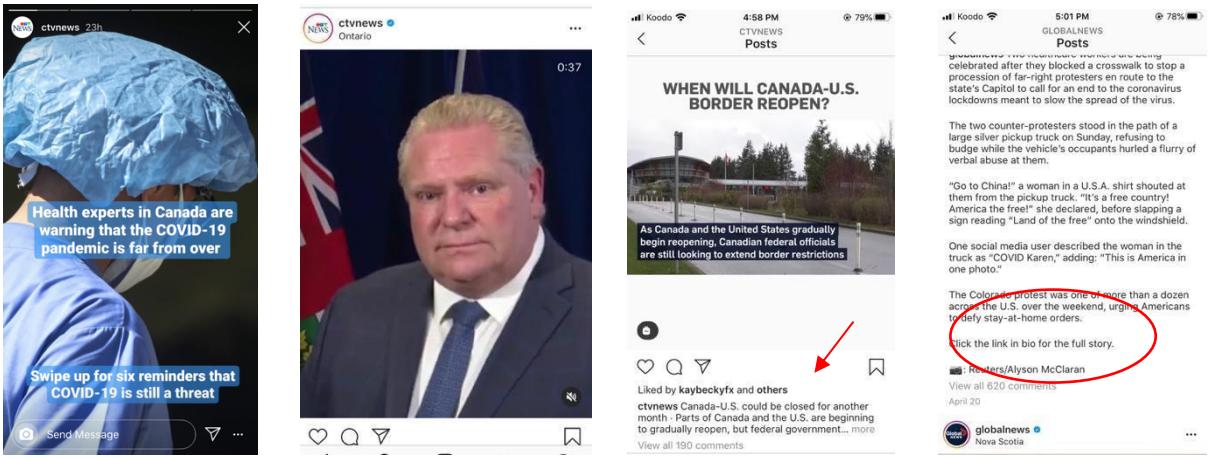
Snapchat Affordances



User is required to swipe 'read' on left screen to read full story on right.

Figure 7

Instagram Affordances



User swipes for full story (far left), clicks on video (left), clicks on comments (right) or returns to link in Global News bio (far right).

Limited interest in politics and political news

There are two factors at play when it comes to focus group participants accessing political news. One is that many do not seek out *any* news, political or otherwise. The other is that they have no interest in political news, or as one participant put it "politics is not my number one choice" (Focus Group #1).

Expectation news will come to them. The data revealed that participants do not intentionally seek out news. In fact, as one participant put it "it's just somehow everybody just knows" what's happening in the world, including politics. Several participants said they could not pinpoint where they first hear information, they just *do*. As one participant said, "I don't go looking for news. It's like news finds me" (Focus Group #2). Another expressed the sentiment that if news is important it will show up somewhere.

- ...I'm actually not a huge consumer of like, say the traditional news because I don't actually watch a ton of TV. I don't actually have any apps that are related to news. I'd say actually, most of the news I'm focused on is, I'm a big sports guy. I have my sports app. And so, I get news, like the Score, things like that. And a lot of times a lot of world issues come up through that. (Focus Group #1)

Only the participants who had taken journalism courses sought out news on a regular basis. They said they check first thing in the morning and usually once in the evening on their preferred sites (CTV, Global News, CP24, Vice and CBC). The others said they either come across news incidentally while scrolling through their phones or they hear something "through the grapevine" and check it out. They all said they rarely read past the headline and first two paragraphs unless "the news is very big, very local, or it affects me directly" (Focus Group #1), a sentiment expressed by one of them. By way of example, two participants shared their experiences seeking information about the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. Both thought they had applied incorrectly. One said he "probably Googled it 30 times, read all these different articles, really tried to digest it" adding that "if I'm invested in it, and I need to know the answers, I'll read and fully be invested" (Focus Group #1). The other said he needs to be "extremely interested in it, or it has to impact me, or I have to be scared" (Focus Group #1) as he was in this case.

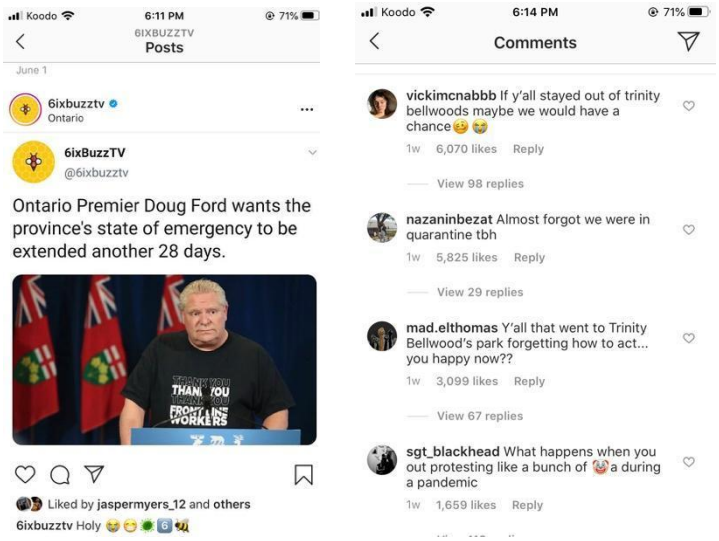
While many of the participants said YouTube was among the top three apps on their phones, almost all participants said they do not watch TV news – except for breaking news or election results. None reported watching local or national news, even during the election campaign.

While students who had taken journalism courses preferred and used push notifications from media organizations to alert them to breaking news, more participants preferred to use news aggregators, such as Apple News, Reddit and especially 6ixBuzzTV where they can access news à la carte. 6ixBuzzTV is unique in this field in that it is not an aggregator so much as an amplifier of news stories. Whereas Apple News and Reddit provide links to mainstream news stories, 6ixBuzzTV provides "news" in the form of a photo and headline, sometimes taken from

a mainstream news website, along with thousands of comments from its more than 1.7 million followers, as shown in Figure 8. 6ixBuzzTV is a GTA-based Instagram site that is a popular "first-stop" for news among more than half of participants. They said the site provides a diverse range of opinions that help them to understand all sides of a story. As one participant explained, "...the thing about 6ixBuzz, they can't give you much information. It's more like a headline. So, like a picture, maybe with a few words on it, sometimes but it's usually just a headline. So, it doesn't give you much information. So that's why you go to the comments. You see what everyone's saying, and you get a little bit of everything" (Focus Group #2).

Figure 8

6ixBuzzTV Affordances



Users see a headline, photo and thousands of comments per post. This post made on June 1, 2020 had 4,865 comments as of this screen capture on June 10, 2020.

Limited interest in political news and discussion. As mentioned at the start of this section, few of the participants are interested in political news. These comments offer a sample of their feelings towards both politics and political news.

- I don't tend to read too much politics. It's not a topic that I that kind of grew on me. (Focus Group #1)

- I'm almost more interested on the comments or what people think about what's happening. (Focus Group #1)

- I was on it every day, just really interested in it. Then after elections, I'd say like, I'd seek it out maybe, once or twice a week. (Focus Group #1)

- ...a lot of the times the mess ups are the most interesting. (Focus Group #1)

- ...away from election time, I just, it's non-existent pretty much for me. I don't really follow it at all, regardless of the story, unless it's a breaking story...I tend to stay away from it, not necessarily on purpose, it's just it doesn't really interest me. (Focus Group #2)

Some of the participants see mainstream media as the problem. They said their social media feeds are "overloaded" with political news stories from south of the border, especially news stories about U.S. president Donald Trump. The following commentary provides insight into some participants' views on this.

- I like reading Canadian news more than American news. But it feels like everything's overloaded with Americans. If you want to browse maybe the first page of Reddit, there will be four things about Donald Trump, right? So it almost seems like they're more popular and they get more attention than us so it's just kind of crammed in my face, but I don't necessarily like reading it. (Focus Group #1)

- What the mayor has done is almost never going to come up on my newsfeed for me at least, whereas all I see is what Donald Trump's done...what's happening in Italy...what Trudeau is talking about. (Focus Group #1)

Although one participant said she found stories about Trump "entertaining," the tone and nature of many political stories is often off-putting for others. The word "attack" came up several times. Participants said they would prefer to hear positive political news stories but that is not what is on offer, especially during elections. Several said media reports focus too much on personal attacks and not enough on issues.

- I don't like it because whenever I see an ad or an article, it's always you know, just for example, you know, Andrew Scheer is attacking Justin Trudeau who was attacking Jagmeet Singh. And then Jagmeet Singh is making a TikTok attacking the two of them, and no one's actually talking about what they're talking about. (Focus Group #1)

- It can be small things, whether if you're talking about, for example, let's say Andrew Scheer and they use some terms that kind of either belittle him or make him seem not that great. Or it could be for anybody. It could be against Jagmeet Singh or Justin Trudeau anybody. And I guess... the way they speak about them when giving the news. (Focus Group #1)

- I find there's a lot of politics on social media when there's negative stories, when right now I find Doug Ford and Trudeau are dealing with the whole pandemic very well and there's no stories about how well they're dealing with it. But if they were to make a mistake, all of a sudden then there'd be stories on our social media. (Focus Group #1)

This was especially true of the "brownface" issue during the federal election when a photo of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wearing brownface makeup surfaced. Most of the participants said this was a non-issue for them and accused the mainstream media of giving it too much attention. They said they heard about the story when it "blew up" on social media but few looked for any information beyond the headline. One participant, who is Black, said knowing Trudeau was a drama teacher in the past and that this incident happened years ago was enough for her. She said she did not need to read more because she felt "obviously he doesn't think like that now. He cannot think like that right now" (Focus Group #2). Two participants described the frustration expressed by many with this election story:

- It's always either, you know, this is terrible and he should have never done it or it's not that bad and people should look past that. There was no kind of nice vocal, middle ground on it...For me, it just kind of came irrelevant for someone who it didn't particularly bother, so I didn't read too far into it. (Focus Group #1)

- I didn't really affect my opinion either. I find it was more just like gossip and everything. I understand it was hurtful but it happened so long ago...I feel like it didn't really matter at that time, especially to the big deal that they made it into. (Focus Group #1)

Participants also said they rarely, if ever, share political news stories, in part due to the toxicity found on social media. As one participant put it, “The trolls are real” (Focus Group #1). The other reason provided is that politics are largely “taboo” among their generation.

- You almost don't want to bring it up, just in case...It more just comes up in small talk with my family or my really close friends. (Focus Group #1)
- I don't think I really shared anything unless it was just sharing with my fiancé or her family or my family. I didn't really post anything because there are people on social media who will just give you backlash and be against you no matter what you say. (Focus Group #1)
- When you're in the heat of an election, I find that people literally just come on the internet to tear other people down. And it has a huge impact on what I decided to share during those periods of time. (Focus Group #1)
- On social media, when people have opinions, they tend to attack rather than actually stating points and using the political parties and their platforms. They just like they bash on what the other person thinks. (Focus Group #1)
- ...I think a lot of times it gets mixed up with attacking versus constructive arguments. (Focus Group #1)

Connections not made to political stories. Several participants said they cannot make connections between their own lives and the political news stories they see and hear. They were presented with a current news story about allegations that Erin O’Toole, a local Member of Parliament, was using his parliamentary budget to fund his Conservative leadership campaign. One participant said, “I don't really understand the information you just gave to us. I don't understand what, how that would affect myself or, like, how to understand the information given” (Focus Group #2). Part of the challenge, according to some participants, is that they feel ill prepared to understand politics. One participant described her feelings this way:

> I want to understand it because I want to know who I'm voting for and why I should be voting for them. And I want to compare it to different parties, to make sure that I have a full understanding. But a lot of the time, it's just, they bring up information. And yes, they're important, like financial means and taxes and that kind of stuff, but it's something

> I don't really understand because I haven't really learned about it, or learned how to understand it, especially in our school systems. (Focus Group #2)

Desire for a personal model of news seeking

What others think matters most. What their peers are thinking is as much a part of the "news story" as the headline, according to several participants. They said they are often "guilty of getting caught by the headline" and reading only that and the comments to find out about an issue, even during the election. One participant said she never comments on social media herself but added "I will literally look at the comments because it's interesting to see people's point of view. And how bold people are on social media. It's very interesting to me" (Focus Group #2). Several said that reading the comments section provides them with a greater cross-section of ideas and offers a more balanced perspective of the issue. This was especially true for several of them when the "brownface" issue arose.

- I saw the headline, I made my own conclusion...some people were like, 'Oh, this is this is despicable.'...and some other people were like, 'It's not a big deal', but somewhere in the middle it like, can't you see what this is? They just want to, you know, sway your votes one way or the other. (Focus Group #2)

- Because it was such a large topic and it had such like an impact on the election, I believe, that I did want to know other people's sides and I wanted to read more stories and not just a single story on it. (Focus Group #1)

Story interest is "me-centric." Stories that did attract the participants' attention were those that related directly to them and their families. The phrase "if it's relevant to me" appeared several times among the participants. For example, one participant who had just finished her second year of college and whose sister is in high school said she read everything about the Ontario government's plans to make online courses mandatory in high school because it directly concerned a family member. Another said he currently reads political news only if it's about the pandemic and when the province will reopen.

Mainstream media is not critical to decision making. Most participants said mainstream news stories were not critical to their decision making in the federal election. Most took a "one-stop shop" approach to learning about the parties, leaders, and issues. Several visited CBC's Vote Compass website where they used an online tool to learn about the issues and see how their interests aligned with the political parties. Others went directly to the campaign websites themselves and one person used a website developed by Future Majority, a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by young people, to learn about party policies and platforms. One participant, a first-year journalism student, said she preferred the CBC Vote Compass platform because new stories were not about "what was actually going on" and more like a "rival fight" (Focus Group #1) whereas the website was clear and concise. Another participant said he already had a sense of his preference but "just wanted to back my information up a little bit" (Focus Group #1) by looking at the CBC site.

Beyond these sites, most participants said they paid little attention to mainstream media in the lead-up to election day. One participant said while she did seek out more information most of her friends "just looked at the platforms and they were on their way" (Focus Group #1). Several participants said they preferred to skim their social media feeds instead where they saw a "blend" of political information, including politicians such as NDP leader Jagmeet Singh doing Q&A sessions with young voters on 6ixBuzzTV.

Conflicting attitudes about the role of parents and family

The data revealed some tension around the subject of parents and family. Some participants reported regularly talking about politics with their parents and sought their guidance on political issues and topics raised in the news.

- I'd say my family's pretty good. All they do is watch the news all day so they usually seem to know more, so I actually trust my family when it comes to news. (Focus Group #1)

- I trust my dad a lot. He's very current in the events of the world. (Focus Group #2)

- My grandparents are very political. So, I get a lot of that from them. And they share a lot of their thoughts and ideas on different parties. And that's where I got most of my understanding of how to vote and understand that aspect. (Focus Group #2)

However, others felt their parents' views and information were unreliable because they sourced their information from social media without fact checking elsewhere.

- ...if it's my in-laws, they get their news from Facebook a lot of the time so it's normally fake. (Focus Group #1)

- My dad barely knows how to use his phone so I don't trust what he's telling me. (Focus Group #1)

- I find like my mom and my older generation of family, they're kind of lost when it comes to social media and finding things on the internet. So, they're gullible. (Focus Group #1)

- They're kind of like the older so don't really know, like, when somebody posts this it's like obviously a joke or it's completely fake. (Focus Group #1)

4.3 Discussion

Before commencing with a discussion of the results of the findings, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of this study. The sample size of nine participants in one geographic area, Durham Region, is not large enough to be generalizable. Despite such limitations, the focus groups generated rich data that provides a foundation for future research and informed conversations about the challenges of engaging young voters in the political process.

As well, it is important to situate myself in the study. I was a working journalist for more than twenty years at a broad range of news organizations and I have been an instructor in the

Journalism – Mass Media program at Durham College for the past decade. Three of my present and former students were participants in the focus groups.

4.3.1. Initial insights

Participants were asked at the start of each focus group to define *news* and *political news*. Most used wording that included the phrase "important information" – an indication that they do consider news vital to understanding political issues and, ultimately, to the process of voting. Yet, the findings reveal few engaged with news during the federal election campaign—on social media or in mainstream media—beyond visiting campaign platform sites or similar websites. As such, the research questions focused on how Generation Z used social media to access political information are not necessarily answered directly by the data. Rather, the data point to foundational challenges that are impacting this behaviour. Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the links between the themes and research, which I will address in the analysis below.

Figure 9
Generated Themes in Relation to Research Questions

Major themes	Sub-themes	Research Questions
Dissatisfaction with current news landscape	• Mainstream media not trusted • Social media not trusted • Mainstream media used only to validate social media • Political news and information difficult to find	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4 RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 RQ1, RQ3 RQ1, RQ4
Limited interest in politics and political news	• Expectation news will come to them • Limited interest in political news and discussion • Connections not made to political news	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4 RQ1, RQ2, RQ4 RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Desire a personal mode of news seeking	• What other people think matters most	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4

	● Story interest is "me-centric" ● Mainstream media is not critical to decision making	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4 RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Conflicting attitudes about the role of parents and family	● Parents cannot be trusted to share news from social media ● Reliance on parents for political understanding	RQ3 RQ3

Mainstream media is failing. News organizations are not reaching participants in ways that engage them, starting with the issues that journalists, editors and producers consider salient and extending to how those stories are presented on both news websites and social media platforms. Participants used words such as "irrelevant" and "not that interesting" to describe political news stories. In part, it's the language of the news, as evidenced by one participant who said she is often deterred from reading political news stories by "the thickness of the information sometimes...whether there's long, hard paragraphs with condensed information" (Focus Group #2). They expressed that many political news stories only *tell* them the information but fail to explain *why* it matters. Yet, they do not want to be talked down to or be offered news that's all style and no substance. A 19-year-old participant said she appreciated the social media posts that explained political platforms using formats such as lists because she was new to voting. However, she felt "it was kind of a little too dumbed down in a sense, where it's like, I got the point and I kind of needed to know more without having to research more into it myself" (Focus Group #1).

Additionally, participants are turned off by negative news, which they said is often the case with political stories. Many described the tone of political news as argumentative and overly dramatic. One participant commented that during the election he felt "like every move that they made (by political leaders) was blown up out of proportion." This supports recent findings that young people are frustrated by negativity, sensationalism and the perceived agenda of

mainstream media (Newman et al., 2019). This generation was born around the time of the 9/11 attacks and has grown up in a time of terrorism, war, recession, and now a pandemic. They want the ability to *act* not just *know*, as evidenced by the participant who questioned the usefulness of the Erin O'Toole campaign finance story with her comment "It's like, what can I do about this? Like, nothing" (Focus Group #2). On this point, they also want to be engaged in two-way conversations about the issues affecting them, not simply passive recipients of information, and they want to engage with the people involved. These findings are consistent with Burkey (2018) and Wohn and Bowe (2016) who have argued that social media has minimized the agenda-setting authority of mainstream media and put it in the hands of users who want to decide for themselves what is newsworthy.

Verification is important. The desire to fact check was strong among these participants. All mentioned the need to be skeptical of every source, whether it be mainstream news or 6ixBuzzTV, and many said they don't consider news to be real until they have seen it posted on at least two or three mainstream media websites. They follow the same process demonstrated by young people in previous studies, that is Googling the headline and looking for verification by a mainstream media source (Nee, 2019; Antunovic et al., 2018). However, this does not mean they actually read the stories in-depth and, in fact, many said they don't, but they are cognizant that information should not be taken at face value regardless of the source. They are also reluctant to share a story unless they have done some digging on their own. As one participant said, "My friends fact check everybody because if you get a wrong, you're going to get chirped so...everyone will fact check no matter what" (Focus Group #1). Some participants said they do "blindly trust" their friends to share credible stories and may not always verify them with another source. Additionally, though they may not fully trust mainstream media, they do see it as the

most trustworthy source on the internet. However, few of the participants mentioned verifying a story through other means, such as going to the source of the story directly.

Inadequately prepared for the political process. Political socialization theory holds that there are five agents that shape young people's attitudes, beliefs, and values about politics (Quintelier, 2015), including teachers and the media. For the past 20 years, students in Ontario have been required to take a half-semester civics class as a requirement for graduation in an effort to increase civic engagement. Almost a decade ago, Milner and Lewis (2011) looked at the effect of that decision and found that the success of civics education in this province depended on the person teaching it, not the curriculum per se. It may not be surprising then that two of the students mentioned feeling ill-prepared to become voters, to which others agreed. A 24-year-old participant, who had voted previously in the 2018 provincial election, commented that "...my civics class really didn't prepare me for political parties and automatically being thrown into a world or have to vote for my future." Though the Canadian electoral system relies on people electing a *local* member of parliament, several participants also said they had little knowledge of their local candidate or issues. They expressed that their primary concern in an election is who will be the leader. One participant summed it up by saying "...for a federal election, provincial election, municipal, you want to be able to trust the person that you're voting for because although you're voting for the party, it is a single person who will then be the face of your country" (Focus Group #1). One of the major challenges facing young voters is their lack of knowledge about the political process as it relates to them. While many mentioned that political news involves stories about "important things" at federal, provincial, and municipal levels, all of the discussion about political news focused on federal politics with only passing mention of provincial politics in the context of the pandemic and online learning for high school students.

Power of news aggregators. A surprising insight of this study was the propensity for participants to use "news" aggregators as their main starting point for news. The use of quotation marks is intentional for although some act as curators of news provided by trained journalists (Apple News, Reddit), others provide information represented as news even if those stories do not cover all, or even some, of the 5Ws and the H.

4.3.2 Summary of discussion

As mentioned earlier, the research questions were not answered directly by the data. With respect to RQ1, participants reported using digital media to engage with news but not necessarily *political* news, which they found uninteresting or negative. In terms of RQ2, while social media platforms are where participants first became aware of issues raised during the federal election campaign, they did not engage with news stories here, preferring instead to read only the headline and comments or to "Google" the information for themselves. In a similar vein, RQ3 was answered through the "Googling" process whereby participants saw a story of interest on social media but verified the information using a Google search to confirm the information on 2-3 mainstream news websites. Finally, examining RQ4, the data is unclear. All participants reported using "one-stop" election information platforms to base their voting decision and beyond that few paid much attention to political news during the campaign. However, their commentary indicates they paid attention to comments sections on social media platforms for some political stories, so to some extent they did rely on political "news" though perhaps not in the traditional sense.

The research questions assumed—incorrectly—that potential voters would follow political leaders, parties, and issues as they evolved throughout the campaign, which was not the case. Another challenge was asking participants to remember their social media and news

consumption behaviour seven months after the election. The research questions may have yielded better insight had they looked more deeply at the content of political news stories and the affordances of digital media generally to see how those two factors impact the interest and willingness of young voters to engage in political news.

4.4 Conclusion

In sum, participants of the two focus groups generally do not seek out news, much less political news, and used digital media in limited ways to decide their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election. They are not satisfied with the current news landscape, they are not interested in political news generally, they prefer news that is personalized to them, and they have mixed attitudes about political news shared by their parents and families.

In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of these findings for newsrooms, civics education classrooms, politicians, and election officials.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

A cornerstone of democracy is having a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry. To make an informed decision, young voters must know about the political leaders, parties, and issues that impact them since "[i]nitial turnout decisions made by those aged 18–30, approximately, set a course for their political engagement in adulthood" (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2008, p. 712). However, there is growing concern among scholars, educators and elections officials in many Western democracies that these voters lack the level of political knowledge required to make informed choices at the ballot box, in part because they consume less news than other generations and because they increasingly use social media as their news source. While many media organizations share news stories on social media platforms, research shows the affordances of those platforms—and therefore the audiences they attract—can influence the depth and diversity (or lack thereof) of news stories found there, particularly when it comes to political news. It is against this backdrop that many countries are also experiencing a decline in youth voter turnout and the widening gap in turnout between younger and older citizens.

The aim of this study was to understand the news-seeking behaviour of the youngest generation of voters, Generation Z, specifically as it relates to political news and the 2019 Canadian federal election. The purpose of the research was to understand how they engage, verify, share, and consume political news on social media to better understand how newsrooms and educators can engage them in this area and, hopefully, assist them to become more informed voters.

As such, this research specifically explored the following questions with a focus on the 2019 Canadian federal election campaign:

RQ1: How do Generation Z voters use digital media generally to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues?

RQ2: How did Generation Z voters use social media to engage with news stories about political parties, leaders and related issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ3: How did Generation Z voters track, verify and share political news sourced from social media in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

RQ4: To what extent did Generation Z voters rely on political news from social media to decide their vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election?

In this chapter, I will summarize the findings of my research then place them in context in the fields of communications and technology. From there, I will identify areas for further research and conclude with final thoughts on the implications of these results.

5.1 Summary of findings

Data gathered from two focus groups of first-time voters aged 18-24 revealed four major themes: (1) dissatisfaction with mainstream news and mistrust of social media; (2) lack of interest in politics or political news; (3) a desire for more personalized news stories that help young people understand news and make connections to their lives; and (4) tension around parents as positive or negative agents of political socialization. These themes represent a consistent message across both focus groups: news is important to young people and they know they should care about politics and political issues, but the current media landscape is not serving them (or their parents) well.

Three findings within these themes are especially interesting. The first relates to news consumption and the preference of young people to read comments over news stories. This is not something I encountered in the literature yet was prevalent in the analysis. Tangentially, this

finding supports previous studies that speak to the influence of peers and celebrities to the validity and trustworthiness of news shared on social media (Hodson & Petersen, 2019; Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). What makes this finding stand out is that some young people consume the comments *as news*, with the belief that the variety of opinions represented is somewhat akin to a news story featuring multiple sources. The second significant finding is related to dependence on news aggregators, especially those such as 6ixBuzzTV that feature only headlines and comments, as a primary source of news on social media. Within the literature, studies find a desire for aggregated news but among older populations and typically related to sites that share news stories in their entirety (Newman et al., 2020; Lee & Chyi, 2015). The third finding of note is the lack of interest in consuming political news during the 2019 Canadian federal election campaign. Studies have shown many young people are disengaged from political news outside of an election period but my findings point to disinterest even during a campaign when issues may change by the day or hour.

Turning to the research questions, this study reveals several significant findings. Related to RQ1, my data supports wider studies that have found interest in news generally, and political news more specifically, is waning among young people. Aside from the journalism students in the focus groups, none of the participants consume news—intentionally—on a regular basis. Even then, most of the journalism students said they ignore political news for the most part. Turning to RQ2, the findings show little to no ongoing engagement with news stories during the federal election campaign among the participants, aside from the odd post on social media when something "big" happened, such as the "brownface" incident involving Justin Trudeau. Where that did happen, RQ3 finds that participants did attempt to confirm the information through multiple sources, though they were reluctant to share those stories with others. Related to the

same question, participants had mixed experiences and perceptions about whether family and friends could be trusted to share credible political news. Finally, it was not possible to answer RQ4, which asked about the influence of social media on the decision to vote in the 2019 Canadian federal election, in this study. A limitation of the study was asking participants about their behaviour back in October 2019, so their recall may have been compromised. However, the findings do show a tendency toward generally ignoring election news, even on social media, once participants had made up their minds about how they would vote.

5.2 Findings in context

This study adds a modest contribution to the literature related to news consumption, voting behaviour, and social media use by young people. While several of the findings reinforced existing research on these topics, this study demonstrates young people are not only not accessing political news, they are avoiding it entirely, even in a period when their interest might be expected to be higher. Additionally, these findings fill a gap in the research in terms of first-time Canadian voters and social media use. European and U.S. elections run on different time frames and within different contexts in terms of issues and political leaders, so it is important to understand young voters here within this particular electoral framework.

Several considerations for professional practice emerge from this study. To address the challenge of encouraging young voters to not only vote but to also make themselves aware of political parties, leaders, and issues on an ongoing basis—not just at election time—requires action by educators and journalists. It is important that civics education courses be more comprehensive, to include not only the functions of government but to also draw connections between the actions of governments and the impact on citizens, and to draw that line to political news stories. These courses would benefit from a news media literacy component, since research

has demonstrated a link between exposure to news and civic engagement (Edgerly, 2017; Boulianne, 2016; Quintelier, 2015; Erentaite et al., 2012).

News organizations have made overtures to younger audiences by, among other things, making news stories accessible on social media platforms and reformatting news articles to take advantage of the affordances offered by newer platforms. CBC Discovery on Snapchat is an example of this. However, mainstream media has often been unwilling to make fundamental shifts to some of its practices, including approaches to storytelling. Major news organizations have yet to invent a model that lets them truly work *with* instead of *for* audiences. This study adds to a growing literature that suggests young people want to engage with issues. They want to ask questions, understand the topic, share comments with peers, and engage in conversations. News organizations may consider taking a more activist approach to storytelling and focus less on the emotions of political stories and more on the question of "What does this mean for me?" In fact, Quintelier (2015) states that media "might be more accessible" to young people as a political socializing agent than governments when they ensure young people can follow the news "at their own level of understanding" (p. 65). News organizations may also consider encouraging ongoing conversations with younger audiences, outside of election periods, to find ways to engage them as part of the storytelling process.

It is worth noting that almost two decades ago, Pammett and LeDuc (2003) suggested that the solution to engaging young Canadians to vote was clear: make first-time voting easier and more meaningful; provide young people with tools to help them understand the relevance of voting (politics) to their lives; and engage them more directly in the political process. The findings of this study speak to the all three recommendations in some way.

There is a perspective that needs to be considered that is not addressed by these findings since they focus specifically on an election. That is that not consuming news and not voting does not necessarily mean young people are not politically engaged. Young people may prefer online activism or actions such as boycotts, protests, and petitions (Bosch, 2013) as more meaningful ways to express their civic duty. Moreover, while news consumption on social media may not lead directly to voting, research shows it is leading to more "participatory" politics (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). Additionally, it is worth noting that young people today are coming of age later in life due to challenges such as the precarious nature of the "gig" economy and a lack of affordable housing. Smets (2012) argues their life cycle is delayed, which may lead to delays in other "adult" activities such as voting.

5.3 Future direction

A challenge of this study was the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected both the recruitment of participants and the conversation within the focus groups since they were conducted remotely by videoconference over Zoom. Although literature exists on the topic of online focus groups, future studies into conducting research during a pandemic is warranted. Health officials in Canada and around the world expect a second wave of the virus and, given what is now known about pandemics, it will not be the last. Having a better understanding of best practices for research under these circumstances would benefit all researchers.

Future research may also consider investigation into how young people consume news, especially political news, using non-traditional news aggregators such as 6ixBuzzTV. This research would contribute to the body of literature on this topic, and could provide further insight into how news organizations, educators, and political officials might better connect with young voters on alternative platforms.

5.4 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the use of digital media by Generation Z voters to consume political news in the run-up to the 2019 Canadian federal election. The research found young people disengaged with the current news and political landscape but with a desire to engage and understand. The findings also show young people want to be two-way consumers of information where news is personalized and meaningful, not simply passive recipients of news stories. They are also counting on social media to keep them informed about important issues, sometimes more so than their parents and families. As the media landscape evolves and shifts, the time is ripe for educators and newsrooms to create a new vision for civics education and journalism that embraces these new voters and new platforms.

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Appendix A

PRE-FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

Research Study: New Voters, New Platforms: How first-time Generation Z voters used social media to learn about political parties, leaders and issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election

Preamble:

Hello, this is Danielle Harder calling. I'm the graduate student from the University of Alberta who is conducting focus group sessions on how young people consume news on social media. I hope that you are still interested in participating in the upcoming focus group discussions. I hope to schedule the discussions sometime during the week of _____.

I need to complete a quick telephone survey with you in order to help me place you in the correct focus group. Do you have about 5 minutes to complete it now?

Are you still interested in participating in this study, including the upcoming focus groups? Have you read the information sheet and consent form that I sent to you by email? Do you have any questions about the study or the consent form? I will still need you to sign the consent form when you come for the focus group but in order to complete the phone survey now, I would like to obtain your verbal consent based on that form. Do I have your informed consent to include you as a subject in this study?

Great, we will now get started. I have eight questions for you.

1. How old are you?

2. If you are comfortable answering, what is your gender?

3. If you are comfortable answering, please indicate your ethnicity. I will read through a list if it assists you: Latino/Hispanic, Middle Eastern, African, Caribbean, South Asian, East Asian, Caucasian, mixed or other.

4. What is your highest level of education?

5. Do you or have you attended college or university? To what level?

6. Did either of your parents attend college or university?

7. Did you vote in the Canadian general election on October 21, 2019?

8. Do you have an account on any of the following social media networks: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and/or Snapchat? If so, which ones?

Appendix B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project
New Voters, New Platforms: How first-time Generation Z voters used social media to learn about political parties, leaders and issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election

Investigator/researcher:
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Researcher will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/qfcpolicymanual/policymanualsection66.cfm

Background
You are being asked to participate in a research study to understand how young voters use digital media, including social media platforms, to consume political news. You are being asked to participate in a focus group of 18 to 25-year-olds to understand your experience as a news consumer and voter, and you will receive remuneration for your participation. Participants have been recruited through the researcher's professional, business and social networks using both personal and social media invitations. Your decision to participate or not will not be shared with those contacts.

Purpose of the Study
The aim of this study is to understand how young people use social media platforms to consume political news, with a focus on the 2019 Canadian federal election, and the relationship between this news-seeking behaviour and voter engagement. Data collected from the focus groups will be analyzed to look for themes. The goal of this research is to help news organizations, elected officials and civics teachers better understand and serve young voters, particularly when it comes to engaging them with political news on issues that affect them.

The study is in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology degree for Danielle Harder at the University of Alberta.

Study Procedures
Two focus groups will be conducted: one that includes young people who are either attending or have attended post-secondary and one that includes young people who have not and have instead gone directly into the workforce. Participants must be between 18 and 25-year-old. A pre-focus group survey will be conducted by phone to screen participants to ensure diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities, educational levels, as well as to determine if participants voted in the last federal election and are regular social media users. The focus groups will be 90-120 minutes in length and be recorded using a digital recorder. The recordings will be used to transcribe the audio of the discussion into text format for analysis. Completion of the focus group is completely voluntary. The focus groups will either be held in a classroom at Durham College or remotely through an online platform should provincial social distancing guidelines prevent in-person focus groups. In that event, the focus groups will take place online using the Zoom platform. The

sessions will be recorded and downloaded to the researcher's personal password-protected encrypted hard drive.

Benefits
Your participation will assist educators, politicians and journalists to understand how to better engage your generation in the issues that matter to you. You will also advance knowledge and understanding of your age group, Generation Z, which has its own unique characteristics. However, there may be no direct benefit to participating.

Risks
There are no known risks from participation in this study.

Cost of participation
There is no cost for your participation in this study.

Payment or remuneration
You will receive a $20 gift card (and pizza if held in person) for your participation in this study. Where applicable, you will also be reimbursed for up to $14 in parking fees.

Confidentiality
All information collected will be coded to protect the participant's privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Before releasing aggregated data to the University of Alberta, any identifying indicators will be removed. Data will be kept by the researcher on two password-protected hard drives, with the files encrypted, in a locked cabinet. The data will be kept for a minimum of five years following the completion of the research project, and when appropriate, may be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality. The results of the study will be shared in the researcher's capstone project and may be presented at academic and professional conferences. While direct quotes may be used in any of these forums, participants will not be identified either by name or by characteristics that would make them identifiable.

Please be advised that although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researcher from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researcher would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others or release identifying information about other participants, such their names.

Voluntary participation
Your participation is voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate in this study.

Freedom to withdraw
You are free to withdraw from the research study at any time without adverse consequences. You will not be permitted to withdraw your data following the start of the focus group or any time thereafter because the conversation might become impossible to interpret if one participant's comments are deleted.

Contacts
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact:
Researcher: Danielle Harder, dharder@ualberta.ca or (289) 886-0189
Supervisor: Dr. Gordon Gow, ggow@ualberta.ca or (780) 492-6111

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Participant Informed Consent
I acknowledge that the research procedures have been explained to me, and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that audio of the interview will be recorded. In addition, I know that I may contact the person designated on this form if I have further questions, either now or in the future. I have been assured that the personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time and I will not be asked to provide a reason.

DATE

PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT

PRINTED NAME OF INVESTIGATOR

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

If consent is being provided electronically, please check here:

☐ By checking this box and typing my name and email below, I am electronically signing this consent form.

Name:
Email:

Please indicate if you would like a copy of the research report after final grades have been assigned:
☐YES ☐NO

Appendix C

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Research Study: New Voters, New Platforms: How first-time Generation Z voters used social media to learn about political parties, leaders and issues in the 2019 Canadian federal election

Thanks for participating, overview of discussion, statement about respecting confidentiality and notification that confidentiality cannot be completely guaranteed.

Discussion 1: News consumption
How often do you consume news?

- How often in a day do you check in on the news?
- Which do you rely on most: news websites, news apps or social media?
- How often do you read about political news or stories about politics?
- How does that compare to the number of other news stories you read?
- What kinds of political news are you drawn to?
- What kinds of stories do you shy away from?
- How often do you read the full story, beyond the headline and the first few paragraphs?
- How often do you consume stories about local political issues versus national issues?

Discussion 2: Social media consumption
How often do you use social media networks?

- What are the top most used social media apps on your phone?
- How often do you check them in a day?
- How do you use social media networks to consume news?
- If required to swipe up (Snapchat) or refer to a link in the bio (Instagram) for the full story, how often do you read the full story on these platforms?
- If required to click a link (Facebook or Twitter), how often do you read the full story?
- Regardless of the social media network, how often do you a read a story in its entirety?
- How do you distinguish between credible news stories from other information on social media networks?

Discussion 3: Verifying and sharing news stories
How do you verify news stories?

- What steps do you take to verify a news story found on social media?
- In your opinion, what makes a news story on social media seem ‘trustworthy’?
- How much does the source of the story matter?
- How much does it matter who shared the news story with you in the first place?
- How often do you share news stories?
- How do you decide whether a news story should be shared?
- Who do you share stories with and why?

Discussion 4: Federal election
Thinking back to the 2019 federal election campaign:

- How did you find out about issues in the campaign?
- How did you find information about political parties and political leaders, and their positions on issues?
- How did you verify news stories about the election, including issues and politicians?
- What kinds of news stories did you share about the election or election issues?
- How often did you access election news on social media?
- How often did you access election news on news organizations' websites?
- What differences and similarities did you observe between the stories on social media and those on news websites?

Discussion 5: Affordances of different mediums (A political story is projected on a screen showing it on the landing page of a mainstream news website as well as the four social media platforms under study. If required, participants will use their own smartphones to access the stories as well.)

- Consider the story you see before you about _____ issue.
- Which of the stories most interests and engages you to read on? Why?
- What makes one story more interesting to you over another?
- Looking at each of these stories in turn, what steps would you take to verify the story?
- Which would you share with someone else and why?
- If you were to share this story, would you add a comment? If so, what would you say?

Appendix D

CODING PROCEDURE

The first step of coding the data involved reading through each transcript line by line to both familiarize myself with the data and to ensure verbatim transcription. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, in qualitative research it is important that the transcript retain the information "in a way that is 'true' to its original nature" (p. 88). This was especially important given the nature of Zoom recordings where low bandwidth and people talking at the same time prevented transcription software from accurately transcribing some parts of the conversation. It was critical that I watch both the video and listen to the audio to ensure accuracy.

The procedural description for coding followed that recommended by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), which is aimed at moving from raw text to research concerns in small steps by moving the researcher from a lower level of understanding to higher level while being able to move back and forth between the stages as new insights are gained. Thus, my analysis started with me reading and re-reading each transcript separately to become familiar with the text. Following the second reading I selected *relevant text*, that is, text specifically related to my research concerns, and copied it onto a new document (see Table 1). This kept me focused on what I wanted to know and why as I chose which text to keep. I also wrote memos to note relationships, fresh ideas or connections to research concerns, and recorded potential *repeating ideas*, "an idea expressed in relevant text by two or more research participants" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 54).

Table 1
Sample of relevant text

JR: Because I don't really search up news like I like reading Canadian news more than American news. But it feels like everything's overloaded with Americans. If you want to browse maybe the first page of Reddit there will be four things about Donald Trump. Right? You know, and so it almost seems like they're more popular and they get more attention than us so it's just kind of crammed in my face, but I don't necessarily like reading it. I'd rather read, like I'm more likely search up Canadian news, than American news.
(Memo: Focus on SM feeds is U.S. political news, not Canadian. Lack of access to Canadian news (esp. at the provincial and local level).

MS: I definitely read more Canadian than anything else. I do, however, like, I don't tend to read U.S. too much, unless it has to do with Canada just because, sometimes, I find the U.S. ridiculous, but um, I do like to just search up Canada and other countries. I find that really important to know like our relationship and standing with some other international partners but I'm normally just Canadian, yeah.
(Memo: This generation thinks globally, not just locally.)

In the third step, I started at the top of the page of relevant text for each transcript and looked for the first *repeating idea*. I transferred this over to a new page then went through the entire transcript, copying over each repeating idea that related to this starter idea (see Table 2). This step allowed me to see deeper connections between ideas across the entire conversation, not necessarily in the same moment, and across groups. This provided insight into the importance of some themes over others. The importance placed on 6ixBuzzTV as a news source is an example of this. Each repeating idea was named using an excerpt from the text to express the overall sentiment because the participants' own words are "more evocative of their subjective experience" (Auberach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 58).

Table 2
Sample of a repeating idea

Repeating idea #13 – "It feels like everything's overloaded with Americans"

JR: ...I know I least I'm in Whitby, and I couldn't even tell you what the municipal news is in Whitby, at least regarding anything politics, and it doesn't feel like there's a lot of channels unless I'm searching them out, that I can actually read about it. Like, you know, what the mayor has done is almost never going to come up on my newsfeed for me at least. Whereas all I see is what Donald Trump's done what you know, what's happening in Italy, all these, what Trudeau is talking about. It's much harder to find those municipal channels and those closer unless I searched them up. (pp. 6-7)
TS-M: Way more often than, not more often for Canadian than American. I'm not really as interested only, like, I know someone said earlier, it's like, let's say Donald Trump messes up, for example.
JR: Because I don't really search up news. Like, I like reading Canadian news more than American news. But it feels like everything's overloaded with Americans. If you want to browse maybe the first page of Reddit there will be four things about Donald Trump. Right? You know, and so it almost seems like they're more popular and they get more attention than us so it's just kind of crammed in my face, but I don't necessarily like reading it. I'd rather read, like I'm more likely search up Canadian news, than American news. (p. 13)
TS-M: With my dad, specifically, politics, like about everything basically, whatever Trump's up to or any, but any other family, it would just be things like, 'Hey, be careful not to go here. They have ticks, something like, just more like warnings, health and safety (p. 19)

The fourth step involved a similar process, this time using the repeating ideas to find *repeating themes*, "an implicit idea or topic that a group of repeating ideas have in common" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 62). I started by transferring all of the repeating ideas to a master list in a new document (see Table 3). Then, starting with the first repeating idea I looked for other repeating ideas in common with the first and clustered them together. I repeated this process until all of the repeated ideas had been clustered (see Table 4). Once again, I referred

back to my research concerns and any ideas that now seemed to hold less relevance were discarded. In other cases, some repeating ideas were collapsed together, while others were moved from one repeating theme to another. The themes were named in simple terms that described the overarching sentiment.

Table 3
Sample of the master list of repeating ideas

(a) "It's just somehow everybody just knows."
(b) "I'm not a news watcher."
(c) "Politics is not my number one choice."
(d) "I'm more interested in the comments."
(e) "Hashtags are huge."
(f) "It's kind of like a news desert."
(g) "I don't particularly like mainstream media."
(h) "I usually just kind of back it up as well."
(i) "I always start with Google."
(j) "I need to be extremely interested in it."
(k) "I look for whoever is not biased."
(l) "I'm often guilty of getting caught by the headline."
(m) "It feels like everything's overloaded with Americans."

Table 4
Sample of a repeating theme

Theme #2 – Limited interest in political news and discussion
(c) "Politics is not my number one choice."
(m) "It feels like everything's overloaded with Americans."
(p) "The trolls are real."
(Memo: Political news is irrelevant and inaccessible. It's not something they want to share or discuss due to toxicity of the internet.)

The final step was to look for major themes. Similar to the previous steps, I moved the first repeating theme over to a new document (see Table 5). I then went through the major themes and moved over each related theme into that cluster. When there were no further themes connected to

that starter theme, I moved to the next and found all of the related themes to that starter and clustered them together. I repeated this process until the themes were exhausted. At that point, I used more abstract ideas to name the major themes.

Table 5
Sample of a major theme

II. *Limited interest in politics and political news*
A. Expectation news will come to them
(a) “It's just somehow everybody just knows.”
(b) “I’m not a news watcher.”
(j) “I need to be extremely interested in it.”
(x) Prefer news aggregators.
(z) “I don’t go looking for the news; it’s like the news finds me.”
B. Limited interest in political news and discussion
(c) “Politics is not my number one choice.”
(m) “It feels like everything’s overloaded with Americans.”
(ee) Inundated with U.S., not local, political news
(p) “The trolls are real.”
(w) “Politics is a little taboo.”
(aa) “Away from election time, it’s non-existent for me.”