

## **Scroll, Click, Trust? Repeat**

Dutch Instagram Users' Perceptions of News Credibility Regarding the Gaza Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

*In today's fragmented media landscape, Instagram plays an increasingly prominent role as a news source for young adults, raising concerns regarding news credibility, algorithmic influence, and misinformation. This thesis explores how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of traditional broadcaster accounts, such as @nosstories, compared to non-broadcaster news accounts, including @cestmocro and @nieuws, within the context of the ongoing Gaza conflict. Although prior research has examined news trust on platforms like Twitter or Facebook, Instagram's visually oriented and algorithmically curated environment remains understudied, especially during polarised geopolitical events. This research combines twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a deductive thematic analysis, guided by media credibility theory, uses and gratifications theory, and the concepts of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and media repertoires. The findings reveal that participants' credibility assessments are shaped by political alignment, emotional engagement, habitual news routines, and platform-specific features. Traditional news outlets are generally perceived as reliable, yet participants expressed scepticism regarding perceived bias or incomplete reporting on Gaza. Non-broadcaster accounts were praised for providing immediacy and alternative perspectives, but concerns regarding sensationalism, ideological one-sidedness, and misinformation were also prevalent. Instagram's algorithm and visual presentation further shape news engagement, reinforcing selective exposure and confirmation bias. Familiarity, convenience, and social validation often influence trust perceptions, even when critical reflection is limited. These results highlight the need for stronger media literacy, platform accountability, and journalistic adaptation to meet the expectations of young audiences. By focusing on the intersection of platform dynamics, source characteristics, and user motivations, this study offers new insights into how trust in news is constructed within the algorithmically driven, highly visual environment of Instagram.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Media Credibility, Social Media, News Source Trust, Deductive Thematic Analysis, Semi-structured Interviews*

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and context**

Sharing news on social networks and social media platforms has become an essential part of the contemporary digital landscape (Newman, 2009, p. 43). Social media's ability to rapidly disseminate information to wide audiences has encouraged traditional news organisations to adapt their newsroom structures and journalistic practices to remain relevant in this competitive, fragmented media environment (Thomas, 2025, para. 2). Simultaneously, non-broadcaster social media accounts have emerged as influential news providers, often operating outside the formal boundaries of professional journalism. These accounts typically rely on a sourcing pattern that amplifies user-generated content and eyewitness reports, reshared and reframed at various levels of proximity to the audience (Tandoc, 2018, p. 180). This dynamic has blurred the boundaries between institutional journalism, citizen reporting, and activism, especially in the context of global crises.

Social media's role in crisis communication has grown considerably. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok not only allow real-time updates and rapid dissemination of news but also create spaces for participatory discourse, peer validation, and alternative framing of events (Selvi, 2023, paras. 4-5). Particularly during large-scale humanitarian crises, such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or protracted conflicts, social media enables citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers, elevating alternative voices and facilitating grassroots mobilisation. However, this acceleration of information sharing presents substantial challenges: the spread of misinformation, the influence of emotional framing, and the formation of polarised echo chambers (Rhodes, 2021, p. 2).

The ongoing conflict in Gaza, which escalated severely in October 2023, exemplifies the critical role that social media now plays in shaping public understanding of complex geopolitical events (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 295). Due to restricted journalistic access, the dominance of government-controlled narratives, and editorial selectivity in traditional Western media, coverage of the conflict has often lacked historical context and detailed reporting on civilian casualties (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, pp. 295–296). Consequently, many young audiences have turned to Instagram to access real-time updates, first-hand testimonies, and visual content that offers alternative perspectives often underrepresented in legacy media (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 297).

This shift towards Instagram as a primary news source raises critical questions about credibility, trust, and the spread of misinformation. While some social media accounts provide valuable, timely information, others disseminate unverified claims, employ emotionally

manipulative framing, or promote ideologically biased narratives (Awwad & Toyama, 2024, para. 3.3). Instagram's algorithmic curation, visual-centric design, and reliance on social validation (likes, shares, comments) may further complicate users' ability to critically evaluate the reliability of news content. Unlike text-heavy platforms such as Twitter, Instagram's visual presentation may trigger affective responses that bypass deeper cognitive processing, thereby shaping credibility judgments in subtle but significant ways.

Moreover, the platform's interactive features, such as story polls and comment threads, enable peer-to-peer engagement that can reinforce social identity and collective belief systems. These dynamics contribute to the entrenchment of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users predominantly encounter content that aligns with their existing views, often at the expense of exposure to diverse perspectives (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). As such, the credibility assessments of young Instagram users are not formed in isolation but are shaped by the technological, emotional, and social structures embedded within the platform.

Given these developments, it is important to investigate how young audiences perceive and evaluate the credibility of different news sources during highly polarised conflicts like the war in Gaza. Understanding these perceptions is essential for promoting critical news consumption and for informing journalistic, educational, and policy responses that address the challenges posed by the hybrid digital news environment.

## **1.2 Societal relevance**

In an era where global crises unfold in real time on social media, understanding how individuals engage with, interpret, and evaluate news content has become increasingly important. Platforms such as Instagram, which combine entertainment, community interaction, and information provision, are central to this development, particularly among younger audiences (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10). For many in the 18 to 35 age group, Instagram is no longer merely a space for social connection or leisure; it functions as a primary gateway to news, shaping perceptions of global events and influencing public discourse (Galan et al., 2019, p. 21).

The war in Gaza, which has been widely disseminated and discussed through Instagram, exemplifies how traditional journalism now coexists—and often competes—with non-traditional news sources, including citizen journalism, activist accounts, and entertainment-focused pages that share news fragments. This development raises critical societal questions about the democratisation of news production, the risks of misinformation, and the deepening of polarisation through algorithmically reinforced information environments (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334). Traditional media outlets, such as NOS and NRC, have responded to these shifts by adopting

platform-specific communication strategies aimed at retaining relevance among younger audiences. They have integrated Instagram's visual and interactive features into their news delivery, offering short videos, carousels, and interactive polls designed to align with the platform's participatory culture (NOS, 2025; NRC, 2025). These efforts underline the evolving relationship between established journalism and social media logic, where credibility is no longer defined solely by institutional reputation but increasingly shaped by aesthetic presentation, emotional appeal, and peer engagement (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397).

At the same time, non-traditional accounts such as @cestmocro or @nieuws have gained substantial influence by providing rapid, often emotionally charged updates that resonate with users' personal beliefs and experiences. While these accounts may foster alternative perspectives, they also contribute to a fragmented news landscape where sensationalism, ideological one-sidedness, and misinformation can circulate unchecked (Awwad & Toyama, 2024, para. 3.3). Particularly in the context of the Gaza conflict, where reporting is highly polarised and access to reliable information is limited (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 296), understanding how audiences form trust in different news sources on Instagram is essential for safeguarding informed democratic participation.

Furthermore, Instagram's algorithmic design, which prioritises personalised content based on user preferences, exacerbates the risk of filter bubbles and echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforcing existing beliefs (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11; Möller, 2021, p. 93). These dynamics have tangible implications for public debate, civic engagement, and the ability to critically evaluate news in times of crisis.

This thesis addresses these societal concerns by investigating how Dutch Instagram users assess the credibility of Gaza-related news. In doing so, it offers insights relevant to educators, policymakers, journalists, and platform designers. Strengthening media literacy initiatives, ensuring platform accountability, and fostering journalistic practices that align with the expectations and habits of younger audiences are vital steps towards mitigating the risks of misinformation, polarisation, and superficial news engagement. By focusing on the interplay between user motivations, platform structures, and news credibility, this research contributes to ongoing societal efforts to maintain a well-informed and critically engaged public in an increasingly digital and polarised media environment.

### **1.3 Academic relevance**

Academically, this study contributes to multiple intersecting fields within media and communication studies, including research on media trust, credibility evaluation, social media

journalism, and algorithmic influence. While research has extensively explored information on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, Instagram remains comparatively underexamined in scholarly literature, particularly in the context of news consumption during conflict (Swart & Broersma, 2022, p. 397). As a visually oriented and algorithmically curated platform, Instagram raises new questions about how credibility is perceived when images, reels, and engagement metrics become central to how users interpret news.

Moreover, this thesis builds on and integrates several academic concepts. It applies media credibility theory (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2014, pp. 23-24), which distinguishes between source credibility, the trustworthiness and expertise of content producers, and medium credibility, referring to trust in the platform itself. It also draws on uses and gratifications theory (Whiting & Williams, 2013, pp. 366-367) to explain why young users turn to Instagram for news: not only for information-seeking, but also for convenience, emotional engagement, or social interaction. Finally, it incorporates the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers to explore how algorithmic curation might reinforce political biases or narrow exposure to diverse perspectives (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, pp. 10-11). By focusing on a specific age group and conflict, this thesis addresses a clear empirical gap while also helping to refine broader theoretical understandings of media credibility in the digital age.

#### **1.4 Research question and objectives**

In an effort to address the academic and societal gap concerning the credibility of news on social media platforms, this study explores how Dutch young-adult audiences perceive and evaluate the credibility of traditional broadcaster Instagram accounts (e.g., @nosstories, @ad\_nl) in comparison to non-broadcaster Instagram accounts that (re)post news (e.g., @cestmicro, @nieuws) within the context of the ongoing conflict in Gaza. While previous research has examined general patterns of trust in news media and online information consumption, less is known about how users distinguish between different types of news sources on Instagram during politically sensitive events. This study contributes to this gap by focusing on users' evaluations of source credibility in a platform-specific and crisis-related context.

The central research question guiding this study is: *“How do Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of non-broadcaster news accounts versus traditional broadcaster accounts when seeking information on the Gaza conflict?”* To answer this question, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35, which was followed by a thematic analysis of their responses.

The objective of this research is to better understand how young Instagram users assess the



credibility of news content, what role source characteristics play in this process, and how everyday media use may influence these perceptions. By comparing traditional broadcasters with non-broadcaster news accounts, this study aims to provide insight into how credibility is constructed within the routines and media repertoires of young audiences.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This thesis draws upon media credibility theory to understand how Dutch users of Instagram between 18 and 35 evaluate news sources regarding the Gaza conflict. It further utilises uses and gratifications theory to explain audience motivations behind engaging with certain Instagram news accounts. Additionally, the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers are discussed to explore how algorithmic exposure shapes long-term credibility perceptions. Integrating these theories and concepts allows for an in-depth exploration of how Dutch Instagram users evaluate and engage with both traditional broadcaster accounts and non-broadcaster news accounts providing information on the Gaza conflict.

### **2.1 Social media as a news source**

The Reuters Institute report on young people's consumption of news (Galan et al., 2019, p. 21) has revealed that Instagram is the most used application (in daily minutes of screen time) by Gen Z and Gen Y, 18- to 35-year-olds. In their top 25 most-used apps, no news application was found. Yet, this does not imply that the young adults do not want to access news or do not search for news at all. They want news to be interesting and important to them, rather than only being important for society (Galan et al., 2019, p. 54). They would like to read more news on not only what they 'should' know, but also news that is interesting to them, that is fun to know, or news that can be useful to know. This type of news is easily found on Instagram as they can curate and control the news that they want to see easily by following certain accounts or hashtags (Galan et al., 2019, pp. 22-23). In addition, Instagram seems to be seen as a platform that demands more focus and attention from its users in terms of news consumption (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 11). This leads to the notion that Instagram can be seen as a relevant news source for young adults.

This user-centred mode of news consumption is well explained by uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which helps account for the psychological and social motivations behind media choices. According to UGT, individuals actively select media that satisfy specific needs, such as information-seeking, convenience, or social interaction (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843; Whiting & Williams, 2013, pp. 366–367). In the context of Instagram, these gratifications are particularly relevant to how and why users engage with news content. Many young adults turn to Instagram not only for its immediacy and visual appeal but also because it provides alternative perspectives not always present in mainstream reporting (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12). Furthermore, the social aspect of the platform, such as likes, shares, and comment threads, adds a layer of community interaction to news engagement, reinforcing a sense of involvement or participation. These motivations are especially salient during ongoing crises like the Gaza conflict, where users seek real-time updates

and emotionally resonant narratives.

Social media facilitates real-time information dissemination, engagement with alternative perspectives, and direct interaction with news providers (Selvi, 2023, paras. 4-5). Di Domenico et al. (2021, p. 334) specifically looked into the dissemination of fake news on social media; some of their findings can be applied to the spreading of all news on social media. The spreading of news on social media platforms is mostly linked to shares, likes and reposts from users. The interaction of users with posts is strongly related to the online behaviour of their social circle (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334). Users are looking for confirmation of their online community and aim to achieve this through their sharing behaviour. When consuming online content, people don't invest much time or mental energy. As a result, people's attitudes towards news posts and their intention to remark on and spread fake news are greatly influenced by the behaviours of other users. As noted by Sundar et al. (2024, p. 156), users often participate in 'sharing without clicking', in which the users interact with news posts without properly investigating the source and content of the social media post. This superficial sharing of news is widely prevalent on social media platforms and deeply contributes to news dissemination. Additionally, it is important to note that there are also non-human players in the field of news dissemination on social media. Non-human agents in the form of robots (or social bots) are active on the platforms through computer algorithms which are designed to mimic human-like behaviour on the platforms (Di Domenico et al., 2021, pp. 334 – 335). By liking, sharing and commenting, they interact with human users and quicken the spreading of (fake) news. In addition, the algorithm of the social media platforms also plays a role in news dissemination, as it facilitates the spread of news through multiple factors. The low barriers present on social media platforms make it easy and inexpensive for anyone to create and amplify content, with services available to buy followers or even deploy social bots (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 335). The structure of social media encourages superficial engagement with content, as users are often prioritising eye-catching headlines over credible sources. This environment promotes shallow thinking and increases users' susceptibility to misinformation. Social media fosters polarisation by creating echo chambers where users mostly encounter content that confirms their existing beliefs, reinforcing biases. This phenomenon will be discussed further in a later part of the theoretical framework.

As Instagram has become more dominant as a news platform for younger audiences, assessing how the users perceive news source credibility on this platform is essential (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 2). The audience's assessment of news is heavily influenced by the perceived credibility of the media (Volobueva, 2008, p. 22). Media credibility theory provides the framework to understand these perceptions by emphasising two primary dimensions: source credibility and medium

credibility.

## **2.2 Source credibility**

Source credibility refers to the perceived trustworthiness and expertise attributed to specific news, as source credibility looks mainly at the writer(s) or the publishers of the news articles (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, pp. 139-140; Wölker & Powell, 2021, p. 88). Traditionally, audiences assessed credibility based on journalistic reputation, rigorous fact-checking, and editorial oversight. In the social media age, however, these traditional measures often intersect with modern factors such as engagement metrics, community endorsement, and perceived authenticity (Tandonc et al., 2017, pp. 142-143). Perceived authenticity and relatability significantly influence credibility judgments, especially among users who perceive mainstream media as biased or lacking transparency (& Boersma, 2021, p. 397). Source credibility reliably influences perceptions of truth, particularly in online environments. Information attributed to credible sources consistently leads to higher truth assessments compared to information from non-credible or unknown sources (Nadarevic et al., 2020, pp. 13-14). This effect arises because users often use credibility as a shortcut, particularly when motivation or ability to critically analyse content is low. Moreover, Nadarevic et al. (2020, p. 14) found that repeated exposure significantly amplifies perceived truth, suggesting that familiarity itself can sometimes overshadow explicit credibility evaluations, particularly on social media where repetition is frequent and rapid.

In addition, according to Verboord (2024, p. 243), media repertoires, the patterns by which individuals habitually combine various media, have profound implications for how users assess trustworthiness. Users often depend on habitual consumption patterns rather than active, critical assessments of source credibility, meaning frequent exposure to specific Instagram news sources reinforces perceived credibility due to familiarity and routine rather than rigorous reliability checks (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 5). Therefore, trust in sources is shaped not only by content quality but also significantly by embedded habits within users' media repertoires.

Political alignment profoundly shapes perceptions of source credibility. The study by Sülflow et al. (2019, p. 170) indicates that an alignment between audience beliefs and source narratives heavily influences credibility evaluations. Traberg and Van Der Linden (2021, p. 2) further reinforce this, finding that perceived credibility significantly mediates the impact of political biases on susceptibility to misinformation. Individuals tend to view politically aligned sources as inherently more credible, making them more likely to accept (mis)information from such sources and dismiss truthful information from politically dissimilar ones. This phenomenon is notably prevalent during politically charged events, such as the Gaza conflict, where mainstream media often faces criticism

for perceived Western biases, insufficient historical context, and inadequate reporting on civilian suffering, particularly Palestinian casualties (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, pp. 295-296). Hence, Dutch Instagram users, aged 18- 35, may increasingly trust non-broadcaster accounts for alternative narratives, grassroots perspectives, and perceived transparency absent in traditional reporting.

### **2.3 Medium credibility**

While source credibility refers to trust in the content provider (journalists, experts, or influencers, etc.), medium credibility concerns how the platform, through which the message is delivered, shapes audience perceptions of trustworthiness (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 101; Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). In traditional settings, medium credibility often referred to institutionalised media like newspapers, radio, or television (Hovland et al., 1953, as cited in Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). However, in the current media environment, social media platforms introduce new dimensions to how credibility is assessed. With the rise of algorithmic curation and user-generated content, platforms like Instagram are not just passive channels for information but active agents in shaping news experiences (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 180).

Instagram's credibility is influenced by its visual-centric nature, reliance on algorithmic personalisation, and emphasis on interactive features like likes, comments, and story polls. These interactive and participatory functions create a credibility environment that differs from traditional media. Users often associate high engagement, in the form of likes, shares, and comment threads, with relevance or truthfulness, even in the absence of traditional journalistic verification (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406). This creates a user-centric mechanism of trust, where the visibility and social validation of a post function as heuristic cues for credibility.

Furthermore, Instagram's hybrid identity as both a social and media platform positions it as a unique site for news consumption, particularly among younger audiences. Sülflow et al. (2019, p. 173) found that the visual and social aspects of Instagram significantly enhance trust in content, as users may associate personalisation and aesthetic presentation with authenticity. In politically sensitive contexts such as the Gaza conflict, the visual and social aspects may become even more influential. Users may assess credibility not solely based on institutional reputation but on emotional resonance, shareability, or alignment with community narratives. All of which are shaped by the medium's features (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 148).

Important to note, this study limits its analysis to Instagram as the medium of interest, as this is the most used social media platform of the target audience (Galan et al, 2019, pp. 20-21; Newman et al., 2024, p. 10). All participants are asked about their experiences consuming news about the Gaza conflict, specifically on Instagram, allowing for a focused exploration of how

medium-specific affordances influence perceived credibility during a complex, evolving geopolitical event.

## **2.4 Filter bubbles and echo chambers**

Filter bubbles and echo chambers provide additional explanatory mechanisms for understanding audience credibility assessments. In the context of social media platforms like Instagram, algorithmic filtering tailors content to user preferences, creating personalised "filter bubbles" that limit exposure to diverse viewpoints (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). While such personalisation enhances user engagement, it also reinforces confirmation biases, as users are consistently exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing views, thereby amplifying the perceived credibility of familiar sources (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 170).

Echo chambers further influence this phenomenon through reinforced social interactions within homogeneous networks. On platforms like Instagram, users often engage with like-minded individuals, creating environments where different opinions are scarce. This social reinforcement solidifies existing beliefs and can lead to increased polarisation, particularly in politically sensitive contexts such as the Gaza conflict, where users may gravitate towards sources that reflect their ideological ideas and perceived authenticity (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 10).

Möller (2021, p. 92) elaborates that both filter bubbles and echo chambers are based on the idea that individuals are excluded from information that challenges their beliefs, often leading to ideological segregation. While filter bubbles result primarily from algorithmic selection by curating a personal information ecosystem based on user behaviour, echo chambers stem from user-driven selection, where social ties and like-mindedness shape what content is shared and consumed (Möller, 2021, p. 93). This distinction is important: filter bubbles emphasise the boundaries created by algorithms, while echo chambers focus on the repetition of views within socially constructed environments.

The underlying mechanisms behind both phenomena include selective exposure and homophily. Selective exposure refers to the tendency of individuals to prefer information that aligns with their existing beliefs, avoiding conflicting viewpoints that may cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957, as cited in Möller, 2021, p. 93). Homophily, the preference for forming social bonds with similar others, further reinforces these filter bubbles by ensuring that individuals' networks predominantly circulate familiar, belief-confirming content (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954, as cited in Möller, 2021, p. 93).

These mechanisms are particularly relevant during the Gaza conflict, where content is politically charged and emotionally loaded. Dutch Instagram users may thus find themselves inside

information environments that continually validate their perspectives, not only through algorithmic reinforcement but also through the selective sharing behaviours of their social circles. Such dynamics complicate credibility assessments and raise questions about the diversity and reliability of the news consumed.

## **2.5 Media repertoires**

The concept of media repertoires provides an important lens through which to understand the habitual and contextualised nature of news consumption. A media repertoire refers to the specific combination of media types, platforms, and sources individuals routinely use to access content (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369). Rather than approaching media use as isolated or purely rational decisions, this perspective views it as part of a structured, everyday practice shaped by habit, social background, and individual preference. As Verboord (2024, pp. 255–258) argues, these repertoires significantly affect how users engage with and evaluate the credibility of information, particularly in digital environments where media choices are abundant and algorithmically curated.

Media repertoires thus influence not only what content is consumed but also how that content is perceived in terms of credibility. These repertoires are not merely individual routines but are embedded within broader processes of social stratification (Vandenplas & Picone, 2021, p. 1455). These processes shape how users engage with media and attribute value to different sources, suggesting that credibility assessments are entangled with both habitual exposure and socio-cultural positioning.

On Instagram, young users' repertoires often include a mix of traditional broadcaster accounts (such as @nosstories or @ad\_nl) and non-traditional news sources (such as @cestmocro or @nieuws). While traditional outlets provide institutional credibility and professional journalism practices, non-traditional accounts are often valued for their immediacy, emotional resonance, and perceived authenticity. Hendrickx (2024, p. 12) observes that young users tend to develop trust in specific accounts not necessarily due to their journalistic accuracy, but due to their integration into daily media routines and the affective familiarity they provide.

Media repertoires thus influence not only what content is consumed but also how that content is perceived in terms of credibility. Users who regularly follow non-traditional accounts may begin to attribute credibility to them based on repeated exposure and routine engagement, rather than critical evaluation (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 5). This aligns with findings by Diddi and LaRose (2006, p. 195), who noted that audiences often transition from active selection to habitual consumption, reinforcing perceptions of credibility through familiarity and convenience. Therefore, media repertoires play a key role in understanding the subjective credibility assessments Dutch Instagram

users make when navigating complex, conflict related news like that on Gaza.

## **2.6 Traditional vs non-traditional news outlets on Instagram**

A final distinction necessary to this framework lies in the differentiation between traditional and non-traditional news outlets on Instagram. Traditional broadcaster accounts, such as @nosstories and @ad\_nl, are extensions of legacy media institutions known for established editorial guidelines, journalistic standards, and institutional oversight. These accounts are often perceived as reliable due to their affiliations with mainstream news organisations and their use of professional reporting practices (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, pp. 139–140). However, this perception is increasingly contested by younger users, who may view mainstream media as biased, incomplete, or misaligned with their values, particularly in contexts involving geopolitical or humanitarian crises like Gaza (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, pp. 295–296).

In contrast, non-traditional Instagram accounts such as @cestmocro and @nieuws operate outside the institutional journalistic sphere. These accounts typically aggregate, reframe, or comment on existing news, often using viral language, memes, or emotional storytelling to engage audiences. Their appeal lies in their immediacy, relatability, and perceived grassroots nature, which may be seen as more transparent or authentic than traditional sources. This relatability often resonates with users who feel alienated by formal news language or sceptical of elite media agendas (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397).

While traditional outlets benefit from their historical credibility and fact-checking infrastructure, non-traditional accounts leverage social capital, aesthetic familiarity, and community endorsement as markers of credibility. This distinction is particularly important for understanding how users navigate credibility assessments, especially when political biases and emotional framing intersect with platform-specific cues like likes, shares, and comments. Exploring how Dutch Instagram users engage with both types of sources reveals the changing contours of news trust and the shifting boundaries between journalism and social media commentary.

## **2.7 To conclude**

To sum up all that has been stated above, this theoretical framework brings together several perspectives that aid in investigating how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 assess the credibility of news during the Gaza conflict, focusing on the differences between traditional news sources posting on Instagram and non-traditional news accounts. Media credibility theory forms the backbone of this study, highlighting how perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise are shaped by both the content provider (source credibility) and the platform through which the content is



delivered (medium credibility). Uses and gratifications theory explains why users may initially gravitate toward Instagram for news, as they are driven by convenience and the appeal of social interaction. While media repertoire theory helps account for the habitual nature of users' platform and source preferences over time. The concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers further nuance the framework by illustrating how Instagram's algorithmic curation and social feedback mechanisms may reinforce confirmation biases and limit exposure to dissenting perspectives. Finally, the distinction between traditional and non-traditional news outlets on Instagram highlights how audiences increasingly turn to alternative, grassroots accounts for perceived authenticity and alignment with their ideological views, especially in the emotionally and politically charged context of the Gaza conflict. Together, these theories and concepts allow for a comprehensive exploration of how platform dynamics, user motivations, and broader media structures intersect to shape news trust and engagement on Instagram.

### **3. Research design**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to explore how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of news accounts in the context of the Gaza conflict. It explains the rationale for choosing qualitative research and semi-structured interviews as the primary method, details the sampling and interview procedures, and describes how the key theoretical concepts were operationalised in the interview guide (see Appendix B). It explains the process of the deductive thematic analysis. Additionally, it addresses issues of validity, reliability, and ethics, demonstrating how thoroughness and transparency were maintained throughout the research process.

#### **3.1 Interviews, sampling, and applied case**

This thesis uses qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews, to answer the research question: “How do Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of non-broadcaster news accounts versus traditional broadcaster accounts when seeking information about the Gaza conflict?”. The decision to use semi-structured interviews stems from the need to explore participants’ perspectives in detail while maintaining enough structure to ensure comparability across interviews. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable when the aim is to understand how people make sense of complex social phenomena, such as media trust during a politically sensitive conflict. As Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021, p. 1360) explain, this method allows for a focused conversation guided by predefined themes, while also giving participants the space to introduce relevant experiences and reflections that might otherwise be overlooked. This flexibility is essential when studying media credibility on a platform like Instagram, where individual interpretations are shaped by habits, emotions, social interactions, and contextual knowledge. The method enables the researcher to probe deeper when necessary, following up on unexpected but meaningful insights. In this way, semi-structured interviews offer a balance between consistency and openness, making them an appropriate choice for investigating how credibility judgments are formed and negotiated in the evolving landscape of social media news.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for exploring subjective, situationally influenced concepts such as source credibility, medium credibility, and algorithmic exposure, which are highly dependent on individual experiences and interpretations (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14; Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 170). Unlike quantitative methods, which may overlook such nuances, interviews provide the depth required to understand how participants perceive and process information within the complex information environments created by Instagram. Similar qualitative methods have been effectively employed by Hendrickx (2024, pp. 6–8), who

combined semi-structured interviews with the walkthrough method to explore how young Belgian adults perceive and interact with news content on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

A total of 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews have been conducted, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, to provide detailed insights without overburdening participants. In-depth interviews allow for rich insights into how Dutch Instagram users, aged 18–35 years old, perceive news on Instagram, particularly as it enables the participants to compare and explain their perceptions of news provided by broadcaster Instagram accounts in comparison to non-broadcaster Instagram accounts (Legard et al., 2003, p. 139). The interviews were conducted in Dutch as it was the mother tongue of all participants, and they felt more comfortable speaking in Dutch compared to English. This promotes authenticity and encourages participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. Interviews were held either via video conferencing or face-to-face, depending on participant preference, to maximise comfort and engagement. The interviews were led by one researcher, the author of this thesis, along the lines of a pre-determined interview guide (see Appendix B), which will be discussed in detail in paragraph 3.2. As the interviews were semi-structured, there was space for additional personal questions that followed from the participants' answers. The interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and then transcribed for analytical purposes. The interviews were thematically analysed using deductive thematic analysis, which will be explained more in depth in paragraph 3.3.

The sample consists of 12 Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 who regularly consume their news through the social media platform (7 men, 5 women, with a mean age of 25.16, see Appendix A). This age range was selected as they are the most active age demographic on Instagram as of 2024 (Statista, 2024). Furthermore, this group represents a key demographic within the academic and societal debates surrounding news trust, misinformation, and polarisation in digital environments (Galan et al., 2019, p. 21; Hendrickx, 2024, p. 11).

The aim was to recruit a diverse sample with a balance of gender identities, education levels, and political orientations to capture varied perspectives. A diverse sample contributes to the ability to generate transferable results and strengthens reliability. However, it became apparent during recruitment that assembling a politically diverse sample was more challenging than initially anticipated. As such, the sample is predominantly composed of left-leaning participants. Although this political skew represents a limitation regarding generalisability, it also mirrors existing patterns of ideological homogeneity within the information environments of young Dutch Instagram users (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). Therefore, the sample remains ecologically valid for examining how credibility perceptions operate within ideologically aligned media bubbles.

The sampling method combines purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling method where participants are intentionally selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the study (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653–654). Within this research, purposive sampling was used to recruit Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 who actively consume news on the platform from both broadcaster Instagram accounts and non-broadcaster Instagram accounts, ensuring that the sample reflects the target audience's news consumption habits, trust perceptions, engagement patterns, and the diverse media repertoire of both types of news retrieval on the platform. Snowball sampling is a network-based sampling method in which initial participants refer other potential participants who meet the research criteria, allowing the sample to expand organically, like a snowball gathering more snow while it rolls down a hill (Parker et al., 2019, p. 3). Although snowball sampling facilitates recruitment, it also risks intensifying ideological homogeneity, as participants tend to recommend peers within similar political and social circles. This dynamic, observed within the current study, reflects the real-world operation of echo chambers and filter bubbles on Instagram, where social networks play a crucial role in reinforcing exposure to aligned viewpoints (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11; Möller, 2021, p. 93).

The Gaza conflict is an appropriate and timely case for examining credibility perceptions, as it represents a highly polarised and contested media landscape with pronounced accusations of bias, especially within Western media contexts (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, pp. 295–296). Instagram has been selected as the research platform due to its widespread use among young adults, its visual emphasis, and unique features that shape how credibility is perceived, including interactivity, community engagement, and algorithmic content curation (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 173; Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406). Focusing on the Gaza conflict allows for the exploration of credibility assessments under conditions of heightened emotional involvement, political sensitivity, and competing narratives.

### **3.2 Operationalisation: the interview guide**

The interview guide for this research was built around four core theoretical concepts derived from the framework: source credibility, medium credibility, media repertoires, and algorithmic influence (including filter bubbles and echo chambers). These concepts directly shaped the thematic structure and sequence of questions used during the interviews and were aimed at uncovering how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of different types of news sources, especially concerning the conflict in Gaza.

To explore source credibility, participants were asked about their trust in both traditional broadcaster accounts (such as @nosstories or @ad\_nl) and non-traditional Instagram accounts

(such as @cestmocro or @nieuws). They reflected on which aspects made them trust or distrust these sources, with prompts concerning tone of voice, visual presentation, sourcing practices, engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments), and perceived authenticity. These elements correspond to the credibility indicators identified in academic literature, such as perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and relatability (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, pp. 139–140; Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397). Additionally, specific attention was paid to participants' reflections on Gaza-related content, with follow-up questions exploring the influence of political alignment, perceived bias, and emotional impact on their credibility judgments (Traberg & Van Der Linden, 2021, p. 2).

In addressing medium credibility, participants were invited to reflect critically on Instagram as a platform beyond the news sources themselves. Rather than abstract theoretical prompts, questions focused on how Instagram's visual orientation, interactive affordances, and algorithmic design shaped their perception of trustworthiness. For example, participants were asked how different content formats (e.g., reels, posts, stories) or platform-specific features (such as verification badges, follower counts, or comment visibility) influenced their assessments of reliability and truthfulness (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 173; Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406). This approach aligns with existing scholarship on medium credibility but extends it by incorporating platform-specific visual and algorithmic dynamics, particularly relevant in Instagram's highly curated information environment.

The concept of media repertoires was explored through open-ended questions concerning participants' everyday news routines, account preferences, and patterns of platform use. Participants were asked how and when they encountered news on Instagram, which accounts they followed, and how they integrated Instagram into their broader news habits. These questions aimed to identify whether credibility assessments resulted from intentional source selection, routine exposure, or passive consumption, in line with research highlighting the role of habit and familiarity in trust construction (Verboord, 2024, p. 258; Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369).

Finally, algorithmic influence and filter bubbles were explored by assessing participants' awareness of Instagram's content curation mechanisms. Participants reflected on whether they noticed repetition of specific viewpoints, ideological homogeneity, or limitations in exposure to alternative narratives, as described in literature on selective exposure and algorithmic personalisation (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). Additional questions focused on the extent to which participants attributed their news environment to their own choices versus algorithmic processes.

Importantly, the interview guide was designed to balance theoretical rigour with accessibility, ensuring that questions were grounded in participants' lived experiences while

capturing complex constructs such as source credibility, emotional resonance, and algorithmic influence. Space was provided for unstructured elaboration, enabling unexpected insights to emerge, such as participants' reflections on AI-generated imagery, emotional fatigue, and moral obligation in news consumption, factors not always explicitly foregrounded in existing literature but highly relevant to understanding credibility in practice (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12; Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334).

### **3.3 Deductive thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the interview data, following the widely recognised method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 297), which enables the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns of meaning—or 'themes'—within qualitative datasets. This flexible yet structured approach is particularly suitable for exploring subjective concepts such as credibility, trust, and user engagement within a polarised media environment.

In line with the deductive approach, the analysis was guided by pre-established theoretical constructs derived from the framework of this thesis: source credibility, medium credibility, media repertoires, and algorithmic influence (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 94). These overarching themes provided an initial structure to the analysis, ensuring alignment between theory and empirical interpretation. However, the process also incorporated space for inductive refinement, capturing unanticipated yet relevant patterns, such as emotional fatigue, distrust towards AI-generated content, or moral obligation narratives, which emerged organically from participants' accounts (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

The first stage of the analysis involved familiarisation with the dataset through repeated, careful reading of the interview transcripts. This iterative process enabled immersion in the material and the identification of recurring expressions, experiences, and conceptual connections. During this phase, initial analytical notes were made concerning potential codes and emerging patterns, enhancing reflexivity and transparency (Brink, 1993, p. 35).

A codebook was developed based on both theoretical constructs and empirical insights from the familiarisation phase. Codes reflected key concepts, such as trust, credibility perceptions, algorithmic exposure, news avoidance, emotional responses, and user motivations. As the analysis progressed, these codes were refined and subdivided to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical depth. For instance, broad categories such as "trust in news" were disaggregated into sub-codes distinguishing between "trust in traditional broadcasters," "trust in non-traditional accounts," and "trust based on visual cues," allowing for a more nuanced exploration of credibility dynamics

(Meyer et al., 2010, p. 101; Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397).

To maintain analytical rigour, coding was conducted systematically in Atlas.Ti, a qualitative data analysis software suited to organising complex, multi-layered datasets. The process followed an open, axial, and selective coding structure, consistent with established qualitative research practices (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 95). Open coding generated an initial set of data fragments related to the research themes; axial coding identified connections and relationships between these fragments, while selective coding focused on consolidating core themes relevant to the research question.

Throughout the process, reflexive notes documented the researcher's analytical choices, emerging uncertainties, and potential biases, acknowledging the researcher's positionality as a young Dutch Instagram user, which, if left unexamined, could subtly influence interpretation (Brink, 1993, p. 35). Furthermore, transparency was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, codebook iterations, and thematic developments.

The final set of themes represents both deductively driven theoretical constructs and inductively identified participant perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram users navigate credibility assessments within a fragmented, algorithmically curated news environment. This approach allowed for both theoretical alignment and openness to new empirical insights, enriching the analytical depth and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **3.4 Validity and reliability**

In this thesis, validity and reliability are understood within the context of qualitative research, where trustworthiness, credibility, and transparency are key to ensuring research accuracy (Brink, 1993, p. 35; Nha, 2021, pp. 4–8). Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation or exact replication, this research focuses on producing consistent, well-documented, and transferable findings that reflect the lived experiences of Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 in their evaluation of news credibility.

The validity of this study has been strengthened through careful alignment between the theoretical framework and the interview questions. Concepts such as media credibility, uses and gratifications, and algorithmic influences have been operationalised into clear, targeted questions that directly address the research question. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed literally, helping to preserve participants' original phrasing and reduce interpretation bias. The coding process, conducted in Atlas.Ti and structured around open, axial, and selective coding, further ensures that the themes are grounded in the data.

Reliability, understood here as dependability, has been enhanced by maintaining a detailed

trail of the research process, from sampling and interviewing to transcription and coding. Reflexivity is also incorporated through continuous reflection on the researcher's position, assumptions, and potential influence on participants and interpretation, in line with Brink's (1993, p. 35) emphasis on the researcher as a possible source of error. To address concerns of sampling bias and increase transferability, the study uses a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to include participants with diverse gender identities, educational backgrounds, and political orientations. This diversity ensures that a wide range of perspectives are included, particularly relevant given the highly polarised nature of the Gaza conflict.

In addition to these strategies, the use of a theoretically informed codebook has contributed to both internal consistency and analytical transparency. By developing and iteratively refining the codebook based on established concepts—such as source credibility, medium credibility, and media repertoires—the risk of researcher bias influencing theme identification has been reduced (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 95; Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Moreover, conducting a pilot coding round allowed for preliminary adjustments, enhancing the reliability and clarity of the final coding structure.

Further, the inclusion of verbatim Dutch quotes alongside their English translations in the results chapter increases both transparency and linguistic validity, ensuring that the original meaning, tone, and cultural nuances of participants' statements are preserved. This approach supports the credibility of the findings, especially given the sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the Gaza conflict, where phrasing may subtly reflect ideological positions (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 296). By systematically integrating these measures, this study provides a robust, transparent, and trustworthy account of how young Dutch Instagram users perceive and assess news credibility in a fragmented digital environment.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

This study adheres to the research ethics guidelines set out by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC). All participants were informed that the research formed part of a master's thesis project at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Care was taken not to give the impression that the study was affiliated with official EUR faculty research or branding, in line with the ethical rule to avoid misuse of university identity or materials.

Prior to data collection, all participants received a clear explanation of the study's aim, namely to investigate how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of news content related to the Gaza conflict. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were



explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any time, decline to answer specific questions, or request that their data be excluded from the study without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, either in written form or through audio-recorded verbal consent, following established ethical principles of autonomy and voluntary participation (Tracy, 2010, p. 847).

To promote comfort, agency, and openness, interviews were conducted either online or in person, depending on the participants' preferences. Participants were also given the choice to speak in Dutch or English; all opted for Dutch, as it is their mother tongue and facilitated more authentic, nuanced expression. Particular care was taken when addressing sensitive topics, such as the Gaza conflict. The researcher approached politically charged discussions with neutrality, ensuring that participants were not placed in situations of discomfort or forced to articulate political positions beyond their willingness.

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. Participants' names and identifying details were excluded from the transcripts and analysis unless explicit permission was granted. All participants are referred to by a pseudonym consisting of their participant number and general demographic markers, such as age, gender, and occupation. Audio recordings, transcripts, and coded data were stored securely on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher, in accordance with GDPR data protection guidelines (BERA, 2018, para. 40).

Additionally, ethical consideration was given to the emotional well-being of participants. Given the potentially distressing nature of news about the Gaza conflict, participants were reminded they could pause or terminate the interview at any point. No participants reported experiencing emotional discomfort during or after the interviews. Nevertheless, this option remained available to ensure that participation did not inadvertently cause psychological harm, aligning with ethical research standards on non-maleficence (BERA, 2018, para. 41).

Finally, the dissemination of this research follows principles of transparency and academic integrity. Results will be presented anonymously in the thesis and any future academic outputs, ensuring that participants' contributions are protected while still contributing to a broader understanding of news credibility on social media platforms like Instagram.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Source credibility

Participants displayed distinct patterns in how they assess the credibility of news sources on Instagram. In line with media credibility theory, their evaluations were shaped by both source characteristics, such as institutional reputation and alignment with personal beliefs, and by their broader media repertoires and habitual consumption patterns (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 101; Verboord, 2024, p. 243).

#### 4.1.1 Traditional broadcaster accounts

Traditional outlets such as NOS, AD, Volkskrant and FD were commonly perceived as trustworthy due to their institutional reputation, professional standards, and familiarity. This aligns with source credibility literature, which highlights the role of perceived expertise and reliability (Wölker & Powell, 2021, pp. 88-89).

*"I basically always have news websites open, I just know it that it is true"* (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). *Original: "Omdat ik gewoon eigenlijk praktisch gezien altijd met die nieuwswebsites open zit... weet ik gewoon dat het klopt."*

This reflects how credibility assessments are not purely based on rational evaluation but are embedded in routine media repertoires (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369; Verboord, 2024, p. 255). Similarly, a 27-year-old male journalist explained:

*"If it comes from a known outlet, or something I already follow, I trust it faster"* (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist, Dutch). *Original: "Als het van een bekend nieuwskanaal komt, of het is iets wat ik volg, dan vertrouw ik het eerder."*

Such comments underscore how both institutional reputation and habitual engagement contribute to perceptions of source credibility. Several participants reported using traditional outlets to verify information initially encountered on Instagram, reflecting the active audience behaviour described by uses and gratifications theory (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843). A 28-year-old male in-between jobs stated:

*"If I see news on Instagram, I double-check it on traditional media"* (Participant 4, male, 28, in-between jobs). *Original: "Als ik nieuws zie op Instagram, check ik het bij traditionele media."*

However, trust in traditional outlets was not absolute. Some participants questioned the completeness or neutrality of legacy media, particularly in relation to the Gaza conflict. The same participant expressed criticism:

*"NOS didn't handle Gaza well; they left out essential parts of the story"* (Participant 4, male,

28, in-between jobs, Dutch). *Original: "NOS pakte het toen niet goed aan."*

*"And for example, not the NOS. When you would watch the news in the past, some parts would be shown, not everything"* (Participant 12, male, 23, Student-worker in data analytics). *Original: "En niet bijvoorbeeld bij een NOS. Als je vroeger het nieuws keek, dan werden er bepaalde stukken laten zien en niet alles."*

Such remarks resonate with existing concerns regarding ideological selectivity in mainstream reporting, especially on polarised geopolitical events (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 295). Others described perceiving traditional outlets as more objective or comprehensive compared to alternative sources.

*"I think traditional media sketch a more complete picture"* (Participant 2, male, 18, university student). *Original: "En ik denk dat die beter het hele plaatje schetsen."*

In sum, while traditional broadcasters benefitted from institutional credibility and habitual use, participants' trust remained conditional, influenced by personal experiences of news quality and completeness.

#### 4.1.2. Non-traditional or alternative accounts

Non-traditional accounts such as @cestmocro or @nieuws generated mixed responses. Some participants valued these sources for immediacy and alternative narratives, resonating with literature on authenticity and grassroots credibility (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397). A 23-year-old male student working in data analytics shared:

*"With cestmocro I got the same things, but a bit more real for me. ... Maybe because they really show everything that is happening."* (Participant 12, male, 23, student-worker). *Original: "Met cestmocro kreeg ik dezelfde dingen mee, alleen dan wat echter voor mijn gevoel. ... Misschien omdat zij heel erg alles laten zien wat er gebeurt."*

This illustrates how users may turn to alternative sources for perspectives perceived as missing from mainstream reporting, particularly during polarised events such as the Gaza conflict (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 296). Similarly, a 29-year-old female marketing professional shared appreciation for @ridethenews:

*"They really try to post independent, unbiased news, which I like"* (Participant 7, female, 29, marketing). *Original: "Ze doen zoveel mogelijk onafhankelijk, onpartijdig nieuws posten en dat vind ik wel fijn."*

Such comments suggest that non-traditional accounts may, for certain users, compensate for a perceived lack of diversity or authenticity in mainstream reporting, confirming earlier research on alternative media trust (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397). However, several participants were

also sceptical of non-traditional sources, particularly when these accounts displayed ideological one-sidedness, sensationalism, or lack of journalistic oversight. For instance, a 26-year-old male finance consultant remarked:

*"The goal there i believe is, much more to get views than to actually convey journalistic added value or urgency" (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). Original: "Het doel daarachter is volgens mij veel meer om die views te halen dan echt het overbrengen van de journalistieke meerwaarde of urgentie."*

This reflects media credibility theory's emphasis on expertise and journalistic standards as essential conditions for trust (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, p. 140). Non-traditional accounts were therefore assessed along a spectrum where relatability and immediacy competed with concerns over factual accuracy.

*"Then it was really about Palestine, yeah, you just had to believe what you saw on Instagram" (Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: "Toen was het echt van Palestine, ja je moest gewoon geloven eigenlijk soort van wat op Instagram voorbijkwam."*

These findings align with media credibility theory, which suggests that perceived authenticity does not automatically equate to journalistic reliability (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, p. 140; Wölker & Powell, 2021, p. 88). Users' trust fluctuated based on their awareness of content manipulation, framing, and underlying motivations. Some participants also described actively distrusting specific alternative accounts. For example, a 27-year-old male journalist explained:

*"With accounts like RapnieuwsTV, I immediately think: I don't trust this at all" (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist). Original: "Bij accounts zoals RapnieuwsTV denk ik meteen: dit vertrouw ik voor geen meter."*

Furthermore, perceived political alignment played a key role. Accounts perceived as ideologically one-sided or emotionally provocative were viewed with suspicion, especially when participants disagreed with their underlying framing. A 31-year-old male IT worker described encountering explicitly framed posts:

*"On the feed of cestmocro, it literally says: new day, new massacre by the terrorist state of Israel" (Participant 6, male, 31, IT). Original: "Op de feed van cestmocro staa:t nieuwe dag nieuwe massamoord door terreurstaat Israël."*

Such examples reflect the intersection between political alignment, emotional framing, and source credibility (Traberg & Van Der Linden, 2021, p. 2; Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 296).

In sum, evaluations of non-traditional accounts were highly fragmented. Some participants

appreciated their immediacy, alternative viewpoints, or perceived independence, fulfilling information-seeking and emotional gratifications (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843; Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12). Others were critical, expressing concerns over bias, emotional manipulation, or credibility gaps. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of credibility assessments on Instagram, where perceived authenticity, political identity, and platform structures continuously intersect.

#### 4.1.3 Influence of political alignment?

Political alignment significantly shaped participants' evaluations of news credibility, consistent with research on selective exposure and motivated reasoning (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 170; Traberg & Van Der Linden, 2021, p. 2). Several respondents openly acknowledged trusting sources more when the content aligned with their personal beliefs, highlighting how ideological proximity functions as a cognitive shortcut in assessing credibility (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

*"If it fits with my own ideas, I tend to believe it faster"* (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist). *Original: "Als het aansluit bij mijn ideeën, geloof ik het sneller."*

Participants frequently reported inhabiting ideologically homogenous media environments, reinforcing the impact of filter bubbles and echo chambers (Möller, 2021, p. 93). For example, a 21-year-old female university student described:

*"I'm in a pro-Palestine bubble; I barely see anything pro-Israel"* (Participant 9, female, 21, university student). *Original: "Ik zit wel in bijvoorbeeld een pro-Palestina bubbel... ik zie weinig pro-Israël dingen voorkomen."*

*"I am studying a very leftist study, so all my peers post leftist content, so i do not really encounter any countering content"* (Participant 10, female, 20, university college student). *Original: "Ik heb een hele linkse studie, dus zij reposten ook allemaal hele linkse zaken, dus daarin kom ik ook niet echt tegengas tegen."*

Such findings illustrate how political identity, social networks, and algorithmic curation intersect to shape credibility perceptions. When users primarily encounter content aligned with their existing beliefs, alternative narratives are often dismissed or excluded, reinforcing ideological segregation (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11; Möller, 2021, p. 93). Overall, the findings demonstrate that political alignment operates as both a motivator for selective trust and a mechanism reinforcing perceived source credibility, particularly in fragmented digital environments like Instagram.

## 4.2 Medium credibility

Beyond the characteristics of news sources themselves, participants' credibility evaluations were strongly shaped by features of the social media platform, in this case, Instagram. This aligns with the concept of medium credibility, which highlights how technological affordances and platform-specific dynamics influence audience trust (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 101; Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). Instagram's visual focus, algorithmic curation, and interactive features played a central role in shaping how participants engaged with and judged the credibility of news about the Gaza conflict.

### 4.2.1 Visual and emotional impact?

The visual nature of Instagram was repeatedly mentioned as influencing perceived credibility, both positively and negatively. Several participants described how emotionally charged images or videos increased the perceived urgency or relevance of news, confirming research on visual impact in digital environments (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406).

*"It is also a bit more engaging I would say... It's a mix of real news and non-news"*

(Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: *"Het is ook iets meer engaging, zou ik zeggen... een beetje zo'n mix van echte nieuws en dan geen nieuws."*

A 20-year-old female university college student highlighted the power of graphic content:

*"You know what really grabs my attention, when I see a blurred post that says 'this may contain sensitive content'"* (Participant 10, female, 20, university college student). Original:

*"Wat me wel altijd veel pakt is als je een post hebt en die is eerst geblurred en dan staat dit kan gevoelige beelden bevatten ofzo."*

This illustrates how visual presentation, including platform-triggered warnings, heightens engagement and perceived newsworthiness, even when critical reflection may be limited (Sundar et al., 2024, p. 156). However, participants also expressed concerns about manipulation through visuals.

*"Bad stock photos or AI-generated images make me distrust it, especially with heavy topics like bombings"* (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist). Original: *"Slechte stockfoto's of AI-plaatjes maken me wel wantrouwig, zeker bij heftige onderwerpen zoals bombardementen."*

*"[...] But also certain visuals can influence taht for example. Currently there are many AI generated things, beacuse of that you are more mindful."* (Participant 8, male, 34, warehouse logistics). Original: *"[...] maar hebben bepaalde visuals ook invloed daarop bijvoorbeeld. Nu heb je heel veel dingen met AI enzo, let je daar ook, daardoor meer d'r op."*

Thus, while Instagram's visual design can enhance credibility via emotional resonance, it simultaneously raises concerns about misinformation and superficial engagement.

#### 4.2.2. Engagement and social cues

In line with medium credibility theory, participants often used social cues such as likes, shares, or comments as heuristics for assessing credibility (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 148; Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406).

*"The more likes, the more people are involved with/interested in the subject. So that is to me an indicator of..."* (Participant 4, male, 28, in-between jobs). Original: *"Hoe meer likes over het algemeen hoe meer mensen ermee bezig zijn, dus dat is dat is dan wel weer een indicator..."*

*"So that's quite. Like that is actually quite influential if I think, this is AI and then go look and there are 300,000 people saying that it's really true and that it really happened, then I would just google on the internet if is there really is one person that lost their head by a shark for example."* (Participant 7, female, 29, marketer). Original: *"Dus dat is best wel. Van dat is eigenlijk best wel van invloed als ik denk, dit is AI en vervolgens ga kijken en er zeggen 300.000 mensen dat het dat het echt waar en dat het echt gebeurd is, dan zou ik even op internet gaan googelen van is er echt één iemand zijn hoofd kwijtgeraakt door een haai bijvoorbeeld."*

These findings confirm that engagement metrics often serve as superficial yet influential credibility signals, shaping news consumption patterns even in the absence of deeper content evaluation (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14). Nevertheless, some participants actively questioned the reliability of these cues.

*"Yes, while cestmocro also has a reputation anyway it's quite such a big channel with a lot of followers and it's taken very seriously. [...] It does grab my attention but I would be less quick, I would be less quick to say to to the conversations at the dinner table of: 'God what I just saw yesterday. This really happened, guys.' I would not do that."* (Participant 10, female, 20, university college student). Original: *"Ja, terwijl cestmocro heeft ook wel een reputatie toch het is best wel zo'n groot kanaal met veel volgers en het wordt heel serieus genomen. [...] Het pakt me wel maar ik zou minder snel ik zou minder snel aan de aan de gesprekken bij de eettafel zeggen van god wat ik pas zag gisteren. Dit is echt gebeurd, jongens. Dat zou ik niet gaan doen."*

Such remarks suggest that while social validation shapes initial impressions of news credibility, users still combine these cues with prior knowledge or source reputation in forming final

judgments.

#### 4.2.3. Algorithmic influence

Algorithmic curation emerged as a key factor shaping both exposure to news and credibility assessments, confirming the role of filter bubbles and selective exposure as described by Möller (2021, p. 93). Several participants described how the Instagram algorithm amplified repetition, thereby reinforcing perceived truth through familiarity.

*"If you see something often enough, you start believing it more"* (Participant 8, male, 34, warehouse logistics). Original: *"Als je iets vaak voorbij ziet komen, ga je het eerder geloven."*

*"I feel like I passively get shown things and don't have much control over what I see"* (Participant 3, female, 22, university student). Original: *"Ik heb het gevoel dat het passiever is en dat ik het zeg maar, maar krijg wat ik te zien krijg en voor de rest heb ik minder keuze."*

These observations align with research indicating that algorithmic personalisation fosters selective exposure, confirmation bias, and habitual news routines (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11; Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Participants also expressed concerns about the hidden mechanisms behind algorithmic filtering. A 31-year-old male IT worker remarked:

*"You see that friends already follow an account, or they've liked something, and suddenly it shows up in your feed too"* (Participant 6, male, 31, IT). Original: *"Je ziet dan ook wel dat vrienden dat account al volgen of iets hebben geliked."*

*"I know that even what comments you get. That that is influenced by algorithms. So, that what gets to the top of those comments is again very subjective. And everyone gets something different."* (Participant 10, female, 20, university college student). Original: *"Ik weet dat zelfs welke comments je krijgt. Dat dat beïnvloed wordt door algoritmes. Dus dat wat bovenaan komt te staan in die comments is ook weer heel subjectief. En iedereen krijgt wat anders."*

This reflects the interplay between algorithmic influence and social networks in reinforcing exposure to specific content, ultimately shaping perceptions of credibility through both technological and interpersonal cues (Möller, 2021, p. 93).

#### 4.3 User motivations

Participants' motivations for consuming news on Instagram reflect core principles from UGT, which posits that audiences actively engage with media to fulfil specific psychological or informational needs (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843; Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 367). Within the



context of the Gaza conflict, participants demonstrated diverse motivations, including information seeking, emotional gratification, social belonging, and simply convenience.

#### 4.3.1. Information seeking

Several participants described Instagram as a supplementary or preliminary news source, with traditional outlets still seen as essential for deeper understanding. This supports UGT's argument that users strategically combine platforms to meet varying information needs (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12).

*"I will look for, a NOS, or what are the international media reporting." (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). Original: "Ik ga wel op zoek naar oké, NOS wat zeggen de internationale nieuwswebsites erover."*

*"If I really want to know more, I Google it" (Participant 7, female, 29, marketing). Original: "Als het echt iets is dat ik denk van joh wil ik meer over weten, dan zou ik het googelen."*

These remarks illustrate how Instagram often functions as an entry point to news consumption, with users actively verifying or expanding information through other channels, consistent with media repertoire theory (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369). Other participants noted that certain formats on Instagram, such as short stories or summaries, fulfilled quick information needs, particularly when time or attention was limited.

*"I follow NOS Stories, especially when I am busy, you will still open Instagram. [...] Then you watch the story, and you think, alright I am up-to-date now." (Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: "Ik volg wel NOS stories. Dat vind ik wel chill, want vooral als ik het druk heb, dan ga je nog steeds wel op Instagram. [...] Dan kijk je even die story en denk van ach, ik ben weer up-to-date."*

*"yes, less of a need for a news-application or something else on my phone, or to watch the news on television. Because I feel like I already see the important things. With only social media, I have enough sources." (Participant 12, male, 23, student-worker in data-analytics). Original: "Ja, minder behoefte aan een nieuwsapp bijvoorbeeld of telefoon of om journaal te kijken, want voor mijn gevoel krijg ik de belangrijke dingen wel mee. En met dan alleen bijvoorbeeld op social media heb ik er in principe genoeg aan denk ik."*

This reflects the desire for accessible, digestible news formats that for some interviewees, would complement more in-depth consumption elsewhere (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 11).

#### 4.3.2 Emotional obligation or not?

In line with UGT's emphasis on emotional needs (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 367), participants also engaged with Gaza-related news on Instagram to satisfy emotional curiosity, social empathy, or even a sense of moral obligation.

*"I feel a bit obliged to watch it [...] staying informed is the least I can do from my safe environment"* (Participant 10, female, 20, university college student). Original: *"Ik voel me een beetje verschuldigd om het te kijken [...] het minste wat ik kan doen vanuit mijn veilige alles, dat ik mezelf een beetje geïnformeerd houdt."*

Such comments illustrate how news consumption extends beyond information acquisition, offering emotional engagement or social validation during crises (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12).

On the contrary, several participants reported emotional fatigue or disengagement, especially when news flows became repetitive or distressing.

*"It feels like it's always the same... it's quite depressing"* (Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: *"Dan denk ik van ja, het is elke keer hetzelfde... Het is ook heel shit."*

This highlights the dual role of emotional gratifications, which can both attract and repel users, depending on content tone and personal emotional thresholds.

#### 4.3.3. Social interaction and community belonging

Instagram's social features also fostered a sense of community engagement around Gaza-related news, consistent with research on participatory media environments (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334; Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12).

*"My friends repost a bunch of things... I get a lot through them, especially pro-Palestine content"* (Participant 9, female, 21, university student). Original: *"Mijn vrienden reposten alles... ik krijg veel via hun binnen, ook pro-Palestina dingen."*

*"You see that your friends are already following that account or whether they have like a post."* (Participant 6, male, 31, IT). Original: *"Je ziet dan ook wel dat vrienden dat account al volgen of iets hebben geliked."*

Such examples confirm that news consumption on Instagram is embedded within social relationships, reinforcing both exposure and perceived credibility through community dynamics (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 10).

#### 4.3.4. Convenience and accessibility

Finally, convenience was a dominant motivation for consuming news on Instagram, aligning with UGT's emphasis on accessibility and minimal effort (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843).

*"On Instagram I just see whatever comes across"* (Participant 4, male, 28, in-between jobs). Original: *"Op Instagram zie ik gewoon wat voorbijkomt."*

*"It's the platform I automatically grab when I just want distraction or entertainment"* (Participant 3, female, 22, university student). Original: *"Het is ook een soort van social media app die een soort van, gauw maar naar grijpt omdat het een beetje gewoon maar iets even wil doen of afleiding of whatever of gewoon even entertainment wil hebben."*

These remarks illustrate how Instagram's design promotes passive, habitual news consumption, reinforcing the role of platform structures within media repertoires (Verboord, 2024, p. 258).

### 4.4 Filter bubbles and echo chambers

Participants widely recognised the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers on Instagram, supporting concerns from existing literature that algorithmic curation and social homogeneity reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). Many respondents reported being predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reflecting selective exposure and confirmation bias mechanisms (Festinger, 1957, as cited in Möller, 2021, p. 93).

#### 4.4.1. Confirmation bias

Participants frequently described how Instagram's algorithm reinforced their existing views by repeatedly showing similar content, particularly concerning the Gaza conflict. These experiences confirm that algorithmic personalisation reinforces confirmation bias, narrowing information exposure and shaping credibility through repeated, aligned content (Möller, 2021, p. 93). Moreover, some participants linked their media repertoires to filter bubble dynamics.

*"You can very easily, I think end up in a kind of funnel where you only get news of what you find interesting or what you believe. And then I think it is very difficult, especially with these algorithms, to then get out of that again."* (Participant 12, male, 24, student-worker in data

analytics). Original: *"Je kan heel makkelijk denk ik in een soort van trechter terecht komen waardoor je alleen maar nieuws krijgt van wat jij interessant vindt of wat jij gelooft. En dan is het denk ik heel moeilijk, zeker met die algoritmes, om daar dan weer uit te komen."*

*"The algorithm mainly shows things I already like, like football or korfbal. "* (Participant 8, male, 34, warehouse logistics). Original: *"Het algoritme laat vooral dingen zien die aansluiten bij wat ik leuk vind, zoals voetbal en korfbal."*

*"If I only see one opinion, and suddenly I get a hundred similar posts, you start believing it"* (Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: *"Als ik dan één mening zou zien en opeens ga ik honderd van die filmpjes, dan geloof ik er ook echt in."*

*"It often reflects your opinion and doesn't really challenge you"* (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). Original: *"Je hebt eigenlijk het gevoel dat het vaak wel een beetje jouw mening reflecteert en niet per se uitdaagt."*

This reflects how both algorithmic and self-selected media use contribute to homogenous information environments, limiting exposure to opposing perspectives (Vandenplas & Picone, 2021, p. 1455).

#### 4.4.2. Lack of counter-information

Participants also acknowledged the scarcity of dissenting views within their Instagram feeds, highlighting the echo chamber effect described by Möller (2021, p. 93). A 21-year-old female university student shared:

*"I'm in a pro-Palestine bubble, I hardly ever see anything pro-Israel"* (Participant 9, female, 21, university student). Original: *"Ik zit wel in bijvoorbeeld een pro-Palestina bubbel... ik zie weinig pro-Israël dingen voorbij komen."*

Such remarks align with research suggesting that both algorithmic curation (filter bubbles) and social environments (echo chambers) reduce informational diversity, amplifying ideological segregation (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11).

Some participants expressed frustration about this lack of plurality.

*"Sometimes I think: I need to hear opposing views, otherwise you will not be able to argue why you have a certain position"* (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist). Original: *"Soms denk ik, ik moet ook tegengeluiden horen, anders word je slecht in beargumenteren waarom je iets vindt."*

Such awareness suggests that while echo chambers are prevalent, some users remain critically conscious of their limitations and seek to counteract them, at least to a degree. Overall, the findings confirm that Instagram's algorithmic design, combined with user behaviour and social networks, fosters selective exposure, confirmation bias, and ideological isolation, complicating credibility assessments in politically sensitive contexts like the Gaza conflict.

#### 4.5 Media repertoires

Participants' news consumption patterns on Instagram were strongly shaped by their broader media repertoires — the habitual combinations of platforms and sources used in daily life (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369; Verboord, 2024, p. 255). These routines influenced not only what news participants encountered but also how they assessed credibility, confirming that trust is often reinforced through familiarity rather than active evaluation (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

##### 4.5.1. Habitual source use

Several participants described using specific news outlets out of routine, rather than based on deliberate trust considerations.

*"I basically always have news websites like NOS or AD open"* (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). Original: *"Omdat ik gewoon eigenlijk praktisch gezien altijd met die nieuwswebsites open zit."*

*"Having a newspaper subscription has become a habit to look for more in-depth stories"* (Participant 11, male, 27, journalist). Original: *"Ik heb nu een krantabonnement, dat is echt een gewoonte geworden om meer verdieping te zoeken."*

These patterns reflect Verboord's (2024, p. 258) argument that habitual exposure to familiar sources fosters credibility perceptions, even when critical analysis is limited. Other participants described how platforms like Instagram had become habitual gateways to news, often passively consumed alongside entertainment.

*"I've used Instagram for so long; I know how the platform works, it's familiar"* (Participant 3, female, 22, university student). Original: *"Ik gebruik Instagram ook al heel lang, dus het is voor mij ook een beetje een platform dat ik wel snap."*

Such habitual use confirms that media repertoires extend beyond conscious source selection, encompassing platform familiarity and convenience (Vandenplas & Picone, 2021, p. 1455).

#### 4.5.2. Familiarity based credibility

Participants often linked perceived credibility to the familiarity of visual styles, account names, or content routines, rather than strictly to journalistic quality.

*"Accounts I follow, I just assume they are reliable"* (Participant 4, male, 28, in-between jobs). Original: *"Accounts die ik volg, vertrouw ik gewoon."*

*"Oh, this is really bad. But I saw a clip and something had happened. Something with children or something. I don't quite remember how that went. But there was a video and I showed it to my boyfriend. I said, oh my god, you should see what happened to these kids or something. And then the one said, that's just fake. And then I said, huh, but that had the tune of NOS. That's how that clip started, with that tune. But I didn't realise it was a different logo. Yes, so really it was such an absurd clip too. And I said, oh but god, look at it. It just happened, yo. It just happened. It was something about, something about high school. Yeah, people in high school or something. I don't remember. It was very absurd that video. And I showed it to him and he really said like Participant 5, this is just not real. This is just AI or something he said. That's also very scary. With AI, it's really possible. All those videos all look so real."* (Participant 5, female, 24, university student). Original: *"Oh, dit is echt heel slecht. Maar ik zag een filmpje en er was iets gebeurd. Iets met kinderen of zo. Ik weet niet meer helemaal hoe dat ging. Maar er was een filmpje en ik liet het aan mijn vriend zien. Ik zei, oh mijn god, moet je zien wat er is gebeurd met deze kinderen ofzo. En toen zei die, dat is gewoon nep. En toen zei ik, huh, maar dat had het deuntje van NOS. Zo begon dat filmpje, met dat deuntje. Maar ik had niet door dat het een ander logo was. Ja, dus echt zo'n absurd filmpje was het ook. En ik zei, oh maar god, kijk eens. Het is gewoon gebeurd, joh. Het is gewoon gebeurd. Het was iets over toen, iets met de middelbare school. Ja, mensen in de middelbare school ofzo. Ik weet het niet meer. Het was heel absurd dat filmpje. En ik liet het aan hem zien en hij zei echt zo van Deelnemer 5, dit is gewoon niet echt. Dit is gewoon AI ofzo zei hij. Dat is ook heel eng. Met AI, dat kan echt. Al die filmpjes zien er allemaal zo echt uit."*

These comments illustrate how familiarity itself can function as a credibility shortcut, consistent with Nadarevic et al.'s (2020, p. 14) findings that repeated exposure increases perceived truth. Moreover, familiarity with traditional news outlets remained influential. A 31-year-old male IT worker shared:

*"How long a news brand exists, like FD or NOS, contributes to trust"* (Participant 6, male, 31, IT). Original: *"Hoe lang een bepaald medium bestaat zoals FD of NOS draagt bij aan*

*betrouwbaarheid."*

*"But really the objective news, yes, I do trust that from the Netherlands. From just Dutch legitimate media. [...] Because I think, when I see things on there, and these are serious things, you see them passing by in several places. And I think if you have a lot of media institutions writing about it, then I do think there is a certain.... That it's real. And I also do think that in the Netherlands our media is just good."* (Participant 2, male, 18, university student). Original: *"Maar echt het objectieve nieuws, ja, dat vertrouw ik wel van Nederland. Van gewoon Nederlandse legitieme media. [...] Omdat ik denk ik, als ik dingen daarop zie, en dat zijn serieuze dingen, dan zie je ze op meerdere plekken voorbij komen. En ik denk als je heel veel media erover schrijft, dan denk ik wel dat er een bepaalde... Dat het echt is. En ik denk ook wel dat in Nederland onze media gewoon goed is."*

Such remarks confirm that both institutional legacy and daily media routines shape credibility assessments, supporting the argument that trust is embedded within structured, habitual media use (Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Overall, participants' evaluations of news credibility on Instagram were not purely rational but strongly mediated by routine platform use, source familiarity, and the integrated nature of their media repertoires.

#### **4.6 Awareness of misinformation**

Participants demonstrated a varied but noticeable awareness of the risk of misinformation on Instagram. While some reported actively verifying content, others acknowledged relying on superficial indicators, aligning with research showing that limited cognitive resources often lead to heuristic credibility assessments (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14). Two key dimensions emerged: critical evaluation and awareness of non-human influence, such as bots or algorithmic manipulation.

##### **4.6.1. Critical evaluation and scepticism**

Many participants described adopting verification strategies when consuming Gaza-related news on Instagram, reflecting a degree of critical media literacy (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334).

*"Often I want to check the source on Instagram, to see where it's coming from"* (Participant 1, male, 26, finance consultant). Original: *"Op insta wil ik vaak de bron nog even zoeken kijken waar ze het vandaan hebben."*

*"If I see news on Instagram, I double-check it on reliable websites"* (Participant 4, male, 28,

in-between jobs). Original: "Als ik nieuws zie op Instagram, check ik het bij traditionele media."

Such behaviours align with research indicating that users rely on source cues to compensate for superficial engagement environments (Sundar et al., 2024, p. 156). However, scepticism varied by source type. Non-traditional accounts often triggered greater scrutiny, with participants highlighting concerns over framing or manipulation.

*"Yeah, yeah, it was really cherry picking that I saw at one point and also some framing. There were just different words being used with certain posts from one side and the other. Then it was really a very, very different perception..."* (Participant 9, female, 21, university student).

Original: *"Ja, ja, het was echt cherry picking dat ik op een gegeven moment zag en ook wel framing. Er werden gewoon andere woorden gebruikt bij bepaalde posts van de ene kant en aan de andere kant. Dan was het echt een heel, heel andere beleving..."*

Visual manipulation also raised suspicion, as could be read in the story described by the 24-year-old female university student (See paragraph 4.5.2.). These examples highlight both active verification strategies and the potential for superficial visual cues to mislead, confirming the tension between critical awareness and platform-induced heuristics (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

#### 4.6.2 Non-human agents

Several participants acknowledged the role of non-human actors, such as bots or AI-generated content, in spreading misinformation, consistent with concerns in existing literature (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 335).

*"Nowadays, with photos or videos, I have a reflex to immediately check: is this real or AI? Does someone have 6 fingers?"* (Participant 6, male, 31, IT). Original: *"Ja ik merk de laatste tijd bij het foto's en video 's dat ik al snel een reflex heb om te kijken van is het een echte foto of is het AI? Staat er iemand met 6 vingers op?"*

*"Especially with the rise of AI and the increasing polarisation in the world. That if you want to reduce that, that it's very important that those kinds of platforms that say they are proclaiming the news."* (Participant 2, male, 18, university student). Original: *"Zeker met de opkomst van AI en de toenemende polarisatie in de wereld. Dat als je dat wil verminderen, dat het heel belangrijk is dat dat soort platforms die zeggen dat ze het nieuws verkondigen."*

These remarks confirm that although users recognise the presence of non-human influence, its detection often depends on individual digital literacy levels, reinforcing the challenges of navigating credibility in algorithmically driven, highly visual platforms like Instagram.



#### **4.7 To conclude**

The findings reveal that Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 adopt a highly divided approach to evaluating news credibility surrounding the Gaza conflict. Source credibility remains influenced by institutional trust, political alignment, and perceived authenticity, with non-traditional accounts provoking both appreciation and skepticism. Medium-specific factors such as visual presentation, algorithmic curation, and social validation cues significantly shape news engagement, often reinforcing confirmation bias. Participants' motivations for consuming news on the conflict in Gaza on Instagram range from active information seeking to emotional resonance and social belonging, yet these patterns frequently operate within filter bubbles and echo chambers that limit exposure to opposing perspectives. Ultimately, credibility assessments are embedded within broader media repertoires, where habitual exposure and familiarity foster trust, even when critical evaluation is partial or inconsistent. These results illustrate how Instagram functions as both a convenient gateway to news and a complex, polarised information environment, particularly during sensitive geopolitical events.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of non-broadcaster news accounts versus traditional broadcaster accounts when seeking information about the Gaza conflict. The research was guided by media credibility theory, uses and gratifications theory (UGT), and the concepts of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and media repertoires. In doing so, this study provided insight into the dynamics of news credibility assessments in a rapidly changing media environment, shaped by institutional reputation, political identity, technological affordances, and user motivations. The preceding chapters have laid the necessary groundwork to answer the central research question. Through a deductive thematic analysis of 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews, this thesis has uncovered how credibility perceptions are constructed, challenged, and reinforced within Instagram's fragmented, visually driven, and highly personal information ecosystem. This conclusion chapter brings together the empirical findings, situates them within the theoretical framework, reflects critically on the broader implications, and proposes avenues for future research.

### 5.1 Answering the research question

The central research question posed in this thesis was: *"How do Dutch Instagram users aged 18 to 35 evaluate the credibility of non-broadcaster news accounts versus traditional broadcaster accounts when seeking information on the Gaza conflict?"* The findings reveal that young Dutch Instagram users evaluate news credibility in a nuanced way, very context-dependent, and at times contradictory. Trust assessments are not black and white but situated within a mix of institutional affiliation, perceived authenticity, political alignment, platform dynamics, and habitual media practices.

Traditional news accounts, such as those from NOS, AD, or Volkskrant, are generally seen as reliable due to their institutional standing, editorial processes, and journalistic reputation (Wölker & Powell, 2021, p. 88; Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Many participants described using these outlets as benchmarks for verification, particularly when encountering news on Instagram. However, this institutional trust is conditional. Several respondents expressed frustration with traditional outlets' coverage of the Gaza conflict, criticising them for perceived bias, lack of historical context, or insufficient representation of Palestinian suffering (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 295). Such critiques illustrate that trust in legacy media is not absolute but filtered through personal beliefs, emotional expectations, and political orientations.

Non-broadcaster accounts such as @cestmocro, @nieuws, @ridethenews, or similar platforms triggered diverse, often contradictory responses. On one hand, these accounts were

valued for providing immediacy, grassroots perspectives, and alternative narratives absent from mainstream reporting (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397). For some participants, especially those critical of traditional media's portrayal of Gaza, these sources offered perceived authenticity, emotional resonance, and ideological alignment. On the other hand, non-traditional accounts were also met with scepticism, particularly regarding sensationalist framing, lack of journalistic transparency, and blatant political bias. Participants reported adopting heightened critical awareness when engaging with these sources, scrutinising visual presentation, language, and engagement metrics to assess credibility.

An outstanding finding is the significant role of political alignment in shaping credibility perceptions. Participants openly acknowledged trusting sources more when content reflected their pre-existing views, consistent with selective exposure theory (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 170; Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14). The polarised nature of the Gaza conflict amplified this dynamic, with several respondents describing ideological homogeneity in their Instagram feeds, often dominated by pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli narratives. This confirms the presence of both filter bubbles and echo chambers, where algorithmic personalisation and social network structures reinforce existing beliefs while limiting exposure to dissenting perspectives (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11).

Instagram's technological affordances profoundly shaped how participants engaged with Gaza-related news and assessed credibility. The platform's visual-centric design heightened emotional involvement but also facilitated superficial credibility judgments, with participants reporting reliance on aesthetics, logos, and social validation cues such as likes or comments (Sundar et al., 2024, p. 156). Algorithmic curation reinforced selective exposure, as participants described repetitive exposure to similar, ideologically aligned content, often independent of conscious user choices. This confirms concerns regarding the role of algorithms in fostering confirmation bias, informational homogeneity, and polarisation (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11).

Participants' motivations for engaging with Gaza-related news on Instagram reflect core principles of UGT (Sampat & Raj, 2022, p. 843; Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12). Information seeking, emotional engagement, social belonging, and convenience were dominant gratifications, yet these were often pursued within ideologically homogenous environments shaped by algorithmic filtering and habitual consumption patterns. Media repertoires played a crucial role, with trust frequently linked to source familiarity, habitual exposure, and integration into daily routines (Verboord, 2024, p. 258; Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369). Participants did not always engage in critical evaluation but relied on familiarity and repeated exposure as heuristic indicators of credibility (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

## 5.2 Theoretical insights gained and unexpected results

The findings contribute to and, in some areas, challenge existing theoretical perspectives on news credibility and digital media use. This study verifies the relevance of media credibility theory in hybrid news environments, where both source and medium characteristics interact to shape trust (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 101). However, the results highlight that credibility assessments are rarely based on objective markers alone. Instead, they are intertwined with political identity, emotional resonance, visual presentation, and social validation cues. The findings nuance existing literature by demonstrating that even users who express scepticism towards non-traditional sources still engage with them, often for affective, identity-driven, or informational reasons. This challenges simple distinctions between “credible” and “non-credible” sources and underscores the fluid, context-dependent nature of trust.

UGT remains a valuable framework for explaining why young adults turn to Instagram for news. Yet, this study illustrates that gratifications are increasingly complex and embedded within polarised, algorithmically curated environments. Emotional engagement, moral obligation, and political identity emerged as powerful motivations, sometimes overriding informational accuracy. Participants described both actively seeking news and passively absorbing ideologically aligned content, reflecting the convergence of conscious and unconscious gratifications in digital news consumption (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12).

This study provides qualitative evidence of filter bubbles and echo chambers operating on Instagram, consistent with existing scholarship (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). Participants described homogenous information environments, reinforced by both algorithmic curation and social network structures. Notably, several participants expressed critical awareness of these dynamics, actively seeking alternative perspectives or verifying information through traditional outlets. This suggests that while filter bubbles are prevalent, they are not absolute; user agency and critical reflection can, to some extent, mitigate informational isolation.

The findings highlight the importance of media repertoires in shaping credibility perceptions. Trust is constructed not only through rational evaluation but also through habitual exposure, platform familiarity, and social embedding (Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Participants’ reliance on familiar sources, even when expressing scepticism, underscores the interplay between routine media use and credibility assessments. This extends existing literature by demonstrating how hybrid news environments, characterised by platform convergence and ideological fragmentation, interact with daily media practices to influence trust.

An unexpected finding is the degree to which emotional fatigue and news overload

influenced credibility assessments and news engagement. Several participants reported disengaging from Gaza-related news due to repetitiveness, emotional distress, or a sense of helplessness. This suggests that affective saturation can shape not only engagement patterns but also perceptions of news reliability and personal efficacy, a dimension warranting further theoretical and empirical exploration.

### **5.3 Societal and practical implications**

The findings of this study highlight pressing societal challenges concerning young audiences, social media, and the consumption of news during polarised geopolitical conflicts. As demonstrated, Instagram serves a dual function for many young Dutch users: it provides accessible entry points to alternative perspectives on global events, while simultaneously facilitating the circulation of ideologically charged, emotionally framed, or even misleading news content (Sülflow et al., 2019, p. 173; Sundar et al., 2024, p. 156).

The increasing influence of non-traditional accounts, such as @cestmocro or @nieuws, reflects a broader shift in which traditional journalistic criteria—objectivity, professional oversight, and institutional credibility—are gradually supplemented or replaced by indicators such as emotional resonance, authenticity, and political alignment (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 397). Simultaneously, this research reveals that young people do not approach news consumption on Instagram entirely passively. Several participants combined Instagram with other, more established news sources, or demonstrated critical awareness of misinformation risks and algorithmic manipulation (Verboord, 2024, p. 258).

Nonetheless, these findings underscore an urgent need to strengthen media literacy among young users. Contemporary media literacy extends beyond basic fact-checking to encompass platform-specific competencies, such as recognising the influence of algorithms, understanding visual manipulation, and detecting emotionally or politically biased narratives (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 334; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11). Particularly on Instagram, educational initiatives should equip users with the tools to critically assess visual content, interpret engagement metrics with caution, and navigate algorithmic personalisation consciously. Furthermore, awareness of the role of repetition and familiarity in reinforcing (mis)perceptions of credibility remains crucial (Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14).

In parallel, these findings feed into ongoing debates regarding platform accountability. Instagram is not a neutral conduit for information but an active agent shaping news exposure through its design logic—prioritising engagement, emotional content, and personalised recommendations (Möller, 2021, p. 93; Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 148). During highly polarised

events, such as the Gaza conflict, this design architecture can exacerbate ideological divides, limit exposure to diverse perspectives, and accelerate the spread of misinformation. Platforms thus bear an ethical responsibility to enhance transparency, foster content diversity, and ensure the visibility of verified, balanced news sources.

For journalists and policymakers, these findings imply that conventional approaches to safeguarding trustworthy news provision must adapt to the realities of social media consumption among younger demographics. Traditional news organisations cannot rely solely on institutional authority to maintain credibility but must align their practices with the platform-specific expectations of younger audiences. This entails producing visually engaging, emotionally accessible, yet factually rigorous content, thereby bridging the gap between professional journalism and the participatory culture of platforms like Instagram (Swart & Boersma, 2021, p. 406; Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12).

Lastly, these insights point towards practical interventions aimed at fostering more resilient, less polarised information environments. Such interventions must combine media education, regulatory measures, and journalistic innovation. Educational strategies should prioritise not only critical thinking but also emotional awareness and technological literacy. Simultaneously, platform governance must address the algorithmic mechanisms that amplify polarisation and prioritise emotionally manipulative content. By promoting informational diversity, enhancing transparency, and supporting reliable journalism that resonates with the expectations and habits of young audiences, a more informed and critically engaged digital citizenry may be cultivated (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p. 11; Möller, 2021, p. 93).

#### **5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

While this research provides valuable insights into young Dutch Instagram users' perceptions of news credibility, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualise the findings appropriately. As is characteristic of qualitative research, the emphasis lies on exploring rich, contextualised perspectives rather than producing statistically generalisable results (Brink, 1993, p. 35). With a sample of twelve participants, this study offers detailed thematic insights but cannot claim representativeness across the broader Dutch youth population.

It is further important to note that political orientation within the sample lacked balance, with the majority of participants identifying with left-leaning views. This political skew likely influenced the prominence of pro-Palestinian narratives observed and the critical attitudes towards mainstream Western reporting on Gaza (Khamis & Dogbatse, 2024, p. 295; Möller, 2021, p. 93). While this reflects existing patterns within certain segments of Dutch youth media consumption

(Hendrickx, 2024, p. 11), future research should strive for a more politically diverse sample to explore variations in credibility assessments across ideological lines.

Additionally, this research centres on a single, highly polarised case study: the Gaza conflict. Although appropriate given the intensity and visibility of this event on Instagram, the findings may not readily transfer to less politically sensitive news topics or to domestic issues. Future studies would benefit from comparative designs exploring how credibility perceptions vary across different news categories, including less emotive or more localised topics.

The platform-specific focus on Instagram provides in-depth understanding of this environment but does not capture how users may construct credibility assessments across their broader media repertoires (Verboord, 2024, p. 258). Young audiences frequently engage with multiple platforms—including TikTok, Twitter, or conventional news outlets (Galan et al., 2019, p. 22)—which collectively shape their perceptions of trust. Comparative research across platforms could elucidate how differing affordances, algorithms, and social cultures influence news engagement and credibility heuristics.

A further avenue for future research concerns the affective dimension of news consumption. Emotional fatigue, distress, and disengagement emerged as influential factors shaping participants' willingness to engage with Gaza-related news. Such affective responses appear to intersect with credibility assessments, yet this relationship remains underexplored within existing literature (Hendrickx, 2024, p. 12; Nadarevic et al., 2020, p. 14). Longitudinal studies tracking emotional responses and their influence on news engagement over time could offer critical insights, particularly in the context of protracted conflicts or repeated crises.

Finally, the findings highlight the need for further investigation into the role of non-human agents, such as bots and AI-generated content, in shaping perceptions of credibility. Although participants demonstrated awareness of these dynamics, the extent to which synthetic media disrupt trust in news remains unclear (Di Domenico et al., 2021, p. 335). Experimental research exploring the detection, influence, and mitigation of AI-driven misinformation is increasingly relevant, particularly as technological advances blur the boundaries between authentic and fabricated content.

Taken together, these limitations and suggested avenues for future inquiry point to the importance of continued, multi-faceted research into news credibility within evolving digital ecosystems. In particular, there is a clear need for studies that account for ideological diversity, platform-specific differences, affective engagement, and the growing influence of algorithmic and non-human factors in shaping how young audiences engage with and assess news content.

## 5.5 Final remarks

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that young Dutch Instagram users assess the credibility of Gaza-related news based on several connected factors, including institutional trust, political identity, platform characteristics, personal motivations, and habitual news consumption patterns. Instagram functions both as an accessible source of news and as a platform where misinformation, political bias, and emotionally charged content circulate widely. Evaluating the credibility of news in this environment is not purely rational, nor entirely passive, but influenced by users' beliefs, emotions, social surroundings, and technological design.

This research has answered the research question by demonstrating that young Instagram users do not evaluate news sources solely based on journalistic reputation or institutional standards. Instead, their perceptions of credibility are shaped by political alignment, emotional responses, and visible features of the platform such as design, engagement metrics, and repetition. Traditional broadcaster accounts are still generally seen as reliable, but only when they meet the expectations of users, particularly regarding balanced reporting. Non-traditional news accounts are appreciated by some for offering alternative views and immediacy but are distrusted by others for their emotional framing and perceived lack of neutrality. Overall, users combine their personal experiences, political beliefs, and daily media habits to decide which sources they trust when following news about the Gaza conflict.

A better understanding of these factors is important to promote informed and critical news consumption, especially in digital environments like Instagram where different types of news circulate side by side. This research contributes to that understanding by offering new insights into how young people engage with news on Instagram and how they develop trust in different types of sources. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening media literacy, holding platforms accountable for their role in shaping news exposure, and encouraging reliable journalism that considers the changing ways in which news is consumed. As digital platforms continue to shape how people engage with news, ongoing research and reflection will be essential to protect the quality of information and ensure that citizens can make informed decisions.



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## Appendix A

### Overview of interview respondents

Participant nr.	Age	Gender	Occupation	Nationality
Participant 1	26	Man	Finance consultant	Dutch
Participant 2	18	Man	University student	Dutch
Participant 3	22	Woman	University student	Dutch
Participant 4	28	Man	In-between jobs	Dutch
Participant 5	24	Woman	University student	Dutch
Participant 6	31	Man	IT	Dutch
Participant 7	29	Woman	Marketing	Dutch
Participant 8	34	Man	Warehouse logistics	Dutch
Participant 9	21	Woman	University student	Dutch
Participant 10	20	Woman	University College student	Dutch
Participant 11	27	Man	Journalist	Dutch
Participant 12	23	Man	Student- worker, busy with traineeship in data analytics	Dutch

*Table 1. Overview of sample*

## Appendix B: Interview guide

### English version

Interview Duration: 45–60 minutes

Participant Criteria: Dutch Instagram users aged 18–35

#### 1. Introduction

- Thank the participant for joining
- Brief explanation of the research purpose
- Emphasize confidentiality and voluntary participation
- Obtain verbal consent to record (if applicable)
- Ask gender, age, current profession/study

Icebreaker: Can you tell me a bit about how you usually come across news in your daily life? What platforms/media forms do you use and why?

#### 2. Instagram News Consumption Habits

- *Shift focus to use of Instagram*
- How often do you come across news on Instagram?
  - In what forms, reels posts stories?
- Do you follow any accounts that post news content? If yes, which ones?
- What kinds of news do you usually engage with on Instagram?
  - Do you seek out the news or does it just come to you on your feed/explore page?
- What motivates you to engage with news on Instagram rather than other platforms (e.g., TV, websites, newspapers)?
- How important is Instagram to you for staying informed?

Prompts: Explore entertainment, social interaction, escapism, information-seeking, etc.

#### 3. Evaluating Credibility

- *Now I would like to ask you some questions about the credibility of news that is posted on Instagram.*
- When you see a news post on Instagram, what makes you decide whether to trust it or not?
- Do you trust news accounts like @nosstories or @ad\_nl? Why or why not?
- What about non-traditional accounts like @cestmocro or @nieuws?

- What do you think are the main differences between traditional and non-traditional accounts in how they report?

Prompts: Ask about cues such as tone, visuals, sourcing, reputation, follower count, verification checkmarks, etc. Ask for examples of when they trusted or distrusted a post.

#### 4. Algorithmic Exposure & Perception Shaping

- Do you feel like the content you see on Instagram reflects your views or challenges them?
- How often do you see content from people or accounts that have a different opinion or perspective?
- Have you ever noticed being shown similar kinds of news repeatedly? How do you feel about that?
- Do you think Instagram's algorithm affects your view of which news sources are credible or trustworthy?

Prompts: Explore awareness of algorithmic curation. Probe feelings about being in a 'bubble' or not. Ask if they intentionally seek diverse perspectives.

#### 5. Applying the previous topics to a case: Conflict in Gaza

- *This research has a focus on the news that is being reported on one specific topic, the conflict in Gaza. So far, we've been talking about your general news consumption and how you engage with news on Instagram. For the final part of the interview, I'd like to focus on a specific topic that has been receiving a lot of attention in the news lately: the conflict in Gaza. Since October 2023, violence between Israel and Hamas has escalated again, leading to thousands of civilian casualties and a severe humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. It's a complex and sensitive topic that many people around the world respond to in different ways. Because this can be a difficult subject to talk about, please know that you are free to skip any questions or let me know if there's anything you'd rather not discuss. That's completely okay.*
- Do you follow the news on (developments) the conflict that is currently going on the region of Gaza? Do you actively seek for news on Gaza, or does it come organically?
- Do you have a preferred medium? Why is it that medium?
  - *If it was not Instagram:* What about news on Gaza on Instagram?
- In light of the conflict in Gaza, how do you determine whether you trust a source/post?
  - Do you think political views might play a role in this process?

## 6. Wrap-Up (5 min)

- Is there anything else you'd like to add about the topics we discussed?
- If you could improve how news is presented on Instagram, what would you change?

Final Question: Do you think your Instagram news habits have changed over time, especially with ongoing conflicts like the one in Gaza?

- Thank you for joining and hope you have a great day!

## Dutch version

Interview duur: 45 – 60 minuten

Deelnemer criteria: Nederlandse Instagram gebruikers tussen de 18 en 35 jaar oud

### 1. Introductie

- Bedankt voor je deelname aan dit interview
- Korte uitleg over het onderzoek en waar dit interview voor gebruikt zal worden
- Benadruk vrijwillige deelname en vertrouwelijk omgaan met de data
- Krijg mondeling akkoord voor opname van interview
- Vraag gender, leeftijd, huidige professie/studie

Openingsvraag: Kan je me iets vertellen over je gewoonlijke nieuws consumptie? Op welke manieren kom je aan nieuws? Welke media (platformen) gebruik je hiervoor?

### 2. Nieuws consumptie gebruiken op Instagram

- *Verleg de focus naar nieuws consumptie op Instagram*
- Hoe vaak kom je voorbij nieuws op Instagram?
  - In welke vormen is dit? Reels, stories, posts etc.
- Volg je accounts die nieuws content plaatsen op Instagram? Zo ja, welke?
- Wat voor soort nieuws houd jij je vaak bezig op Instagram?
  - Zoek je dit zelf op of komt dit voor bij?
- Wat motiveert jou om te reageren/bezig te zijn met nieuws op Instagram in plaats van op andere platformen? (Denk aan, televisie, websites, kranten)
- Hoe belangrijk is Instagram voor jou als je op de hoogte wilt blijven?

Extra aanwijzingen: Verken entertainment, sociale interactie, escapisme, informatie zoeken, enz.

### 3. Evaluatie van geloofwaardigheid



- *Nu wil ik je een aantal vragen stellen over de geloofwaardigheid van nieuws dat op Instagram wordt geplaatst*
- Als je een nieuwspost op Instagram ziet, wat zorgt ervoor dat je het vertrouwt of niet?
- Vertrouw je nieuwsaccounts zoals @nosstories of @ad\_nl, oftewel traditionele nieuwsaccounts? Waarom wel of waarom niet?
- Hoe zit het met niet-traditionele accounts zoals @cestmocro of @nieuws?
- Wat zijn volgens jou de belangrijkste verschillen tussen traditionele en niet-traditionele accounts in hun berichtgeving?

Extra aanwijzingen: Vraag naar aanwijzingen zoals toon, beelden, herkomst, reputatie, aantal volgers, verificatievakjes, enz. Vraag naar voorbeelden van wanneer ze een bericht vertrouwden of wantrouwden.

#### **4. Algoritmes en het vormen van percepties**

- Heb je het gevoel dat de content die je ziet op Instagram jouw mening weerspiegelt of uitdaagt?
- Hoe vaak zie je inhoud van mensen of accounts die een andere mening of een ander perspectief hebben?
- Is het je wel eens opgevallen dat je bijvoorbeeld herhaaldelijk hetzelfde soort nieuws te zien krijgt? Wat vind je daarvan?
- Denk je dat het algoritme van Instagram jouw kijk op welke nieuwsbronnen geloofwaardig of betrouwbaar zijn beïnvloed?

Extra aanwijzingen: Het bewustzijn van algoritmische curatie onderzoeken. Vraag of ze zich al dan niet in een 'bubbel' bevinden. Vragen of ze bewust op zoek zijn naar verschillende perspectieven.

#### **5. De vorige onderwerpen toepassen op een casus: Conflict in Gaza**

- *Dit onderzoek richt zich op het nieuws dat wordt gebracht over één specifiek onderwerp, het conflict in Gaza. Tot nu toe hebben we vooral gepraat over hoe je nieuws consumeert, en hoe je dat doet op Instagram. Voor het laatste deel van het interview wil ik graag wat dieper ingaan op één specifiek onderwerp dat op dit moment veel aandacht krijgt in het nieuws: het conflict in Gaza. Sinds oktober 2023 is het geweld tussen Israël en Hamas opnieuw opgelaaid, waarbij duizenden burgerslachtoffers zijn gevallen en er een ernstige humanitaire crisis is ontstaan in de Gazastrook. Het is een complex en beladen onderwerp waar veel mensen wereldwijd op verschillende manieren op reageren. Omdat dit onderwerp*

*gevoelig kan liggen, wil ik je laten weten dat je altijd mag aangeven als je een vraag liever niet beantwoordt of ergens niet op in wilt gaan. Dat is helemaal oké.*

- Volg je het nieuws over (ontwikkelingen) het conflict dat momenteel gaande is in de regio Gaza? Ga je actief op zoek naar nieuws over Gaza, of komt het vanzelf?
- Heeft u een voorkeursmedium? Waarom is het dat medium?
  - Als het niet Instagram was: Hoe zit het met nieuws over Gaza op Instagram?
- Hoe bepaal je, in het licht van het conflict in Gaza, of je een bron/post vertrouwt?
  - Denk je dat politieke standpunten een rol kunnen spelen in dit proces?

## **6. Afronding**

- Is er nog iets wat je graag zou willen zeggen over de onderwerpen die we hebben besproken?
- Als je zou kunnen verbeteren hoe nieuws wordt getoond op Instagram, wat zou je dan doen?

Laatste vraag: Denk je dat je nieuwsgewoonten op Instagram in de loop der tijd zijn veranderd, vooral door de aanhoudende conflicten zoals dat in Gaza?

- Bedankt voor je deelname!

## **Appendix C: Consent form interviews**

### **English version**

For questions about the study please contact:

Marit Krol – [596784mk@student.eur.nl](mailto:596784mk@student.eur.nl)

You are invited to participate in research about news providers on Instagram. This study looks at how young people in the Netherlands (aged 18 to 35) judge the trustworthiness of news they see on Instagram. It compares well-known news accounts like @nosstories or @ad\_nl with other popular accounts like @cestmocro or @nieuws that also share news, especially about the conflict in Gaza. By talking to Instagram users through interviews, the study aims to understand how they decide what news to trust and why they choose certain sources over others. The goal is to learn more about how people deal with news online and what influences their trust in it.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to how young Dutch Instagram users experience and assess news, and how they deal with the credibility of different news sources, particularly in relation to the conflict in Gaza.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview. I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **Risks and benefits**

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

### **Time involvement**

Your participation in this study will take around 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

### **Payments**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **Participants rights**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

### **Contacts and questions**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – Marc Verboord, thesis supervisor of this thesis, [verboord@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:verboord@eshcc.eur.nl).

### **Signing the consent form**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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### **Dutch version**

Voor vragen over dit onderzoek kan je contact opnemen met:

Marit Krol – [596784mk@student.eur.nl](mailto:596784mk@student.eur.nl)

Je wordt uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan een onderzoek over nieuwsaanbieders op Instagram. Deze studie onderzoekt hoe jonge mensen in Nederland (tussen de 18 en 35 jaar) de betrouwbaarheid beoordelen van nieuws dat ze op Instagram tegenkomen. Er wordt een vergelijking gemaakt tussen bekende nieuwsaccounts zoals @nosstories of @ad\_nl en andere populaire accounts zoals @cestmocro of @nieuws die ook nieuws delen, met name over het conflict in Gaza. Door middel van interviews met Instagramgebruikers wil deze studie begrijpen hoe

zij bepalen welk nieuws ze vertrouwen en waarom ze bepaalde bronnen verkiezen boven andere. Het doel is om meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe mensen online met nieuws omgaan en wat hun vertrouwen erin beïnvloedt.

Door akkoord te gaan met deelname aan dit onderzoek geef je toestemming om geïnterviewd te worden. In algemene zin zullen mijn vragen betrekking hebben op hoe jonge Nederlandse Instagramgebruikers nieuws ervaren en beoordelen, en hoe zij omgaan met de geloofwaardigheid van verschillende nieuwsbronnen, in het bijzonder met betrekking tot het conflict in Gaza. Tenzij je liever hebt dat er geen opnames worden gemaakt, zal ik een audio-opname maken van het interview. Het materiaal van de interviews en mijn observaties zal uitsluitend worden gebruikt voor academische doeleinden, zoals verder onderzoek, academische bijeenkomsten en publicaties.

### **Risico's**

Voor zover bekend zijn er geen risico's verbonden aan deelname aan dit onderzoek. Je naam of andere identificeerbare informatie zal niet in de studie worden gebruikt. Deelnemers worden uitsluitend aangeduid met pseudoniemen en algemene kenmerken zoals leeftijd en geslacht. Je bent altijd vrij om bepaalde vragen niet te beantwoorden en/of op elk moment te stoppen met deelnemen.

### **Tijdsinvestering**

Je deelname aan dit onderzoek zal ongeveer 45 tot 60 minuten duren. Je mag op elk moment stoppen met deelnemen.

### **Vergoeding**

Er staat geen financiële vergoeding tegenover deelname aan dit onderzoek.

### **Rechten van deelnemers**

Als je besluit om deel te nemen aan dit project, begrijp dan dat je deelname vrijwillig is en dat je op elk moment zonder opgaaf van reden en zonder nadelige gevolgen je toestemming kunt intrekken of kunt stoppen met deelname. Je hebt het recht om specifieke vragen niet te beantwoorden. Indien gewenst, zal je identiteit worden genoemd in alle schriftelijke data die voortkomen uit het onderzoek. Als je dat niet wilt, zal je privacy in alle gepubliceerde en schriftelijke resultaten van het onderzoek worden gewaarborgd.

### **Contact en vragen**

Als je vragen hebt over je rechten als deelnemer aan dit onderzoek, of als je op enig moment ontevreden bent over een aspect van het onderzoek, kun je – desgewenst anoniem – contact opnemen met Marc Verboord, scriptiebegeleider van dit onderzoek, via [verboord@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:verboord@eshcc.eur.nl).

### **Ondertekening toestemmingsformulier**

Als je dit toestemmingsformulier ondertekent, is je handtekening het enige document dat je identiteit vastlegt. Je HOEFT dit formulier dus NIET te ondertekenen. Om risico's te minimaliseren en je identiteit te beschermen, kun je ook mondeling toestemming geven. Mondelinge toestemming is voldoende.

Ik geef toestemming om opgenomen te worden tijdens dit onderzoek:

<b>Naam</b>	<b>Handtekening</b>	<b>Datum</b>
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Ik wil dat mijn identiteit wordt vermeld in alle schriftelijke data die voortkomen uit dit onderzoek:

<b>Naam</b>	<b>Handtekening</b>	<b>Datum</b>
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#### Appendix D: Codebook deductive thematic analysis

Main code category	Subcode	Definition	Example quote
Source Credibility	Traditional Broadcaster Accounts	Legacy media accounts perceived as credible due to institutional standards.	<p>"Voornamelijk hoe ik aan het nieuws kom is, nou de nieuwswebsites dus AD lees ik veel en NOS lees ik veel en die staat eigenlijk standaard op mijn laptop ook gewoon wel open."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
Source Credibility	Non-Traditional/Alternative Accounts	Independent or grassroots accounts valued for authenticity or immediacy.	<p>"BOOS volg ik ook, dat brengt ook wel nieuws, vind ik wel betrouwbaar. [...] Bij accounts zoals RapnieuwsTV denk ik meteen: dit vertrouw ik voor geen meter."</p> <p>English:</p>
Source Credibility	Political Alignment Influence	Trust influenced by alignment between source and user beliefs.	<p>"Ik heb een duidelijke politieke voorkeur, dus ik denk niet dat mijn mening snel zou veranderen."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
Medium Credibility	Visual and Emotional Impact	Visual formats enhance or diminish credibility through emotional impact.	<p>"Vaak hebben ze, heeft bijvoorbeeld cestmocro hele heftige foto's vind ik. Of teksten."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
Medium Credibility	Engagement and Social Cues	Likes, shares, comments shape perceived trustworthiness.	<p>"De toegevoegde waarde die Instagram heeft is dat je ook kan zien wat anderen ervan vinden."</p>

			English: ""
Medium Credibility	Algorithmic Influence	Algorithm curates exposure to news, influencing visibility and trust.	<p>"Ik merk heel erg als je een reel bijvoorbeeld... Soms laat ik een reel opeens voor ongeluk aanstaan ofzo, een paar keer als ik op de wc zit of iets anders aan het doen ben. En dan krijg je die berichten daarna wel al meteen weer dat vaker terug"</p> <p>English: ""</p>
User Motivations	Information Seeking	Seeking news updates or real-time information via Instagram.	<p>"Zelf vooral heel veel sport, want ik daar gewoon heel geïnteresseerd in ben."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
User Motivations	Emotional Gratification	Engagement with news for emotional resonance or human-interest stories.	<p>"Ik heb zoiets van deze mensen maken dit door. Er wordt hier nieuws over geschreven. Dan is het belangrijk genoeg dat dit moet lezen."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
User Motivations	Social Interaction & Community Belonging	Community interaction motivates news engagement on Instagram.	<p>"Mensen die ik volg, reposten vaak dingen over Gaza, dat zie ik veel."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
User Motivations	Convenience and Accessibility	Ease of access and passive exposure drive news consumption.	<p>"Instagram is laagdrempelig, je krijgt nieuws snel te zien, ook al is het wat oppervlakkiger."</p> <p>English: ""</p>
Filter Bubbles &	Confirmation Bias &	Content aligned	"Ik zit wel in bijvoorbeeld een pro-



Echo Chambers	Personalisation	with user views due to algorithmic filtering.	Palestina bubbel... ik zie weinig pro-Israël dingen voorbij komen."
Filter Bubbles & Echo Chambers	Lack of Counter-Information	Limited exposure to alternative or opposing viewpoints.	"Dan krijg je opeens heel veel van dat perspectief... dan lees je misschien niet de andere kant meer."  English: ""
Media Repertoires & Habitual Consumption	Habitual Source Use	Routine use of specific sources builds trust patterns.	"Omdat ik gewoon eigenlijk praktisch gezien altijd met die nieuwswebsites open zit."  English: ""
Media Repertoires & Habitual Consumption	Familiarity-Based Credibility	Credibility attributed through repeated exposure rather than critical evaluation.	"Dan wil ik het meer de objectieve waarheid vinden op de voor mij bekende websites."  English: ""
Awareness of Misinformation	Critical Evaluation and Scepticism	User awareness of unreliable or misleading content.	"Ik denk dat ik geluk heb dat ik heel erg media-bewust ben, dat ik daar doorheen kan kijken."  English: ""
Awareness of Misinformation	Non-Human Influence & Bots	Bots, fake followers, or artificial amplification of news visibility.	"Die AI-plaatjes, daar twijfel ik dan wel bij, zeker als het gaat over bombardementen of oorlog."  English: ""

Table 2: Codebook

## Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

### Student Information

Name: Marit Krol

Student ID: 596784

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Marc Verboord

Date: 26-06-2025

Declaration:

### Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:



Date of Signature: 26-06-2025

### Extent of AI Usage

☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

**Ethical and Academic Integrity**

☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

