

Hostile Legacy Media, Friendly Social Media? Exploring Young People’s Use, Trust, and Bias Perception of Different News Sources About the Middle Eastern Conflict

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With the Middle Eastern conflict escalating in the final months of 2023, news on the topic was covered not only by legacy media but also shared by famous personalities and ordinary users on social media platforms. Especially for young people’s news diets, these novel news sources play an increasingly relevant role, yet their usage and perception remain mostly unexplored. Multilevel models using data from a quota-based cross-sectional youth survey in Austria suggest that, in the context of the current Middle Eastern conflict, information from ordinary users and legacy media is equally used and trusted, ahead of social media personalities. Additionally, we find evidence for a hostile bias that young people perceive in legacy media content, whereas ordinary users are seen as exhibiting a friendly bias. These findings draw attention to the need for a nuanced understanding of news consumption in the digital realm, especially in the context of conflicts and crises.

Keywords: news sources, news consumption, media trust, friendly/hostile bias perceptions, multilevel modeling

While the Middle Eastern conflict has been ongoing for decades, the armed confrontation between Israel and Palestine escalated in the final months of 2023 following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7. The attack and the subsequent war between Israel and Hamas not only led to a surge in coverage by legacy news media but also flooded social media feeds across the globe. Increasingly, not only journalistic sources but also individual citizens share information and seek to mobilize support from international audiences on platforms such as TikTok (Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2025). In this “globalized world of mediatization” (Lemish & Götz, 2022, p. 303), young adults are exposed daily to news about terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, and wars, whether or not they are directly impacted by these events.

Conflict news coverage is a rich field in communication research with growing attention to online and social media (Ariel, Unkel, Weimann-Saks, & Malka, 2023). However, research often groups all digital sources together, neglecting the distinct role of nonlegacy actors—especially in how young people gather

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news (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). Thorson and Wells (2016) propose the concept of *curated flows* to distinguish between different actors shaping news on social media. In addition to traditional journalistic curators, the framework also comprises processes of *social curation*, typically carried out by a user's personal network (i.e., peers, family), but increasingly involving social media personalities, such as celebrities and influencers, who shape social flows through the parasocial relationships they build with followers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Stehr, Rössler, Leissner, & Schönhardt, 2015).

For this reason, we strive to examine young adults' engagement with legacy media compared with personalities and ordinary users on social media in the context of the Middle Eastern conflict. More specifically, we aim to address the following three research gaps: First, there has been public outcry about the conflict being especially sensationalized on social media, flooding young users with potentially graphic, nonjournalistic content (e.g., Hanson et al., 2023). However, these concerns lack empirical support and warrant a thorough investigation of young people's news consumption of the conflict.

Second, trust in news is especially vital during crises and armed conflicts (Ariel et al., 2023). Still, even in current conflict-ridden times, trust in news remains low (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024). However, little is known about how trust varies across different sources. Consequently, we will investigate differences in use and trust between traditional news sources, social media personalities, and ordinary users in the context of the Middle Eastern conflict.

Third, conflicts, like the Israel-Palestine one, often entail a perception of biased news coverage, even if the reporting is balanced—a phenomenon known as the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). While this effect has been mostly studied for traditional media (but see Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Diehl, & Kwak, 2019), it remains unclear whether it extends to social media. We therefore explore how young people perceive bias in news from traditional media outlets, social media personalities, and ordinary users, and how this links to their news consumption amid the escalation of the Middle Eastern conflict in 2023.

We conducted our study in Austria, a context well-suited for examining perceptions of the Middle Eastern conflict, as public opinion on the conflict is ambivalent (Kempf, 2010). This allowed for a diverse range of perspectives among young people, including both pro-Palestine and pro-Israel supporters. Politically, Austria "does not recognize Palestine as a state bilaterally, but supports a negotiated two-state solution in the Middle East Peace Process" (Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Republic of Austria, 2024, para. 3). While its legacy media coverage of the conflict has long been marked by historically positive relations with Israel—similar to the German context—the discourse has shifted toward more nuanced and diverse news reporting in recent years (see, e.g., Lopatin, Samuel-Azran, & Galily, 2017).

Use of Different News Sources

Most young adults consume little news, regardless of the news outlet. Although traditional media remain relevant to some, many young news consumers primarily rely on social media (Geers, 2020). While younger adolescents mainly encounter news incidentally on social media, individual preferences for certain channels emerge in later adolescence and young adulthood (Klopfenstein Frei, Wyss, Gnach, & Weber, 2024). Furthermore, preference for news sources varies by platform: Users turn to Twitter for news media

and journalists, but pay most attention to social media personalities like influencers and celebrities on Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Newman et al., 2024).

Social media influencers have emerged as important information sources, especially among those suspicious of institutional sources like legacy media or politicians (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). They differ from traditional celebrities in that they gained fame not outside of, but rather on social media platforms (Piehler, Schade, Sinnig, & Burmann, 2022). Moreover, influencers distinguish themselves from ordinary users by accumulating significantly larger audiences of followers (i.e., usually more than 1,000 followers; Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

Moreover, young people's news consumption is shaped by their immediate social surroundings, influenced by parents or teachers, and increasingly by peers as they grow older (Klopfenstein, Wyss, & Weber, 2024). Hence, ordinary people—including friends, family members, acquaintances, and other regular users—can also become relevant news sources on social media. In fact, on platforms like Snapchat or TikTok, ordinary users even rank before mainstream media or journalists as news sources (Newman et al., 2024).

Because of the lack of research on young adults' use of different news sources on social media, especially during times of conflict, we pose the first research question:

RQ1: Which sources do young people use when consuming news about the Middle Eastern conflict?

Trust in Different News Sources

Even as young people increasingly turn away from traditional media channels toward social media, they still trust traditional news sources more (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Especially during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people tend to trust legacy media the most, followed by information from family and friends, while social media represents the least trusted news source (Ardèvol-Abreu, Delponti, & Rodríguez-Wangüemert, 2020). Additionally, Vermeer, Kruikemeier, Trilling, and de Vreese (2022) find that, compared with the period before COVID-19, trust in both legacy and social media as news sources increased slightly during the pandemic, whereas news received from others (e.g., friends or family) was perceived as less trustworthy.

Existing findings comparing trust in different news sources during crises are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and thus may not be generalizable to armed conflicts, such as the Middle Eastern conflict. Moreover, we lack nuanced insights into trust in social media news posted by different actors. Therefore, we formulate a second research question:

RQ2: How much do young people trust in (a) legacy media, (b) personalities, and (c) ordinary users on social media when consuming news on the Middle Eastern conflict?

While we lack causal evidence that trust in news leads to more news consumption for legacy media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2023), numerous studies have found a significant positive association between trust and use (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016;

Ariel et al., 2023; Goyanes et al., 2023), or, vice versa, between mistrust and avoidance of traditional news sources (Gorski, 2023). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: There is a positive association between trust in and use of legacy media news content about the Middle Eastern conflict.

For news sources on social media, current evidence is sparse. Existing findings suggest a directional relation in which trust predicts the use of social media news. Without distinguishing between different actors, Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga (2016) find that increased trust in social media is related to increased reliance on social media news over time. However, we lack evidence on how trust is related to consumption from different social media news sources—particularly personalities and ordinary users—and especially among younger age groups in times of conflict. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3: How are trust and use associated with news content on the Middle Eastern conflict posted by (a) personalities and (b) ordinary users on social media?

Bias Perception of Different News Sources

The seminal *hostile media phenomenon* was first discovered by Vallone and colleagues (1985) in the context of the Middle Eastern conflict. After viewing identical snippets of television news, both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian partisans rated the content and the news source as biased against their side. Since then, countless studies have examined hostile media bias in legacy news outlets, finding—on average—a moderate effect size (Hansen & Kim, 2011).

Although research on hostile media bias is abundant, few studies have explored its effects outside the laboratory. In such an uncontrolled setting, news coverage is seldom completely neutral, which leads to real biases potentially impacting news users' bias perceptions. In this context, relative bias perceptions (Gunther & Christen, 2002) refer to the relationship between political attitudes and bias perceptions. For example, both Israel and Palestine supporters may perceive a news article as biased toward the Israeli side, but Palestine supporters perceive it to be more so. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: The more individuals support Israel (Palestine), the more they perceive legacy media content as favoring the Palestinian (Israeli) side.

While the hostile media effect has been extensively studied concerning legacy media, we lack similar findings for social media sources. Gunther and Liebhart's (2006) experiment, finding no evidence for a hostile media effect for ordinary people as a news source, suggests that the hostile media phenomenon might not apply to nonlegacy news sources. In addition, the same news content was perceived as significantly more hostile when presented as journalistic news content. However, it remains unclear to what extent these findings can be translated to the context of digital media and to novel actors in this realm. Therefore, we ask:

RQ4: Do young people perceive content on the Middle Eastern conflict posted by (a) personalities and (b) ordinary users on social media as biased, and (c) does the bias level differ between sources?

Furthermore, the perception of news as biased is, in turn, linked to the use of these news sources. The theory of *selective exposure* (Festinger, 1957) posits that exposure to attitude-dissonant information creates an unpleasant state of cognitive dissonance, which leads people to consume more opinion-congruent than opinion-challenging content in line with the *confirmation bias* (Garrett, 2009). Therefore, people who perceive legacy news media as biased against their own standpoints are also less likely to use print and television news (Borah, Thorson, & Hwang, 2015). We argue that this association holds true for young people's news consumption in the context of the current Middle Eastern conflict and thus hypothesize the following:

H3: The more individuals who support the Israeli (Palestinian) side perceive legacy media as biased toward the Palestinian (Israeli) side, the less they will use legacy media for information on the Middle Eastern conflict.

Moreover, current research on *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011) and *echo chambers* (e.g., Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014) suggests that the use of primarily opinion-congruent news sources might be even greater on social media, as confirmation bias is further reinforced by algorithmic bias (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Yet, incidental news exposure on social media may also lead to users being more frequently exposed to opinion-dissonant information (Masip, Suau, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2020). For this reason, findings on the association between hostile bias perception and use of legacy media may not be generalizable to social media. In addition, it remains unclear how such potential effects may differ for specific types of news sources, such as social media personalities or ordinary social media users. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ5: How are hostile bias perception and use associated for content on the Middle Eastern conflict posted by (a) personalities and (b) ordinary users on social media?

Method

We conducted a quota-based survey ($N = 569$) of 16- to 25-year-olds in Austria during peak media coverage of the Middle Eastern conflict in December 2023. All participants gave informed consent after being briefed on their rights, as legally permitted for minors over 14 in Austria. Participants were also informed at the beginning of the survey about the study topic and their right to withdraw at any time. At the end, we provided information about counseling services. The survey also received ethical approval from the institutional review board of the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna (approval ID: 20240827_045). The sample reflected the distribution of age ($M = 21.21$, $SD = 2.58$) and gender (49.5% women, 49.6% men, 0.9% other, or no indication) in the population. The data, the online appendix, and the R script used for data analysis are available on OSF (<https://osf.io/4qu9p/>).

On average, the respondents were slightly left-leaning in terms of political ideology ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 2.49$ on an 11-point scale ranging from 1, "left" to 11, "right"). Moreover, 36.4% of the participants had completed primary education, 41.9% had obtained secondary education, and 20.1% had attained tertiary education. In addition, 34.6% were first- or second-generation immigrants, while 65.3% had no migration background, reflecting the national distribution for this age group (Statistics Austria, 2025).

Measures

We assessed media use habits with established scales (see Appendix B for full items and question wording). We assessed frequency of use of news sources¹ concerning this topic (adapted from Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023: "How often do you get information on the current Middle Eastern conflict from the following sources?") for 10 different sources on 6-point scales ranging from 1, "never," to 6, "multiple times a day" (Table A1 in Appendix A). Based on a CFA using a robust maximum likelihood estimator ($CFI = .94$, $TLI = .92$, $RMSEA = .08$, $90\% CI [.07, .09]$), we computed a mean score to aggregate the news sources into three broader types: (1) mainstream media ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.27$), comprising tabloid and quality newspapers (online and offline), linear and online TV, as well as radio; (2) social media personalities ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.55$), including celebrities and influencers², and; (3) ordinary users (family members, friends or acquaintances) on social media platforms ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.72$).

Trustworthiness about news on the Middle Eastern conflict was measured for three source types—mainstream media ($M = -0.08$, $SD = 1.08$, on a 5-point semantic differential ranging from -2, "not trustworthy," to 2, "trustworthy"), social media personalities ($M = -0.26$, $SD = 1.10$), and ordinary users on social media ($M = -0.02$, $SD = 1.13$)—using a single item each, based on Hwang, Pan, and Sun (2008). Perception of bias toward one side of the conflict was again assessed for mainstream media ($M = -0.19$, $SD = 1.04$), personalities ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 1.01$), and ordinary users ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 1.03$) using a 5-point scale ranging from -2, "Biased toward the Israeli side" to 2, "Biased toward the Palestinian side" (based on Matthes, Schmuck, & von Sikorski, 2023). The directionality of the scale was randomized so as not to associate the sides of the conflict with high and low levels of trustworthiness. Additionally, support for conflict parties (based on Matthes et al., 2023, "Which of the two conflicting parties do you rather feel

¹ News was defined broadly as "anything currently happening in the world and in Austria, such as news about politics, the economy, but also sports events, music, culture, lifestyle, or science," which can be consumed "through channels like television and newspapers, but also because so-called influencers or celebrities mention or share news." After questions on general news use, the questionnaire turned to conflict-specific news: "In the following part of the questionnaire, we are interested in your news consumption on a specific topic, namely the current military conflict between Israel and Palestine."

² We defined the terms *influencers* and *celebrities* in the questionnaire, describing influencers as people who have become known for their social media presence, while celebrities were defined as famous because of their profession—even though they can also have many followers on social media. We also provided respondents with pertinent examples.

connected to?³) was measured on a single-item 7-point scale ranging from -3, "Supporting the Israeli side" to 3, "Supporting the Palestinian side" ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 1.54$).

Data Analysis

To assess the impact of participants' support for conflict parties on bias perception for each source type, we ran multiple linear regressions (Table 2) using the *stats* package in base R (R Core Team, 2023). As the repeated measures for use, trust, and bias perception of different sources are nested within participants, we ran multilevel linear regressions (see Hoffman & Rovine, 2007) using the *lme4* package for R (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) to analyze the differences between mainstream media, social media personalities, and ordinary users (Tables 1 and 3). For bias perceptions, we additionally calculated Johnson-Neyman intervals (Bauer & Curran, 2005) to probe the interaction between support for conflict parties and source perceptions using the R *interactions* package (Long, 2021). To investigate the relations between use and trust of different news sources, we ran partial correlations using the *ppcor* package (Kim, 2015). Finally, we ran multiple linear regressions to explore how the interaction between bias perception and support impacts use (Table 4).

We controlled for age, gender, education, and migration background. Age has been linked to greater legacy media use (Ariel et al., 2023) and hostile bias perceptions (Castro, Hopmann, & Nir, 2021), but lower use of (Ariel et al., 2023) and trust in social media news sources (Zimmermann et al., 2022). We controlled for gender, as women tend to use social media more frequently (Ariel et al., 2023), but trust it less (Heravi & Harrower, 2016), particularly content by social media personalities (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Education has been shown to impact news usage habits (Castro et al., 2022), while migration background was considered because of its relevance to the Middle Eastern conflict. For the same reason, we also controlled for participants' support for either conflict party in the analyses that did not include this variable as a predictor. Furthermore, as mistrust in mainstream news (Castro et al., 2022; Schmuck & Harff, 2024) and bias perception of legacy media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Weeks et al., 2019) have both been found to be related to increased social media news use as well as associated with each other (Ladd, 2011), we also controlled for the use, trust, and perceived bias across source types (Table A2 for correlations).

Results

Testing for significant differences in use of different sources for information about the Middle Eastern conflict (RQ1), our multilevel model showed that young people use social media personalities significantly less often than mainstream media ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, Table 1) and ordinary users ($b = -0.26$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, Table A3). However, there was no significant difference in use frequency for this topic between mainstream media and ordinary users ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .459$, Table 1).

³ The survey was conducted in German, the official language of Austria. As the German word for *support* ("Unterstützung") carries a strong notion of financial or activist support, which we did not want our item to reflect, we chose this alternative question formulation. We also added an introduction to the question explaining that we are interested in participants' opinion on the conflict (rather than a general sense of connection).

Table 1. Multilevel Linear Regressions Predicting Use and Trust in News on the Middle Eastern Conflict Based on Source Type.

	Use		Trust	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Personalities (vs. mainstream media)	-0.22***	0.06	-0.17**	0.06
Ordinary users (vs. mainstream media)	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.06
Control variables				
Support ^a	0.11**	0.04	0.09***	0.02
Political ideology	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01
Age	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Gender				
Male (vs. female)	0.16	0.11	0.00	0.06
Other (vs. female)	1.70*	0.86	1.21*	0.53
Migration background				
Second generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	0.08	0.13	-0.15	0.08
First generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.14	0.17	-0.23*	0.10
Education				
Secondary education (vs. primary)	0.20	0.12	-0.01	0.07
Tertiary education (vs. primary)	0.75***	0.15	0.05	0.09
Other (vs. primary education)	-0.04	0.41	-0.00	0.25
Use				
Mainstream media			-0.00	0.03
Personalities			0.10***	0.03
Ordinary users			0.03	0.03
Trust				
Mainstream media	-0.03	0.05		
Personalities	0.18***	0.05		
Ordinary users	0.21***	0.05		
Bias perception ^a				
Mainstream media	0.01	0.05	0.11***	0.03
Personalities	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.03
Ordinary users	0.05	0.05	-0.03	0.03
Constant	1.99***	0.47	-0.66*	0.29
Random effects (Variance)				
Response ID (Intercept)	1.08	1.04	0.21	0.46
Residual	0.98	0.99	0.94	0.97
Intra-class correlation (Participant)	0.58		0.22	
Groups/observations	564/1688		561/1683	

^a Ranging from Israel (negative values) to Palestine (positive values).

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. *** indicates $p < .001$.

To test whether trust in different source types for news on the conflict differed significantly (RQ2), we ran a multilevel model showing that personalities are considered significantly less trustworthy than mainstream media ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .003$, Table 1) and ordinary users on social media ($b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, Table A3). Similar to use, though, young people did not accord significantly different levels of trust to legacy media and ordinary users ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .255$, Table 1). Thus, in answering RQ2, we found that mainstream media and ordinary users were significantly more trusted than social media personalities for news about the conflict.

Moreover, a partial correlation analysis revealed a small, but significant positive association between trust and news use for mainstream media ($pr = .10$, $p = .018$), confirming H1. For RQ3, we also found small, but significant positive correlations between trust and use for social media personalities ($pr = .19$, $p < .001$) and ordinary users ($pr = .14$, $p < .001$).

To assess the impact of participants' support for one of the conflict parties on their bias perception of news from different source types (H2 and RQ4), we used linear regression models (Table 2 and Figure 1). For legacy media content on the conflict (H2), we found that participants with stronger support for Israel perceived legacy media as more biased toward the Palestinian side than respondents supporting Palestine and vice versa ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .043$). Therefore, we accept H2. For social media personalities (RQ4a), on the other hand, individuals' support for either side of the conflict did not significantly impact their perception of personalities as biased ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .636$). In contrast, ordinary users on social media (RQ4b) were seen as significantly more biased toward the Palestinian side by respondents supporting Palestine than by those supporting Israel ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .049$).

Table 2. Linear Regressions Predicting Bias Perception of News on the Middle Eastern Conflict Posted by Different Source Types Based on Participants' Support for Conflict Parties.

	Mainstream media		Personalities		Ordinary users	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Support ^a	-0.06*	0.03	-0.01	0.03	0.06*	0.03
Control variables						
Political ideology	0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Age	0.02	0.01	-0.06**	0.02	0.01	0.02
Gender						
Male (vs. female)	-0.03	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.12	0.09
Other (vs. female)	-0.93	0.73	-0.97	0.72	-1.11	0.74
Migration background						
Second generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.02	0.11	-0.20	0.10	0.01	0.11
First generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	0.02	0.14	-0.13	0.14	0.11	0.15
Education						
Secondary education (vs. primary)	-0.13	0.10	-0.02	0.10	0.14	0.10
Tertiary education (vs. primary)	-0.22	0.13	0.22	0.13	0.13	0.12
Other (vs. primary education)	-0.22	0.34	-0.20	0.33	0.27	0.34
Use						
Mainstream media	0.04	0.04	-0.02	0.04	-0.05	0.04
Personalities	-0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.04
Ordinary users	-0.01	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.10**	0.04
Trust						
Mainstream media	0.21***	0.04	0.01	0.04	-0.10*	0.04
Personalities	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.04
Ordinary users	-0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.04
Bias perception ^a						
Mainstream media			0.19***	0.04	0.17***	0.04
Personalities	0.20***	0.04			-0.04	0.04
Ordinary users	-0.04	0.04	0.16***	0.04		
Constant	-0.63	0.40	1.37***	0.39	-0.16	0.41
Adjusted R-squared	0.09		0.07		0.06	

^a Ranging from Israel (negative values) to Palestine (positive values).

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. *** indicates $p < .001$.

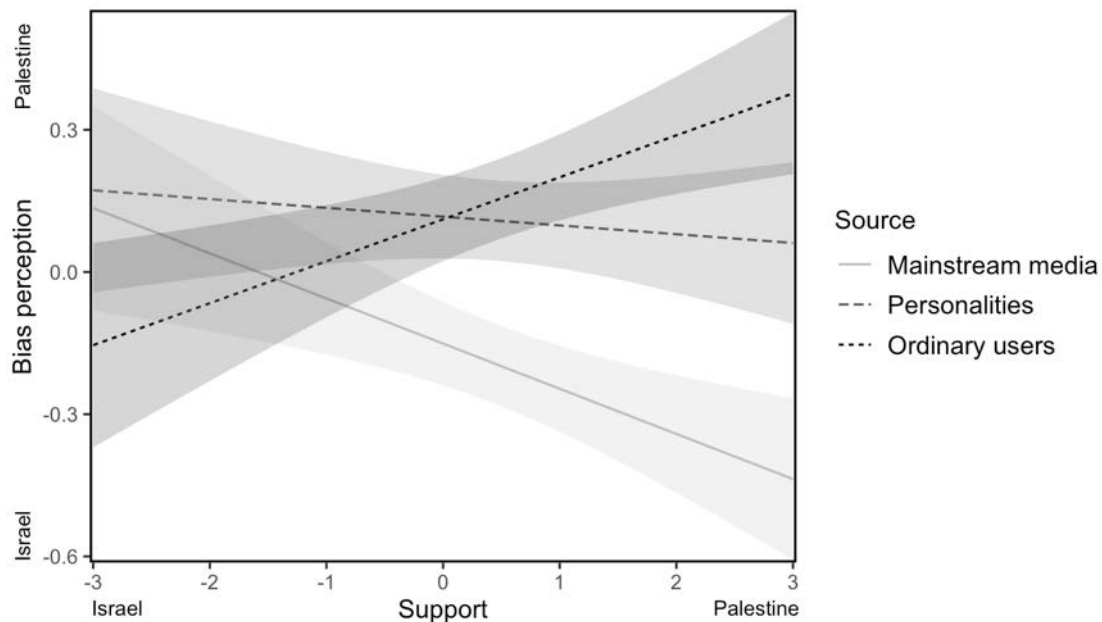


Figure 1. Effect of participants' support for Israel or Palestine on their bias perception of mainstream media, personalities, and ordinary users.

Note. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

To test for significant differences between the three source types (RQ4c), we ran multilevel models assessing bias perceptions of sources toward one conflict side or the other, as well as their interactions with participants' support for Israel or Palestine. We found that personalities are perceived as significantly more biased toward the Palestinian side than legacy media ($b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, Table 3, Model I). Yet, this difference is conditional on participants' support for one conflict side or the other ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .041$, Table 3, Model II). Specifically, Johnson-Neyman intervals showed that the perception of personalities as more biased in favor of the Palestinian side compared with legacy media sources is significant only for a portion of participants, depending on their support for either Israel or Palestine. In particular, the difference in bias perception between personalities and mainstream media is not significant among individuals who support Israel to a moderate to high degree (below -1.28 on a scale ranging from -3 to 3 , with negative values indicating support for Israel). Only participants who show low support for Israel, are neutral, or support Palestine, thus perceive social media personalities as more biased toward the Palestinian side than legacy media (see Figure 2).

Table 3. Multilevel Linear Regressions Predicting Bias Perception of News on the Middle Eastern Conflict Based on Source Type (I) as Well as Source Type and Participants' Support for Conflict Parties (II).

	Model I		Model II	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Personalities (vs. mainstream media)	0.30***	0.06	0.27***	0.06
Ordinary users (vs. mainstream media)	0.34***	0.06	0.26***	0.06
Interactions (Source × Support ^a)				
Personalities (vs. mainstream media)			0.08*	0.04
Ordinary users (vs. mainstream media)			0.18***	0.04
Control variables				
Support ^a	-0.01	0.02	-0.10**	0.03
Political ideology	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Gender				
Male (vs. female)	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06
Other (vs. female)	-1.28**	0.47	-1.28**	0.47
Migration background				
Second generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.10	0.07	-0.10	0.07
First generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.01	0.09	-0.01	0.09
Education				
Secondary education (vs. primary)	-0.01	0.06	-0.01	0.06
Tertiary education (vs. primary)	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.08
Other (vs. primary education)	-0.08	0.22	-0.08	0.22
Use				
Mainstream media	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03
Personalities	-0.03	0.03	-0.03	0.03
Ordinary users	0.06**	0.02	0.06**	0.02
Trust				
Mainstream media	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.03
Personalities	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03
Ordinary users	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03
Constant	0.12	0.26	0.16	0.26
Random effects (Variance)				
Response ID (Intercept)	0.10	0.32	0.11	0.33
Residual	0.96	0.98	0.94	0.97
Groups/observations	561/1683		561/1683	

^a Ranging from Israel (negative values) to Palestine (positive values).

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. *** indicates $p < .001$.

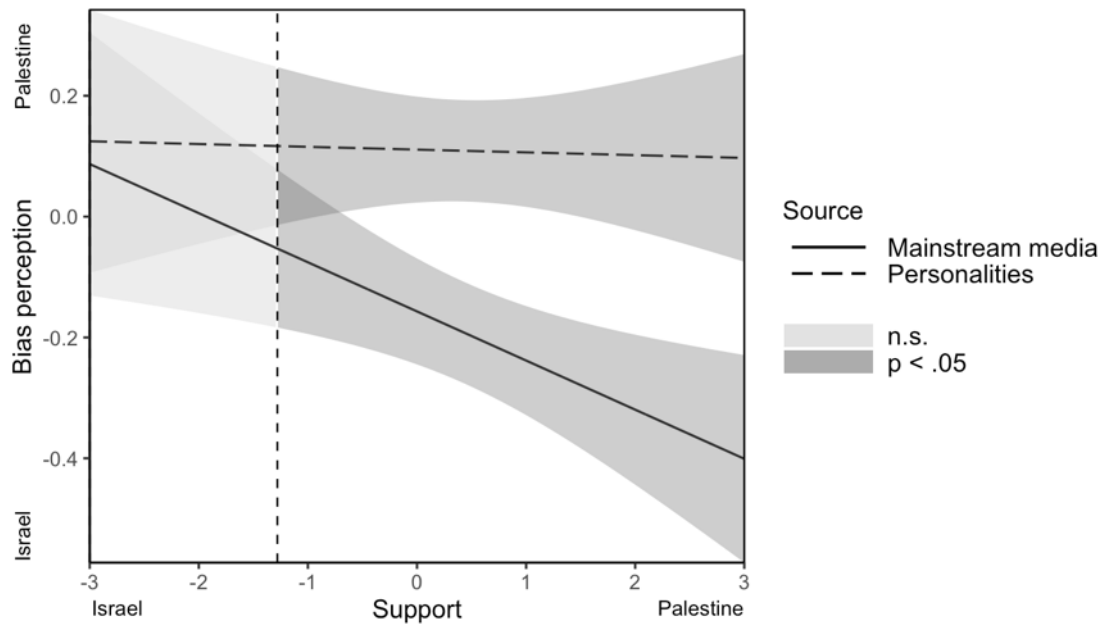


Figure 2. Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance for the difference in participants' bias perception between mainstream media and personalities.

Note. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Furthermore, we also found that ordinary users on social media were perceived as significantly more biased in favor of the Palestinian side than mainstream media ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, Table 3, Model I). Yet, this effect is again significantly interacting with individuals' own support ($b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$, Table 3, Model II). Specifically, Johnson-Neyman intervals showed that the direction and significance of the effect depend on which side of the conflict participants support. In particular, only individuals who are relatively neutral or show Palestine support (above -0.67) perceive other ordinary users to be more biased in favor of Palestine compared with mainstream media. In contrast, for participants who indicate great support for Israel (below -2.90), the effect is reversed, with ordinary users being perceived as more biased toward the Israeli side than legacy media (see Figure 3).

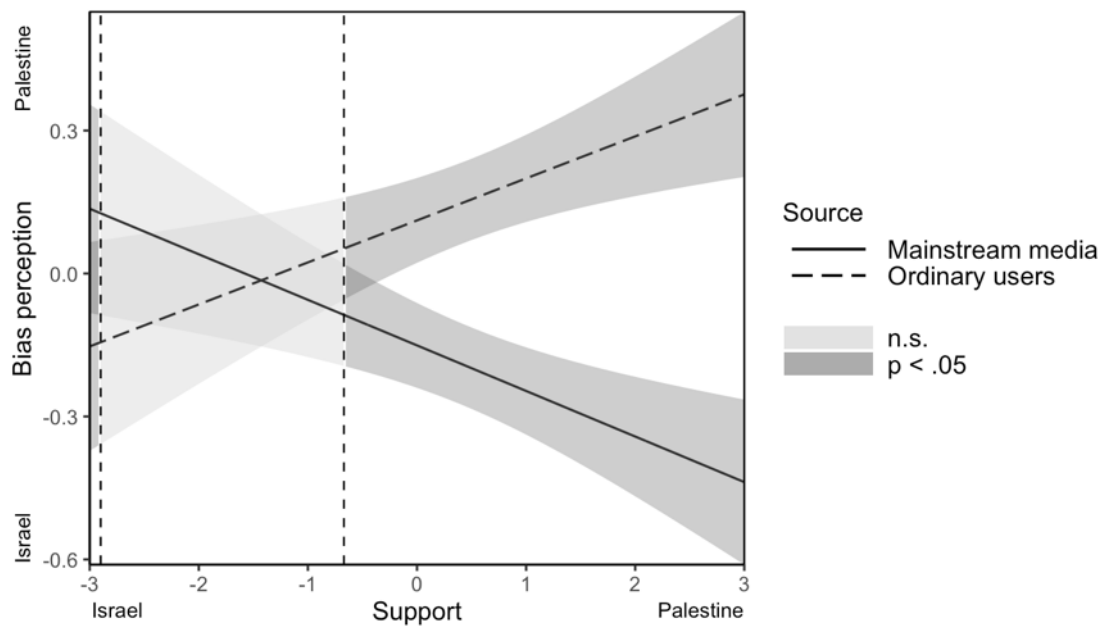


Figure 3. Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance for the difference in participants' bias perception between mainstream media and ordinary users.

Note. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

For personalities and ordinary users on social media, we found no overall difference between the two source types in perceived bias ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .483$, Table A4, Model I). However, there was a significant interaction effect with individuals' support ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .004$, Table A4, Model II). Johnson-Neyman intervals additionally revealed significant differences in some participants' bias perceptions of personalities and ordinary users, but only among those with strong support for either conflict party. Specifically, participants who show moderate to high support for Israel (below -1.84) perceive ordinary users as more biased toward the Israeli side than social media personalities. Palestine supporters (above 1.25), on the other hand, see ordinary users as more biased toward the Palestinian side compared with personalities. For neutral participants and those who show low support for either of the conflict sides, there was no significant difference between the two source types (see Figure 4).

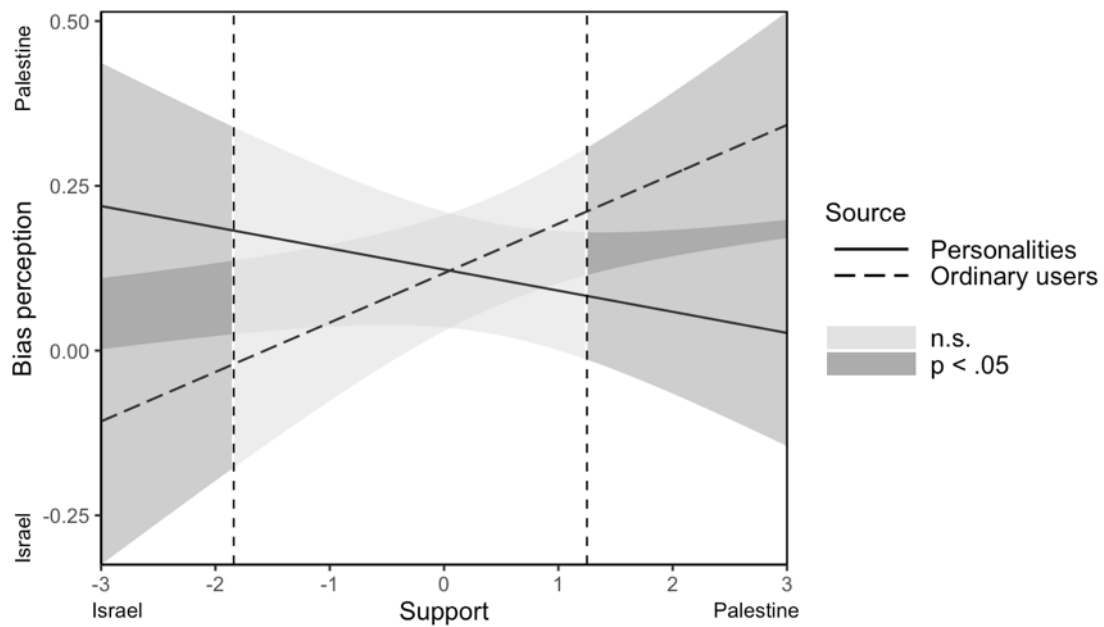


Figure 4. Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance for the difference in participants' bias perception between ordinary users and personalities.

Note. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals.

For H3 and RQ5, the regression models showed no significant interaction effect of participants' support for either of the conflict parties and their bias perception on use for any of the three source types ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .584$ for mainstream media; $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .242$ for personalities; $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .626$ for ordinary users, Table 4; for main effects without interactions, see Table A5). Thus, we reject H3.

Table 4. Linear Regressions Predicting Use of News on the Middle Eastern Conflict Posted by Different News Sources Based on Participants' Support for Conflict Parties and Their Bias Perception of the Respective Source.

	Mainstream media		Personalities		Ordinary users	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Support ^a	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.04
Bias perception ^a	0.02	0.05	-0.05	0.05	0.13*	0.06
Support ^a × Bias perception ^a	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.03
Control variables						
Political ideology	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02
Age	0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Gender						
Male (vs. female)	0.10	0.09	0.16	0.09	-0.17	0.11
Other (vs. female)	0.85	0.72	-1.45	0.76	2.35**	0.88
Migration background						
Second generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.28**	0.10	0.08	0.11	0.25	0.13
First generation immigrant (vs. no migration)	-0.31*	0.14	0.11	0.15	0.05	0.18
Education						
Secondary education (vs. primary)	0.30**	0.10	-0.07	0.10	-0.04	0.12
Tertiary education (vs. primary)	0.44***	0.13	0.38**	0.13	-0.24	0.16
Other (vs. primary education)	0.01	0.33	-0.05	0.35	0.00	0.41
Trust						
Mainstream media	0.10*	0.04	-0.01	0.05	-0.12*	0.05
Personalities	-0.12**	0.04	0.20***	0.05	0.03	0.05
Ordinary users	0.02	0.04	-0.00	0.04	0.17**	0.05
Use						
Mainstream media			0.38***	0.04	0.29***	0.05
Personalities	0.34***	0.04			0.56***	0.04
Ordinary users	0.19***	0.03	0.41***	0.03		
Bias perception ^a						
Mainstream media			-0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.05
Personalities	-0.02	0.04			0.09	0.05
Ordinary users	-0.05	0.04	-0.04	0.04		
Constant	0.86*	0.39	0.73	0.42	-0.07	0.49
Adjusted R-squared	0.42		0.55		0.51	

^a Ranging from Israel (negative values) to Palestine (positive values).

* indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$. *** indicates $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study addresses societal concerns about young people's exposure to social media content related to the Middle Eastern conflict. It contributes novel insights to research on news use, trust, and bias perception among young people by examining not only legacy media but also news shared by social media personalities (i.e., influencers and celebrities) and ordinary users.

A survey of 16- to 25-year-old Austrians revealed that, amid the Middle Eastern conflict, news posted by ordinary users is used as often as content from legacy media, supporting findings on the role of ordinary people in news sharing both offline (Feierabend, Rathgeb, Kheredmand, & Glöckler, 2023) and on social media (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). While *journalistic curation* remains a relevant factor in shaping young people's news diets, *social curation* of information has proven equally important in this context (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Although social media personalities are gaining relevance as news curators (Newman et al., 2024), they represent a less frequently used source of information on the conflict among youth—possibly because of their focus on mobilization or opinions rather than factual information (Zimmermann et al., 2022). The viral "All eyes on Rafah" post in 2024 (see, e.g., Davies, 2024) is a prominent example of such content that many celebrities and influencers shared. Even if social media personalities can act as parasocial opinion leaders, relaying information to their followers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Stehr et al., 2015), our findings suggest that direct social relations with personal contacts are still more impactful in the information-gathering process. Yet, the role social media personalities play in the process of opinion formation about the conflict remains to be investigated.

Given the link between trust and use across source types, it is unsurprising that we observed a similar pattern with trust in news content: While young people's trust levels in mainstream media and ordinary users were similar, news posts by social media personalities were trusted to a lesser degree. This may stem from most users following social media personalities to seek information on trends, products, or lifestyle, rather than social or political issues (Morton, 2020). In addition, the comparatively high trust in friends and family suggests that social relationships confer greater credibility than parasocial relationships with social media personalities.

Moreover, we found that in line with the hostile media paradigm (Vallone et al., 1985), individuals who show greater support toward the Israeli side perceive legacy media as more biased toward the Palestinian side. Conversely, participants who indicate higher levels of support for Palestine see mainstream media as more biased in favor of Israel. In addition, we revealed that mainstream media are perceived as more biased toward the Israeli side compared with social media personalities and ordinary users. However, as we did not assess the actual bias in news content, it remains unclear whether this tendency arises because of the higher number of Palestine supporters in our sample or because legacy media favor Israel in their reporting on the conflict. Even though reporting has become more diverse and nuanced in German-speaking countries, legacy media in these countries have historically exhibited a certain bias against Palestine and tended to sympathize with Israel (Lopatin et al., 2017). While extensive content analyses of media portrayals of the recent Middle Eastern conflict are still pending, first insights suggest that this pattern may also be the case currently (Gondwe & Walcott, 2024).

While previous findings on hostile media bias hold true for legacy media, we did not find evidence of such an effect for social media personalities sharing news on the conflict. Irrespective of individuals' own standpoints, these personalities were seen as slightly favoring the Palestinian side. This result is consistent with previous findings by Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai (2025), who show that pro-Palestinian accounts attract much larger audiences on social media compared with pro-Israeli accounts. Inversely to the hostile bias identified for legacy media, we found that young people perceived a friendly bias regarding ordinary users on social media (Goldman & Mutz, 2011): While Israel supporters perceive a bias toward the Israeli side, Palestine supporters see them as more strongly favoring the Palestinian side. Given the limitations of cross-sectional survey data, we propose two possible, potentially concurrent, explanations for this friendly bias perception of ordinary users. First, in line with current findings on *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011) and *echo chambers* (e.g., Colleoni et al., 2014), the content posted by ordinary users on social media might effectively be biased in line with participants' own opinion on the conflict. Second, ordinary users' content may simply be perceived as opinion-congruent. Gunther and Liebhart's (2006) experiment supports this, showing that neutral news content shared by ordinary people is seen as more aligned with one's own standpoint than the same content shared by journalists.

Moreover, we found that trust is positively associated with use for mainstream media, confirming previous findings (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Ariel et al., 2023; Goyanes et al., 2023). However, this study is the first to show that trust and use are also connected for social media personalities and ordinary users. Furthermore, even if objective reporting is commonly seen as a journalistic quality criterion for traditional media (e.g., McQuail, 2020), the perception of mainstream media as favoring one side or the other did not impact young people's use of this source for news on the Middle Eastern conflict. This is also the case for social media personalities and, surprisingly, for ordinary users, even if previous findings on *selective exposure* (Festinger, 1957) and *confirmation bias* (e.g., Garrett, 2009) would lead one to assume that news content that is perceived as opinion-congruent (*friendly bias*) is also used more frequently.

However, we found no evidence of this phenomenon in young people's consumption of news about the Middle Eastern conflict across different news sources. Yet, at the same time, we acknowledge that selective exposure within different source types may account, in part, for the differences in bias perception (e.g., ordinary people encompass both close contacts, such as family members, and weak ties, such as unknown ordinary users). Specifically, while the content encountered through traditional legacy media sources, such as print or television, is still largely dictated by parental influences, social media allows for a much more personalized news diet that more coherently accords with young people's viewpoints (Klopfenstein et al., 2024).

Limitations

Our study has some notable limitations. First, while we explored young people's bias perception of different news sources on the Middle Eastern conflict, we did not investigate the extent to which contents were actually biased toward one side of the conflict or the other. Future studies would benefit from a mixed-methods approach, pairing survey data with content analyses to assess the relationship between content and bias perception.

Second, we assessed the associations between use and trust as well as use and bias perception for different news sources. However, because our study was cross-sectional, the data did not allow for any conclusions about the directionality of the relationships, let alone causality. Experiments can build upon our findings to investigate the causal direction of the relationships between bias, trust, and the use of different source types.

Third, we used single-item measures for trust and bias perception. Although previous research on attitudes (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007) and trust (Castro, Bahli, Ferreira, & Figueiredo, 2023) suggests that single-item measures may perform as well as—or even better than—multiple-item scales in capturing complex constructs such as trust, we acknowledge that single items may not adequately reflect all relevant dimensions of the measured constructs. Moreover, we used self-report measures for news use, which may not accurately capture actual use habits, especially because of social desirability bias about news consumption patterns (e.g., Shalev, Naab, & Tsfaty, 2025). However, as shown by Jones-Jang and colleagues (2020), this discrepancy would in any case diminish rather than increase effect sizes.

Finally, we chose to study the Middle Eastern conflict at its peak to provide evidence about the public outcry of how the conflict was depicted in social media news content (e.g., Hanson et al., 2023). However, we acknowledge that our research is limited because it concentrates on a particular demographic (young Austrians) and on a specific time. For instance, based on findings about the Covid-19 crisis (Vermeer et al., 2022), collecting data at the peak of the conflict might have temporarily inflated trust in legacy media while diminishing trust in ordinary users. Moreover, because we aimed to draw a quota-based sample in terms of the relevant demographic characteristics of young people in Austria, the stances toward the two conflict parties were not equally distributed within our sample.⁴ Furthermore, some first, nonrepresentative insights suggest that the standpoints on the conflict of legacy media (Gondwe & Walcott, 2024) and the public (Smith, 2023) depend on the particular point in time and on the national context. Depending on the political system, the media environment, and the (domestic) salience of the issue in a given country, news use and the perception of news content may differ significantly from the Austrian case. For this reason, future research should investigate whether our findings generalize to different topics, demographics, and national and temporal contexts.

Implications

Despite these shortcomings, our findings have important implications for journalists, educators, and scholars. While trust in and use of legacy media has declined—especially among young people—they remain a key news source for critical topics like the Middle Eastern conflict. Compared with other sources, such as social media personalities, they still enjoy a higher reputation, as they are deemed more trustworthy. In addition, young people indicated that they used legacy news sources more frequently for information on the Middle Eastern conflict than for personalities on social media. This highlights that quality

⁴ The majority of participants (57 %) indicated a neutral stance toward either of the conflict parties (i.e., 0 on a scale of -3 to 3), while roughly twice as many young people expressed some level of support for Palestine (29%) compared to those who supported Israel (14%).

standards like objectivity or balanced reporting continue to set legacy media apart. To stay competitive on social media, legacy outlets must leverage this strength to keep quality journalism relevant.

Our results also underscore the growing influence of ordinary people on social media in shaping young people's news diets. These users are not only trusted as much as legacy media but are also used just as frequently for conflict-related news, highlighting the role of social flows and ordinary social media users as modern-day opinion leaders (Thorson & Wells, 2016). However, the high level of trust placed in ordinary users also raises concerns about mis- and disinformation on social media platforms. This risk also draws attention to the crucial role of journalists as gatekeepers and the need for media literacy education to help young people assess source credibility.

Finally, our study provides insights into discrepancies in bias perceptions between legacy media and social media, with ordinary users perceived as exhibiting a friendly bias. These findings highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of news consumption on social media rather than employing social media as an umbrella term.

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