



## Is digital native journalism winning the hearts of young people? A Portuguese case study

### ¿Se está ganando el periodismo nativo digital el corazón de los jóvenes? Un estudio de caso portugués

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#### Abstract

Constructing and controlling a narrative is part of young people's need to create meaningful frameworks for interaction today, where we live in a complex scenario characterized by the plurality of media spheres and the number of digital opportunities for participation (Maneta *et al.*, 2024). Given this, traditional media outlets are increasingly distant from young people (Madden *et al.*, 2017), in contrast to digital natives who have a significant emotional dimension, which drives more intimate relationships with technology, but also fuels engagement with news by inspiring connection (Beckett & Deuze, 2016), what Clark and Marchi (2017) describe as connective journalism. With the aim of identifying which editorial approaches are more effective and generate greater empathy and interest in the news among young people, this study conducted 15 interviews with young people aged between 16 and 18. When confronted with two reports on mental health, one from the digital native Fumaça and the other from the newspaper Público, they said they were more interested in the first one, which through its audio format and first-person storytelling offered them a closer approach and made them feel greater empathy, understanding and interest.

**Keywords:** connective journalism, digital natives, emotional journalism, empathy, young people.

#### Resumen

Construir y controlar una narrativa forma parte de la necesidad que tienen los jóvenes de crear marcos significativos para interactuar en la actualidad, en un escenario complejo caracterizado por la pluralidad de esferas mediáticas y la cantidad de oportunidades digitales para participar (Maneta *et al.*, 2024). Ante esto, los medios tradicionales se perciben cada vez más distantes de los jóvenes (Madden *et al.*, 2017), en contraste con los nativos digitales, que presentan una dimensión emocional significativa que impulsa relaciones más íntimas con la tecnología, y también fomenta su vínculo con las noticias al inspirar conexión (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Es lo que Clark y Marchi (2017) describen como periodismo conectivo. Con el objetivo de identificar qué enfoques editoriales resultan más eficaces y generan mayor empatía e interés en las noticias entre los jóvenes, este estudio realizó 15 entrevistas a jóvenes de entre 16 y 18 años. Al ser expuestos a dos reportajes sobre salud mental —uno del medio nativo digital Fumaça y otro del periódico Público—, manifestaron mayor interés por el primero, ya que, en tanto que su formato en audio y la narración en primera persona les ofrecía un enfoque más cercano y les generaba mayor empatía, comprensión e interés.

**Palabras clave:** periodismo conectivo, nativos digitales, periodismo emocional, empatía, jóvenes.

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## 1. Introduction

"Mainstream news media has an age problem" says Nic Newman of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in the report *How Young People Consume News and The Implications For Mainstream Media* (2019). This statement is still relevant today, and it becomes more obvious when we look at recent data that shows us that adolescents and young adults are getting news not only from online organizations, but also from personalities, influencers and celebrities on social networks (Robb, 2020; Cardoso *et al.*, 2024) with a preference for the latter (Munslow, 2024), and a growing disinterest in media. In Portugal, the 18-24 age group (the lowest age group studied by the report) was the least interested in news in 2023, with only 34.4% interested (Cardoso *et al.*, 2024).

However, young people still wish to find news that can connect them to the world and fulfill a range of social and personal needs (Galan *et al.*, 2019). This group does not see traditional media as appropriate for fulfilling this need. As per Galan *et al.*'s (2019) report, there are three important pieces of information that can help to understand what young people are looking for when it comes to news: firstly, they want accessible and easy platforms similar to social networks or streaming services. Media should provide youngsters with stories that fill out their needs, mainly through specific formats (video and audio) that are embedded within the mobile devices that they use in their day-to-day life and through which they share and discuss the content they consume. The last point highlighted in the report focuses on the excess of negative news which young people intentionally avoid, "they don't want media to turn away from serious or difficult stories, but they also want stories that can inspire them about the possibility of change and provide a path to positive action" (Galan *et al.*, 2019).

In a nutshell, young people seek authenticity, fairness and diversity, thus news should be "more personalized, shorter, more accessible and visually appealing", so that young people can find information from people that they feel like a family member or a close friend" (Munslow, 2024). In general, studies on audiences and emotions show that people are more likely to become emotionally involved, retain information and take action when they relate to the news (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

To bridge the gap between traditional media and young people (Madden *et al.*, 2017), digital native outlets have emerged with different approaches to traditional media and spaces to tell stories that are not usually told or that are presented through alternative formats, having a significant emotional dimension at their genesis. Emotion drives not only more intimate relationships with technology, but also fuels engagement with the news by inspiring connection (Beckett & Deuze, 2016), what Clark and Marchi (2017) refer to as connective journalism, in which young people share what seems relevant to them. These feelings are then deepened as they are shared through communication with others.

Today, we live in a complex scenario characterized by the plurality of media spheres and the huge number of digital opportunities for participation, which makes it essential to understand the most effective ways of stimulating young people's consumption and involvement with the news. To this end, journalism, even in the context of a demanding economic environment, should attempt to discuss how it can keep up with new media consumption, which is increasingly hybrid and fluid (Maneta *et al.*, 2024).

With the aim of identifying which editorial approach is most effective and generates the most empathy and interest in the news among young audiences, this article is based on 15 interviews with young people aged between 16 and 18. Three research questions are addressed: 1) What are the main feelings shared by young people when describing the narrative of different news stories? 2) Which traits do young people consider to be more interesting when consuming news on mental health? 3) What are the main differences in terms of positioning between media in relation to mental health? To answer these questions, 15 in-depth interviews were carried out with young people aged between 16 and 18, who were presented with two different articles on mental health from two Portuguese media outlets: the digital native *Fumaça* and the traditional media outlet *Público*.

The results of this study can thus contribute, through an analysis of the editorial strategies adopted by digital natives, to the path that media must follow in order to reach an audience that is becoming less and less interested in traditional news. This group of people will become the next decision-makers; therefore, it is fundamental to adapt to their needs.

## 2. Context and operational concepts

Emotions are a central part of journalism, as stated by Sophie Lecheler, who argues that the latest ways of doing journalism should aim to create content that leads to an intimate and trusting relationship with audiences (Lecheler, 2020). In her commentary *The Emotional Turn in Journalism Needs to be About Audience Perceptions*, Lecheler (2020) analyzes that although most of the new ways of generating emotion in journalism come from a technological base, such as VR or immersive audio, the emotional turn in journalism, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) calls it, is also related to new forms of storytelling, conceptions of the role of journalism and new business models (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

When it comes to young people, the need for connection and proximity to the information they consume is accentuated. In the article *Mind the Gap! Journalism on Social Media and News Consumption Among Young Audiences*, Jorge Vázquez-Herrero, María-Cruz Negreira-Rey and José Sixto-García (2022) concluded that young audiences are looking for a news agenda that is broad, not repetitive, free of politicized opinions, in which a negative view of reality does not predominate and which responds to their needs (Galan *et al.*, 2019), and when this doesn't happen in the traditional media, they often look for it in other actors (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2018).

### 2.1. Generationalism: overcoming current definitions of young people

Within current research on young people, there is a homogeneous base which considers studies conducted with young people from WEIRD families, which refers to western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (Henrich *et al.*, 2010). In this sense, labels such as "digital natives" offer a convenient, yet insufficient and superficial view of young people (Lim, 2016). This is due to the lack of consideration for understudied populations, whose social and family contexts depart from the norm (Alper *et al.*, 2016).

By labelling terms such as "Generation I" (Giunta, 2017) and many others, the literature is continuously attempting to define young people through common practices: "Generation Z like mostly the same food, fashion and places" (Torocsik *et al.*, 2014, p.30).

While a generation refers to a "a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture" (Eyerman and Turner, 1998, p.93), the acceptance of groups by birth age as a simple approach to describe society and expose social problems is limited. This is because media consumers are rapidly shifting their communicative practices from innovation to innovation in short periods of time (Lim, 2016).

Using a generational analysis must be undertaken with care: first, we need to pay attention to sub-populations that do not accord with the norm. Researchers need to contribute to the increasing diversity and inequality around the world by intersecting overlapping forms of social distinction (Alper *et al.*, 2016); second, we should map media trends of different generations in order to provide synergetic practices between them; third, we must consider the continuous technological developments that rapidly change how young people inform themselves and how they communicate with their peers and family.

### 2.2 Young people's relationship with information

The EU Kids Online, a multinational research network seeking to enhance knowledge of European children's online opportunities, risks and safety (Smahel *et al.*, 2020) classifies online activities according to educational/informational (using the internet for schoolwork, to seek for news online), social (use of SNSs and other communicative practices) and entertainment (playing video games, watching videos or listening to music). This is in line with the findings from the Global Kids Online project (Livingstone *et al.*, 2019), which show that kids use the internet at least once a week for information seeking.

The access and types of online activities being undertaken by children and young people should be looked upon with intersectionality, depending on variables such as gender, age, family environment or parental mediation of internet use (Cino *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, a matter that should be carefully considered is digital skills. In this regard, research within young people's digital skills have shown to have both online and offline consequences in fields such as education, identity, sociability and wellbeing (Van Deursen *et al.*, 2018).

Within the literature on digital skills, four digital skill dimensions have been developed, which reflect both functional and critical aspects (Helsper *et al.*, 2015). The first dimension considered is the technical and operational. There are two additional dimensions of digital skills, which are communication and interaction and content creation and production.

Livingstone *et al.* (2023) conducted a systematic evidence review of research on digital skills among 12 to 17 year-olds to understand available research on outcomes of youngsters' digital skills. Information benefits and online opportunities have been found –according to the authors– linked to greater digital skills. As Helsper *et al.*'s (2020) European performance test reveals, there are particularly noticeable variations in information-navigation skills, communication skills, and content-creation skills.

By using the dataset from the latest EU Kids Online project (2020) with participants aged 9-17, and by removing participants younger than 11 (corresponding to a total sample of 15 416 children and young people), Cino *et al.* (2022) attempted to understand how different dimensions of digital skills, including informational, relate to online activities. The authors found that youngsters who perceive to have higher informational skills also tend to use the internet for information-seeking (i.e. looking for news). These results are consistent with previous research (Eynon & Malmberg, 2012) in showing informational skills are associated with homework related information-seeking, but also add that these sorts of skills relate to social and entertainment activities.

Within the Portuguese context, a team of researchers found that Portuguese children (9 to 17-year-olds) –when it comes to informational skills– face difficulties to verify whether online information is true or to choose the best keywords for online searches. These lower rates may reflect critical awareness of the complexity of such competencies (Ponte & Batista, 2019).

### 2.3 Young people, empathy and news media

Clark and Marchi (2017) –who conducted an ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with over 200 high school students in major urban areas of the United States for a period of 10 years– point out the increasing interest from young people towards a connective journalism, in which sharing, inserting oneself into the story and participating in the making of a story become relevant. This participatory environment creates meaningful frameworks for youngsters' interaction.

Adolescents and young adults seem to be disconnected from legacy news, as emphasized by Swart (2021), who found that Dutch youngsters aged 16-22 rarely consume news on television and newspapers and instead commonly refer to social media as the most frequent place for information consumption. Indeed, such disconnection has shown to be related to the complex language and the lack of explanation, which does not inspire young people rather perpetuates media agendas without humanizing stories (Galan *et al.*, 2019).

In recent years there have been significant changes in the way young people consume, access and engage with news, with a large number of youngsters receiving news via social media (Flores *et al.*, 2024), which can result in two critical trends in information consumption by young people highlighted in the article by Maneta *et al.* (2024): accidental consumption (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2018; Flores *et al.*, 2024) and active avoidance and resistance to media (Brites & Ponte, 2017).

The decline in young people's news consumption "does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested in news" (Sveningsson, 2015, p. 1). Rather, it means that youngsters get information from other sources. The genre of news itself, as indicated by Swart and Broersma (2023), may now be produced by many actors, which points out how conceptualizations of news are not intrinsically linked to the institution of journalism (Robertson, 2021), even if news presents one of the major defining traits of journalism as institution (Mast & Temmerman, 2021).

A study conducted by Common Sense (Robb, 2020) with 800 U.S. 13-to 18-year-olds (a particularly relevant segment for this project) evidenced how 45% of teens said they experienced frustration when consuming news, which was the number one feeling they referred to. Other negative feelings such as confusion (30%) and being worn out (25%) were also commonly found. Indeed, with the often-depressing nature of news and the overwhelming amount of information they encounter in their daily lives, young people are prone to be skeptical of news organizations' agendas and thus increasingly likely to avoid the news (Newman *et al.*, 2022).

One specific study that looked upon adolescents (14-19 year-olds) thoughts and feelings about the local and global environment in the United Kingdom (Thompson *et al.*, 2021) found that teens' experiences of

climate-related information –especially the news– lacks nuance, positivity and practical advice, “leading to a sense of powerlessness and end of the world, in turn leading to stress, sadness and avoidance” (p.10).

To capture the interest of younger audiences, in addition to entertainment and soft news, which are their main preferences (Maneta *et al.*, 2024), newsrooms must prioritize diversity and inclusion (Flores *et al.*, 2024).

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1 Research questions

In order to identify which editorial approach is most effective and generates the most empathy and interest in the news among young people, the following research questions were formulated:

*RQ<sub>1</sub>*. What are the main feelings shared by young people to describe the narrative of different news stories?

*RQ<sub>2</sub>*. Which traits do young people consider to be more interesting when consuming news on mental health?

*RQ<sub>3</sub>*. What are the main differences in terms of positioning between media in relation to mental health?

After presenting the three research questions, the following section outlines the methodology employed to address each one.

#### 3.2 Methodologies applied

To answer these questions, a qualitative method was chosen and 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out with young people aged between 16 and 18 from a public school in the Great Area of Lisbon, who were presented with two different articles on mental health from two Portuguese media outlets. The choice of this type of interview presupposes that the researcher addresses a set of relatively open-ended basic questions, but which can be altered, adapting the script to the planning of communication with the interviewee (Rodrigues, 2021).

The inclusion of the specific sample was based on the timeframe for this project, which required to follow a rigorous process entailing not only the collection, but also the analysis of the data. A specific public school was selected among the researchers’ established network, allowing for a thorough communication. This specific school has a dedicated area for external projects, which facilitates the recruiting process. The project aimed for intersectionality rather than a generational approach solely based on birth age as a simple approach to describe society (Lim, 2016). Thus it was requested to the person of contact within the school to include adolescents from different gender and age. While it would be relevant to consider other demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity, the timeframe for this project was limited, and such inclusions would require further collaboration from the public school in order to recruit a more diverse group of students. This process requires more logistics coming from an institution that is already supporting researchers by recruiting a certain number of students according to requested criteria, thus the solicitations need to be reasonable, already considering the school team’s goodwill in supporting research conducted with their students. Table 1 is presented to clarify the collected sample according to age and gender:

Table 1. Sample according to gender and age

Gender \ Age	16-year-olds	17-year-olds	18-year-olds
Males	0	2	4
Females	5	3	1

Source. Own elaboration.

A more specific table (Table 2) is presented to expand on each adolescent (identified as per altered name to maintain anonymity):

Table 2. Sample according to each adolescent who participated in the study

Name (altered)	Age
Joana	16
Mariana	16
Carolina	16
Teresa	16
Lídia	16
Bianca	17
Cláudia	17
Andreia	17
Beatriz	17
Ricardo	17
Carlos	18
Luísa	18
Raúl	18
Vítor	18
João	18

Source. Own elaboration.

The initial goal for this study, apart from having an exact number of teens in each age segment defined, would be to get the most equal number among males and females. The number of females (9) surpassed the number of males (6). Such divergences are beyond the researchers' control. However, considering the internal procedures and different parties that are involved in the process (legal guardians, teachers, school board), the inclusion of such a sample in terms of gender was considered as satisfactory for this study.

All interviews were conducted on the same day, in May 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Consent forms that were initially prepared according to the university's ethical guidelines were signed by either legal guardians (for the case of minors) or by the students themselves (18 year olds) and given to the researchers by the schoolteachers on the day. The interviews were recorded using a recording device and later transcribed.

This project followed a deductive approach, by which the categories derive from category systems defined before the data was collected, in this case through the interview guide that was prepared during the data collection phase. As per requirement of deductive categories to be disjunctive and exhaustive to achieve an appropriate standard when implementing the categories, all themes that were initially defined through the interview guide –already divided in three different groups of questions (journalism; young people's relationship with mental health; analysis of reportages about mental health: *Público* and *Fumaça*)– were considered.

Text passages that corresponded to each category that had been previously defined were assigned a code electronically through a QDA software and a comment was added to each code identifying gender and age. All the coded text segments belonging to each category that was deemed as relevant to help answer the three research questions were compiled into tables within Excel sheets.

For *RQ<sub>1</sub>*, tables were created according to six relevant categories: (1) interest for journalism; (2) reasons for interest / no interest; (3) known media outlets; (4) known journalists; (5) important topics in journalism; (6) most important media type. For each category, two separate tables were created in two different sheets to integrate the two initially demographic indicators defined: gender and age.

For *RQ<sub>2</sub>*, tables were created according to five relevant categories: (1) knowledge about mental health; (2) types of mental health problems; (3) mental health as a spoken / not spoken topic; (4) editorial characteristics of the reportage on mental health; (5) intervenients in the reportage about mental health. For each category,



two separate tables were created in two different sheets to integrate both the initial demographic indicators defined (gender, age).

For  $RQ_3$ , tables were created according to six relevant categories: (1) editorial characteristics that rise more attention –*Público*; (2) feelings that the reportage provokes – *Público*; (3) editorial characteristics that rise more attention –*Fumaça*; (4) feelings that the reportage provokes – *Fumaça*; (5) reportage that rises more attention; (6) reportage with which there is more identification.

### 3.3 Characterization of media outlets analyzed

This article seeks to analyze two Portuguese journalistic projects, *Fumaça* and *Público*. *Fumaça* was born in 2016 and became professional in 2018, claiming to be an “independent, progressive and dissident investigative journalism podcast”<sup>1</sup>. The team is made up of 11 members and is owned by a non-profit association, Verdes Memórias - Associação. In this analysis, participants were shown episode 4 “Aproxima-se a Lua Cheia”<sup>2</sup> of the series “Desassossego: Saúde e Doença Mental”, in audio format and with a transcript.

*Público*, on the other hand, is a daily newspaper founded in 1990, which “is committed to diversified information, covering the most varied fields of activity and corresponding to the motivations and interests of a plural public”<sup>3</sup> and which exists in digital and paper format. In contrast to *Fumaça*’s small team, *Público* has a staff of over 180. In this analysis, we presented participants with an article entitled “Depressão e Ansiedade: o outro barco”.

Despite the vast number of digital natives that have emerged in Portugal in the last decade, some of them with very solid newsrooms, such as Observador, the choice of media organizations analyzed in this study was based on the intention of presenting the young interviewees with two realities with different characteristics, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the newsrooms and teams, which are different in size, as detailed above, but also in the way they are organized and in their business models. *Fumaça* is a digital native, born on the Internet, while *Público* started out as a print media outlet and only five years later, in 1995, registered its website [www.publico.pt](http://www.publico.pt), where it remains today with both formats. Unlike *Público*, a newspaper considered to be traditional and generalist and with much of its content exclusive to subscribers, taking into account some of the features listed in the literature, *Fumaça* has an annual periodicity focused on investigative journalism and with all its content freely accessible, which can fit the definition of an independent media outlet, as it defines itself, an alternative media (Teixeira, 2019), as well as within the concept of entrepreneurial journalism (Bonixe, 2022).

In addition to having a team with many employees, *Público* belongs to the Sonae business group, and uses advertising and membership as its main sources of funding. On the other hand, *Fumaça* is made up of a team of 11 professionals, who claim to work and decide horizontally, does not use advertising as a source of income and survives through sporadic or recurring donations, journalism scholarships and European funds.

Both articles presented to the young people for analysis deal with the same topic, mental health, specifically burnout, anxiety and depression, told in the first person by someone who has actually experienced these problems. However, articles were chosen in different formats: the *Público* article uses text and an illustrative black and white image and the *Fumaça* article is in audio format, with a full text transcript. The choice of articles with different formats was intended to answer the question “in a report on mental health, which formats would you prefer: text, image, audio, video, graphics or other?” asked during the interviews with the 15 young people.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Relative interest for online and TV news, particularly around politics

With regard to the interest that teens say they have in news, 8 teens consider being somehow interested in particular news around topics that interest them more. When looking into gender, 6 out of 10 girls consider

<sup>1</sup> About Us page on *Fumaça*, available at: <https://fumaca.pt/sobre/> and consulted on January 18, 2025

<sup>2</sup> Episode 4 “The Full Moon is Approaching” of the series “Disquiet: Illness and Mental Health”. Available at: <https://fumaca.pt/saude-mental-desassossego-aproxima-se-lua-cheia-ansiedade/>

<sup>3</sup> *Público* Editorial Statute, available at: <https://www.publico.pt/nos/estatuto-editorial> consulted on January 18, 2025.

having more interest than boys, for whom news consumption happens less frequently. As for age, 16-year-olds are more likely to consume news frequently based on their interest when compared to the two older age segments. The most common reason for teens' interest in news is to know about current events (6 out of the 15 teens) followed by having an interest in specific topics. For 3 boys, interest in specific topics is the main reason for consuming news while for 5 girls knowing about current events is the main driving factor for news consumption.

"I am not interested in wars for instance, I prefer more positive topics that are according to my tastes" (Vitor, 18)

"I consider myself as someone who is curious, so I believe it is important to know what is happening around the world" (Teresa, 16)

When looking at the preferred media type to consume news, 8 teenagers commonly refer to television followed by online news (7), particularly social media. For boys, consuming news through digital media is more frequent (3 out of 5), while girls most commonly refer to television (6 out of 10). As for age, the two younger segments of 16 and 17-year-olds prefer consuming news on television (three teens for both age segments) while the oldest age segment of 18 year-olds most commonly refer to online news. An interesting point to highlight is that, when asked to identify media brands that they knew across the different formats, all teens referred to specific television channels, while less than half named a brand associated with a newspaper.

As for the themes that adolescents consider the most important to be informed about, politics is the most common topic for the entire sample followed by war. For 2 boys, war is the most common theme, while for 5 girls politics is the most frequently referred topic. In terms of age, politics is more frequent for the 16 and 18-year-olds, with the exception of 17 year olds referring most commonly to sports.

"The war in Ukraine. I normally would look into news apps to know about the war there" (Raúl, 18)

"I think it is politics. It also has to do with the period we are currently living in... so the topic that most interests me is definitely politics" (Joana, 16)

#### 4.2. News on mental health focusing on those who suffer from stigmatized diseases

The 15 interviewed teens commonly referred to mental health as a topic that is familiar to them and also a theme that they believe is currently widespread. However, for half the teens, there is still a certain stigma associated to mental health diseases:

"I think it is a topic that is being spoken about, but people do not worry so much. I believe that we are still afraid of talking about mental health" (João, 18)

In regard to specific mental health diseases, four were commonly referred to among all teens. The most commonly mentioned disease is depression (14 out of 15 teens), followed by anxiety. Anorexia and Burnout were also commonly referred to by two out of the 15 teens. Both depression and anxiety are similarly considered upon when looking into age and gender segments.

When asked about the preferred intervenients when consuming news on mental health, 14 teens showed a clear preference for those who face a specific mental health problem. Furthermore, for 9 adolescents, mental health professionals are also important to be considered in news content on this specific topic. This is particularly noted among girls when compared to boys:

"I believe that a mix of both would be best. From one side, a person who is going through a mental health problem as well as someone who studies the topic" (Lidia, 16)

"People who are going through the problem, because then we can understand what they are going through... and we can learn to deal better with the situation. It can also be a psychiatrist helping, but maybe he never really felt what it is to feel that way" (Vitor, 18)



#### 4.3. Teens preference for digital native journalism's format and tone

In reference to the preferred format when consuming news on mental health, 11 out of 15 teens refer to audio followed by images. Audio is particularly prevalent among girls (9 out of 10) and among 16 year olds (5 out of 5).

"I believe that audio is the most important because I would like to hear testimonials of people who have faced or are facing mental health problems" (Andreia, 17)

Adolescents in this study show more interest in the audio format available in *Fumaça's* article, as well as the more personal and direct tone associated with the digital native news media outlet. For *Público's* article, 9 out of the 15 youngsters considered the image to be important to capture their attention. This is especially valid for boys, who consider such format to be valuable in addition to text:

"Images are important because they call out more attention from people compared to text. With words only, people get tired. So I think images are very important to captivate the attention" (Carlos, 18)

When comparing both articles from *Público* and *Fumaça* in terms of interest, 12 teens show a clear preference for *Fumaça's* article. *Fumaça's* audio format is particularly valued, thus justifying the choice for the digital native's article:

"I prefer *Fumaça's* article because the audio makes it much more appealing. We really listen to the person who is having the mental health problem speaking, explaining" (Luísa, 18)

The format of *Fumaça's* article—in tune with its presented language style—immerses teens in the story, raising the sensation of proximity:

"*Fumaça's* article allows me to hear a truer and more personal testimonial, with which I can really feel a proximity with the person who is speaking. He transposes the feelings through the audio and makes me feel what he feels" (Bianca, 17)

#### 4.4. Positive emotions: teens' connective feelings as catalysts for interest in news

In terms of teens' emotions when it comes to both articles, 8 teens feel empathy when it comes to *Fumaça's* story. Compassion is the second most common emotion for the digital news outlet, followed by pity. 4 boys identify empathy, while girls are divided between empathy and compassion.

"I felt empathy, because there were stages in my life where I also felt similar. I get very sensitive with this topic, there are more and more people facing these problems" (Luísa, 18)

As for *Público's* article, teens refer to empathy and compassion equally (4 out of 15). However, a third emotion related to distress and anxiety can also be commonly found: 4 interviewees refer to despair. This last emotion is most frequent among boys:

"Despair, as he was sharing his experience facing isolation" (João, 18)

To sum up, both when analyzing digital native *Fumaça's* or legacy media *Público's* articles, teens may feel empathy and compassion in both. But the negative emotions associated with *Público's* article may cause more distance from youngsters towards this article, potentially contributing to news avoidance.

### 5. Discussion

The qualitative interviews firstly revealed how adolescents in this study are disconnected from traditional media, with the exception of television. While digital media is common for teens to consume news—especially

on social media and among boys— TV news is still relevant among the interviewees. The findings do not, therefore, corroborate with those of Swart's (2021) study, emphasizing on adolescents' rare news consumption on television. Youngsters can generally identify Portuguese TV news outlets. However, for other legacy media such as newspapers and radio, there is a clear disconnection.

Interestingly, when connecting text and audio, as is the case for digital native *Fumaça's* innovative approach, adolescents' interest in news increases. Such finding supports the idea that young people look for new forms of storytelling, embedded within the emotional turn in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). The emotions that are projected through *Fumaça's* article through a more personal tone that is achieved through audio format connects with youngsters, conveying feelings such as empathy and compassion. Such findings corroborate with Clark and Marchi (2017) study, in that the interest for news—here specifically on mental health—increases when certain connective emotions arise in news stories. Through those feelings, teens can insert themselves into the universe of the characters, becoming part of the plot.

As for the case of legacy media outlet *Público* and its format—primarily focused on text with resource to an illustrative image— young people may still feel certain connective emotions, however a negative feeling commonly rises among youngsters: despair. Such types of emotions—among others such as confusion or feeling worn out— have been connected to news avoidance amongst youth (Thompson *et al.*, 2021).

Previous studies have pointed out that young audiences look for a news agenda that is broad (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2022) and in which a negative view of reality does not predominate (Galan *et al.*, 2019). The findings confirm that there are diverse themes that teens are interested in—such as politics, war and sports—and while news consumption on such topics necessarily implies contact with a negative view of reality, when it comes to mental health, teens in this study seem to connect to news coming from other journalistic actors (Boczkowski *et al.*, 2018) because of the tone and format in which they are presented. This might then imply that certain editorial traits associated with traditional journalism such as text and images might not be effective in bringing young people closer to journalism when it comes to mental health.

Teens are, as this study evidenced, increasingly sensitive on topics around mental health, as they feel emotionally connected to the theme, many of these teens have questioned themselves about having had a mental health crisis at a certain point of their life. First person testimonials, especially through audio format, as is the case for digital native's *Fumaça* article, humanizes the story and brings a deeper emotional meaning that can be translated into inspiration (Galan *et al.*, 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

This article analyzed which editorial approaches generate the most empathy and interest in the news among young audiences. This was done through 15 interviews with young people aged between 16 and 18. The corpus includes two articles on mental health, a text article from *Público*, a traditional Portuguese daily newspaper, and an audio report transcribed by the Portuguese digital native outlet *Fumaça*.

The theoretical analysis states that young people feel disconnected from journalism and that they are consuming less information through traditional media channels. Youngsters feel an increasing need to be heard and to feel involved. They seek proximity, novel formats, and they also prefer to obtain information according to their interests. All of this is embedded within an emotional dimension that translates into a search for deeper meaning in news stories that young people feel are important to them, and with which they can connect.

When confronted with the topic of mental health, the majority of teens say they empathize with the topic: they consider mental health to be a generalized societal problem, and they say they know someone who either suffered, suffers or knows someone close who battled with mental health issues. Among specific diseases, the most frequently mentioned are anxiety and depression. These arise and intensify considering the immensity of negative news about the state of the world, which ends up leading to active and intentional avoidance of news.

When presented with two reports in different formats on the same subject—both with first-person accounts—there was an immediate interest in the longer report, available not only in text but also in audio format. In this report, the interviewer explains through an emotional approach what it feels like to suffer from a burnout. The results show that the sample of interviewed adolescents are more empathetic and consequently more interested in formats that bring the information closer to them emotionally, in this case through audio (through

which they can feel as if they were the person speaking). However, video format should also be considered, as it was frequently mentioned as one of particular relevance and interest among youth.

To sum up, we can conclude that while young people may still be interested in current events, they look for genuine stories that are told through mixed and innovative formats (video, audio and graphics in addition to the more common format based on text and images). If, for one side, youngsters frequently consume content produced by influencers, celebrities and personalities on social media, they prefer to have access to those who live the stories rather than solely the reports. They seek for the human side of journalism and they are willing to consume such emotional type of content even in longer formats and in innovative digital native outlets that publish less frequently, as is the case with *Fumaça*, analyzed in this article.

## 7. Future research

Since this article is based on a very small sample and is not very representative of Portuguese realities, as only 15 interviews were carried out with young people, both males and females and aged between 16 and 18 from a single public school in Almada –the country's 10th largest city– it would be relevant for future research to broaden and diversify the sample, incorporating participants from other regions of the country who will certainly have specific needs. In this way, a comparative study could also be carried out with other European countries, which would make it possible to gather trends and map common needs.

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