



Between the Present and the Past: Using Card-Sorting and Biographical Approaches to Identify News Influencers' Media Habits

Mariana S. Müller^(✉) , Ana Filipa Oliveira , Margarida Maneta ,
and Maria José Brites 

Lusófona University, CICANT, Porto, Portugal
mariana.muller@ulusofona.pt

Abstract. Validating news through close relationships (e.g. family and friends) is a strategy that young people use to assess the trustworthiness of news [1]. Also, some authors argue that “interactions with media are embedded within a biographical understanding of time” [2]. Considering this, this paper focuses on using semi-structured interviews with biographical features and based on the Q-Sort methodological approach [3, 4], as a qualitative strategy to map past and present news consumption habits. We reflect on this methodological approach to analyse changes in media consumption over time, emphasising social and inter-generational contexts. As part of a larger project, we conducted twelve interviews with individuals - from different ages and backgrounds - previously identified by youth (between 15–24 years old) as their news influencers. The interviews (N = 12) were conducted via Zoom video call platform between July and October 2023. Findings indicate that some strategies contribute to obtaining more thought-provoking answers from interviewees. Namely paying attention to spontaneous mentions of past periods or important events in their lives and mentions of changing media habits. Even though remembering is a complex process, Q-sort helped participants to reflect upon and talk about their media habits. Moreover, our biographical approach with Q-Sort methodology revealed interesting findings with participants of distinct ages and backgrounds.

Keywords: Q-sort · Biographical Approach · Qualitative Research · Media Consumption · News Influencers

1 Introduction

This paper aims to examine the use of semi-structured interviews, with a biographical approach and based on a Q-Sort methodology, to analyse media consumption habits over time. This approach aims to capture intergenerational and social contexts related to media habits. We propose reflecting on this qualitative strategy in the context of a Portuguese project focused on young people, news and digital citizenship - YouNDigital (PTDC/COM-OUT/0243/2021).

We structured the sample for this paper (12 interviews) based on 42 previous interviews with young people who indicated other individuals that influenced their news consumption - henceforth referred to as ‘news influencers’.

In the following sections, we present an overview of young people’s media habits in the digital era, emphasising their strategies to validate news, which includes relying on close relationships. Our theoretical framework comprises the notion of memory and its relationship with media habits. Considering that speaking about media is a complex and often unconscious process [5], we argue that Q-sort methodology with a biographical approach is a relevant qualitative approach to map past and present media habits.

2 Who is Relevant and When? Young People and Their Particular Way of Consuming News

Young people born and raised in the digital age are immersed in distinct forms of news and information consumption [1, 6]. Multiplatform dynamics and personal preferences highlighted by algorithmic influence prevail in their consumption routines. According to Galan et al. [7], young audiences see news not just as what you “should know” but also as what is useful, interesting and fun to know.

The Digital News Report 2023 highlights a rise of TikTok and other video-led networks influenced by the younger generations. In general, they pay more attention to influencers or celebrities than to journalists [8]. In line with this, the YouNDigital survey reveal that young people generally follow instagrammers and youtubers to find out what’s going on in the world [9]. Moreover, and as indicated by the Digital News Report 2023, news brands’ websites and apps are less connected to young generations around the globe. Younger people prefer to access news through their search, social media or mobile aggregators.

Concerning news consumption, Swart [1] highlights that family and friends play an essential role in validating the information consumed, being a widely used tactic by young people to assess the trustworthiness of news. This may disclose the possible influence of intergenerational relationships on news consumption. In addition, studies show that digital media “is transforming audiences’ practices” [10], not only in the sense that younger people trust and turn to older people but the other way around. In particular, intergenerational relationships have boosted seniors’ use of technology positively [11], not only because it reflects on the confidence and skills of the older people, but also because it shapes and strengthens relationships between generations. Considering this, it is relevant to analyse who are the persons who have had an influential role in youth and their news consumption habits.

The YouNDigital project aims to map who plays a role in young people’s news consumption in Portugal and to identify who plays a crucial role in consumption habits. Based on 42 semi-structured interviews, young people aged between 15 and 24, identified 12 individuals who they considered their news influencers. Subsequently, these people were interviewed with the main objective of mapping their media habits, and how they relate to news in a digitalised and datafied context. In this paper, we intend to analyse how biographical interviews can be useful for mapping media habits in the context of intergenerational relationships. We argue that semi-structured interviews, with

biographical characteristics, based on the Q-Sort methodological approach are a relevant qualitative strategy for mapping past and present news consumption habits.

3 A Biographical Approach that Calls for Memory and Nostalgia

Understanding the news habits of the present and the past requires memory. Erll [12] asserts that the notion of memory involves forgetting: “Remembering and forgetting are two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is, memory. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering”. Remembering is a selective and partial process that goes beyond merely reproducing facts. It can be understood as a social process and a product.

Considering this, Cabecinhas [13] argues that aspects such as power relations, filters that operate in a given cultural context, personal experiences and trajectories should be considered in analysis that triggers memory. Moreover, memory is directly connected with social structures and individual sociocultural frameworks [12, 13]. According to Erll [12], media are in a central position in a cultural notion of memory on an individual and collective level. In the first decade of the 2000s, the author [12] already identified, in the new media (e.g. Facebook and YouTube), an acceleration of images and narratives about the past that shaped the daily experience of many people.

Aligned with this, distinct researchers [14, 15] have mapped movements that connect media and nostalgia. Expressions of nostalgia have emerged in social networks and groups and are focused on objects, media products and styles. One of the visible consequences is the creation of cultural products that exalt specific periods and reinforce expressions of nostalgia, such as the Netflix TV show *The Stranger Things*.

Niemeyer [14] considers that nostalgia can be a private or public return to the past and sometimes relates to an imagination of the future. The author [14] argues that this wave of nostalgia is not just fashion or a trend and it can express different ways to deal with time. The re-emergence of nostalgia can also be a reaction to fast technologies in a clear paradox since distinct movements are growing online.

Analysing oldness and newness as categories to describe media, authors [2] argue that “interactions with media are embedded within a biographical understanding of time”. In the author’s proposal, life histories and narratives of media are merged to provide more nuanced ways to comprehend media, its discourses, and narratives. Through the interviewee’s narratives, we aim to analyse the possibilities of mapping media habits in the present and past, considering a biographical approach and a social perspective of memory.

4 Q-Sort as a Qualitative Strategy to Map Past and Present News Consumption

Analysing audience studies, Schrøder [16] points out an empirical shift in the field. An idea of “decoding” encounters with media “texts” was replaced by mapping audience participation in the wider mediascapes in a mixed-methods research design. Schrøder [3] argues that using the Q-methodological approach with qualitative and quantitative analysis allows audiences’ research to go beyond interpretive opacity.

News repertoires are an approach that is gaining ground, not least because of the way people navigate the media ecology nowadays, using a variety of media for information and entertainment [4]. By definition, these repertoires should “focus attention not only on traditional journalistic outlets but also on the broader concourse of possible information sources in the digital media landscape, which can be drawn upon to aid sensemaking in everyday life” [4].

In this context, Q-methodology is considered well-suited for analysing media reception and use [17]. Schröder [3] argues that it allows researchers to capture individuals’ subjective perceptions of an area of experience and aggregate these perceptions through a factor analysis. Since participants must reflect on their choices during the process, Q-methodology has a dialogical and reflective potential. “When informants have completed the card placing process, accompanied by dialogical negotiation, they have self-analysed their subjective news consumption universe, whose internal architecture is moreover relational”, argues Schröder [3].

In a traditional approach, Q-methodology provides both qualitative and quantitative findings, creating a typological pattern of differences and similarities between the participants’ perceptions [3]. Q-methodology is applied in a card-sorting activity with a think-out-loud protocol structured based on the research questions. Participants have to place and rank these cards in a pyramid according to their daily use or importance in their lives. On each card is a statement or the particular sociocultural phenomenon being investigated (Schröder, 2012), usually defined in a previous research stage.

In a pilot study with people aged between 20 and 30 years, Hasenbrik and Domeyer [5] added visual methods to facilitate speaking about media, a complex and often unconscious process. In this case, participants received blank cards to complete with the main elements of their media repertoires, and in a four-step activity, they had to position the cards in a circle with “me” in the centre. The main data for analysis were verbal comments, and visual data was not used as data on its own [5].

Aiming to facilitate the participatory process and obtain precise and thought-provoking answers within the YouNDigital project a bottom-up approach was implemented in our Q-Methodology. Participants were given eight blank cards to complete and three cards with suggestions (War, Digital Influencer, and Television Journalist) they could accept or decline. In the following section, we describe in detail the research design.

5 Research Design

Aiming to understand young people’s perceptions, experiences and understandings of news and digital citizenship, the Youth, News and Digital Citizenship (YouNDigital) project (PTDC/COM-OUT/0243/2021) is structured around a mixed research design. In the first stage of the research, a representative online survey focused on media habits and citizenship was applied to 1362 young people living in Portugal. In the second stage, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people aged between 15 and 24. The interviews were carried out using card-sorting exercises with a think-aloud protocol focused on the consumption and socialisation of news in the context of a digitalised society. At the end, participants were asked to nominate a person they considered to be an influencer in terms of their news consumption habits - their news influencers.

This paper focuses on the interviews with the nominated news influencers. This group consisted of 12 people, aged between 14 and 60 years old, identified as parents, friends, siblings, or professionals/adults working in institutions attended by the young participants. The interviews were conducted between July and October 2023, via Zoom video call platform, and lasted between 45 and 120 min.

The semi-structured interview took into account two axes: 1) Influencers and Socialisation; and 2) Datafication and Algorithms. The two axes are followed from the perspective of a biographical approach, seeking to understand previous versus current information consumption habits. This paper focuses specifically on the first axis, where interviewees assembled the Q-Sort pyramid on the Jamboard platform as Fig. 1 depicts. There were eight blank cards to be filled in and three suggestions that could be accepted or declined: War, Television Journalist, and Digital Influencer. Using the Q-Sort methodological approach [3, 4] with a think-aloud protocol, the news influencers were asked to identify and classify people, themes and subjects that played a role in their information routine, rating them as very important, indifferent and not very important.

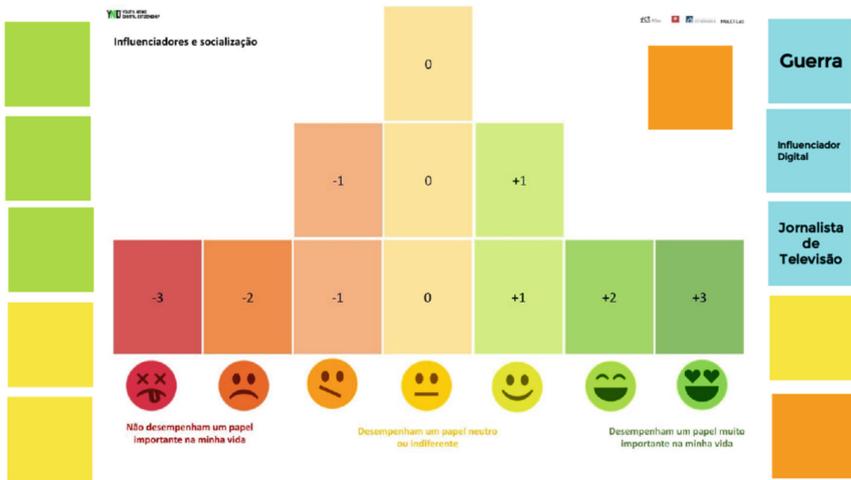


Fig. 1. The Q-Sort pyramid that was presented to the interviewees with 9 blank cards and 3 suggestions (War, Digital Influencer, and Television Journalist) that were not mandatory.

Among the questions asked to the interviewees to promote reflection on the resulting pyramid, two centred on the biographical approach: “Do you think this pyramid could have been different, for example, before or during the pandemic or the war? Or another personal context of yours?”.

By assembling the pyramid and clarifying their choices, the interviewees were encouraged to compare their current information consumption with their habits from other moments in their lives. The aim was to have a more retrospective logic, allowing us to capture a biographical approach, with the essence and involvement of media consumption throughout life and, consequently, the changes in that consumption. Two questions served as the basis for this reflection: “Do you think your news consumption

has always been like this?” and “Has it been different at other times in your life?”. This exercise aimed to prompt reflections about how they experienced news consumption in different periods of their lives and to identify their perceptions about it. As it was a qualitative reflexive exercise, this option allowed us to uncover their in-depth experiences, narrated in the first person [18], through the interviewee’s personal sharing.

In the next section, we present a methodological reflection focused on our experience of interviewing people of different ages (14–60) by using Q-sort and a biographical approach.

6 Unlocking Biographical Insights: Asking Questions at the Right Time and Giving Them Space to Speak

The interview script was assembled to ensure the collection of data and subsequent portrait of media biographies. To facilitate the process, we followed Schröder [3] and Davis and Michelle [17], who propose that Q-methodology is well-suited for capturing media reception and use as it allows for apprehending individuals’ subjective perceptions.

The interview was divided into three parts. In the first part, as an icebreaker, the interviewees presented a piece of news that caught their attention in the previous week. Those who didn’t bring any were invited to talk about a topic of their choice. In the second stage, the interviewees assembled their Q-Sort pyramid, as previously detailed in Fig. 1. The last section of the interview was dedicated to exercises focused on algorithms and datafication.

The script was structured so that the interviewers could ask distinct follow-up questions to map the news consumption of the interviewees. Within this logic, two questions of biographical approach were included: “Do you think your news consumption has always been like this?” and “Has it been different at other times in your life?”. These questions could be asked at any time during the interview.

It was interesting to note that some interviewees, especially the older ones, already linked their news consumption to other moments in their lives, from the beginning. For some of them, talking about their own lives and routines seemed to be easier than for others. Those who spontaneously addressed their routine often ended up forgetting that the focus was on news consumption. They talked about significant events in their lives, and the interviewers deliberately sought to exploit the possible connection with news consumption. For example, Ricardo, 53 years old, talked spontaneously about his resignation and reintegration into the job market. Following this, he was asked if he discussed the news with his coworkers:

You share something, a song, a piece of news about a band, a soccer post, or a joke. I don’t have in-depth relationships or discussions with my colleagues... They are not people whom I feel the desire or even the need to influence. (Ricardo, 53 years old).

Then interviewers questioned if this was different from his previous job. Ricardo answered, by exploring connections to his life trajectory: “In my previous job, it was different, firstly because I’d been there for many, many years, I’d been there for 15 years”. In this case, Ricardo triggers his memory and differentiates it from his current experience. He considers that he influenced his former colleagues because he had a closer relationship with them. Considering the logic that memory presupposes forgetting [12], Ricardo does

not provide an example of how news socialisation was with his colleagues from the previous company.

Similarly, Helena, 18, spontaneously indicated a milestone in her life related to news consumption. After taking part in activities such as the Youth Parliament and the European Youth Parliament, she began to realise the importance of being aware of her surroundings:

From the moment I started taking part in the projects, I began to realise the importance of watching the news, reading the news and knowing what's going on, and from then on I began to consume more of this part. (Helena, 18 years old).

Although the structured questions were direct, some interviewees had difficulty answering them. In this regard, inserting the two biographical questions in moments when the interviewees were already describing their routines or interests seemed to be more feasible.

For example, Tainá, 23 years old, explained that she tends to have a topic she's interested in and read a lot about it for a certain period. When she feels she has delved into the subject enough, she loses interest and seeks another topic. "When it's over, I go back to consuming my normal content until something else catches my interest." The question was asked after she mentioned that she no longer followed news about a particular subject, namely fashion news.

Another strategy used was to pay attention to moments when the interviewees indicated a change in their media consumption. Francisco, 30 years old, mentioned that he stopped watching television with his mother, and then he answered follow-up questions about how his media habits changed over the years:

Yes, yes, yes. It's changed a lot. The television that used to bring people together, sitting on the sofa watching television, I think nowadays... It used to be able to unite, but since everyone already has their own television in their own corner of the house, it's no longer one that can unite. (Francisco, 30 years old).

When asked about the type of content he no longer watches, Francisco mentioned soap operas and gave details about his family routine. "My mother is watching, we're having dinner and she's watching. Since I'm the youngest member of the family, I always have my back on the television." In this case, the questions brought details about the family's interaction from an intergenerational perspective. Francisco has no interest in soap operas, but his mother watches them nonetheless. However, even if he wanted to watch such or any other media content, he was positioned with his back on the screen because he was the youngest in the household.

Once they finished assembling the Q-sort pyramid, the interviewees also answered some questions outlined in the script. Two questions were centred on the biographical approach: "Do you think this pyramid could have been different, for example, before or during the pandemic or the war? Or another personal context of yours?"

Our experience showed that the word "pandemic" stood out. Most interviewees related it to their experience during the pandemic, many of which were negative. Younger interviewees emphasised pandemic restrictions and their impact on their socialisation and favourite media themes:

Before the pandemic, I used to talk more with people who placed more importance on political TV shows and sports, so all these things related to that would be something

that would interest me more because they are part of my social circle. (Giovana, 15 years old).

During the pandemic, soccer ended up dying a little, there were no matches, and no training sessions either. There were no wars during the pandemic either. Friends only spoke by mobile phone because we couldn't have physical contact. And family life remained the same. (Henrique, 15 years old).

In other cases, the interviewees tended to focus their answers on the themes they inserted in the pyramid. Their consumption habits didn't change because their areas of interest remained the same. We understand that the proposed question didn't allow the interviewees to consider, for example, formats, routines, and socialisation. That was the case of Valdemar, aged 60:

The themes of my life, yes, were always very much based on these spaces we had here. Maybe, I'm here, we'll go a little deeper into the family issue, which was very important to me, but I didn't contextualise it because I was more contextualised in the professional issue. But not much has changed. (Valdemar, 60 years old).

Answering the same question, Helena, 18 years old, distanced herself from the influence of the pandemic or war on her interests. She indicated that she becomes interested in the news when she understands its relevance to her life and socialisation:

For example, it wouldn't be a war or the pandemic, in my case, even though I know some people started consuming more news because of that, but that wasn't my case. My case was realising that it's something necessary for social interaction in society. (Helena, 18 years old).

Regarding the difficulties related to being aware of media habits [5], our experience indicates that being aware of changing and past media habits is even more complex. Semi-structured interviews with a biographical approach demand interviewer to be attentive to details that may refer to the past. Being aware of memory as a social process that includes forgetting [12], and that operates in a given cultural context [13] can contribute to a more successful process.

7 Final Remarks

The preliminary findings suggest different perception degrees about changes in the individuals' news consumption routines. All the interviewees associated media routines with distinct times in their lives, following Lesage and Natale [2] idea of a biographical understanding of the time. This aspect can draw attention to more nuanced and nostalgic ways to understand media and its influence on one's news consumption habits.

In generational terms, data suggests some differences between older and younger news influencers. On the one hand, older individuals reported deeper changes related to more frequently used formats (newspapers and television, for example), which, according to their perception, have lost ground to mobile phones and apps. On the other hand, the younger influencers mentioned changes in topics that aroused interest and have changed over time. Furthermore, regardless of their age group, interviewees often associated past habits (e.g. television consumption) with family routines and members from other generations, such as parents, uncles and grandparents. This data suggests the influence of intergenerational contexts and dynamics on media consumption habits throughout a

person's life, with the identification of older family members with interests and habits nurtured over time.

Based on the results of this research, we understand that adopting the Q-sort approach contributed to participants' thinking and talking about their media habits. Even though we understand that remembering past experiences and sensations is a complex process, through this biographical approach we were able to reveal compelling findings regarding participants of distinct ages and backgrounds.

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