

The Impact of NFM Perception of the MZ Generation Group on Social Attention: An Exploration through the Moderating Role of Social Media Use

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Abstract: This study focuses on the MZ generation group aged 18-40. Through the moderating effect of social media, it explores the influence of NFM (news finds me) perception on social attention. The research results show that NFM perception has a significant negative impact on social attention, and the intensity of social media usage plays a moderating role in the relationship between the two. That is, a high intensity of social media usage will intensify the negative impact of NFM perception on social attention, while a low intensity of social media usage can alleviate this impact to a certain extent. This research provides a new perspective for understanding the information behavior and social cognition of the MZ generation in the new media environment, and has certain guiding significance for related practices.

1. Introduction

With the continuous innovation of Internet technology, social media has been deeply integrated into People's Daily lives and has become an important channel for information dissemination and acquisition. The 54th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet (CNNIC, 2024) released by the China Internet Society shows that China has a large number of Internet users, and the usage rate of social media remains high. Especially among the MZ generation, social media is the main platform for them to obtain information and engage in social interaction [1-2]. Against this backdrop, the phenomenon of "News Found Me" (NFM) has become increasingly prominent. NFM refers to the situation where individuals believe that there is no need to actively search for news, and important news will automatically come to them through social media, sharing by friends, etc. (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017) [3]. This passive way of obtaining news has changed the traditional information consumption model and has a potential impact on individuals' social cognition and behavior.

Existing studies mostly focus on the role of NFM perception in aspects such as political participation and political knowledge, while there is less exploration on the relationship between it and social attention. Social attention, as an important indicator to measure an individual's concern

for public affairs, is related to the cohesion of society and the social participation of citizens. As an important force in social development, the level of social attention paid to the MZ generation group is of great significance to the progress of society. Meanwhile, as an important environment for the formation of NFM perception, the usage of social media may affect the relationship between NFM perception and social attention. Different intensities and durations of social media usage may all lead to variations in the impact of NFM perception on social attention. Therefore, this study constructs a research model with NFM perception as the independent variable, social attention as the dependent variable, and social media usage as the moderating variable, aiming to explore the relationship among the three, with the expectation of providing supplements for related research and offering references for guiding the MZ generation to actively pay attention to social public affairs.

2. Research Review

2.1 NFM Perception and Social Attention

NFM (news finds me) perception is a kind of passive information acquisition consumption behavior that emerged in the context of the wide application of social media. Studies have shown that individuals with a strong perception of NFM often lack the motivation to actively obtain information and have a lower enthusiasm for participating in public affairs (Song et al., 2021). Social attention reflects an individual's concern and emphasis on public affairs and serves as the foundation for their participation in social activities and fulfillment of civic responsibilities.

Existing studies have found that passive information acquisition methods may reduce individuals' learning of political knowledge (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2020), which is not conducive to public participation behavior. Therefore, the stronger the NFM tendency of the individual, the less interest they will have in actively exploring society and the outside world due to their habituation to being informed of their status. Over time, their interest and attention to public affairs are likely to decline [4]. Given the current insufficient research on the use of news by audiences in the social field and the reliance on mobile terminals in the MZ era, this study raises the following research questions:

R1: Does NFM perception have any impact on social attention? If it exists, is it a positive or negative influence?

2.2 Social Media Usage and NFM

The development of the Internet and the richness of social media information have provided people with more diverse channels to access information and news. Especially in a highly saturated media environment, it also enables users to experience the instant feeling of "information being available at any time" (Hermida, 2010; Gil de Zuniga & Hinsley, 2013). This environment enables users to no longer need to make too much active effort to search for news, but rather rely more on platform push notifications and "accidental" exposure on social networks (Prior, 2005; Elenbaas, Boomgaarden, Schuck & de Vreese, 2013 [5]). Studies have found that more than one-third (sometimes over half) of citizens in 27 countries around the world use social media to discover and consume news content (Newman et al., 2018). This also leads some scholars to believe that accidental news exposure on social media is a form of opportunistic information seeking, and most social media users do not take conscious actions to search for specific information. Rather, it is out of habit and unintentionally "ritually" connecting to social networking sites and encountering content of interest (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matassi, 2018; Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018 [6]). However, accidental exposure and deliberate news consumption are two completely opposite ways of news acquisition (Bergstrom & Belfrage, 2018). Social platforms often push the most popular content at

present. Meanwhile, the functions of liking, commenting and sharing also increase the exposure rate of information invisibly (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019). Moreover, the mixed editing effect of programs also makes it easier for users to come into contact with unexpected news content.

Regarding the changes in the social media environment and the views on news exposure, many existing research results have proposed that in the media situation of news proliferation, especially in this highly selective media environment (ambient journalism) brought about by the rapid development of the Internet and social media, People's willingness to actively seek news and study in depth will be greatly reduced (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; Gil de Zuniga & Diehl, 2019; Park & Kaye, 2021). Due to the frequent use of social media, users' desire to actively seek information has decreased (Hermida, 2010; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Song et al., 2021), this phenomenon is more pronounced among the younger group, and the lower the level of education, the higher the tendency towards NFM (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; "2020; Park & Kaye, 2021. NFM not only influences users' attitudes towards news and consumption habits (Pew, 2016), but also imperceptibly affects users' cognitive structure of the external world. Therefore, this is why many literatures point out that NFM cannot objectively increase the political knowledge of the audience. Most social media users only remain at the superficial stage of "political listening and speaking" (Burns). "2010; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017 [7-8]. Pinkleton & Austin (2002) proposed that political cynicism is negatively correlated with "active" media consumption and political participation. The research results of Song et al. (2021) further indicate that the use of social media news may have a positive promoting effect on political cynicism, and this relationship is largely mediated through NFM perception [9].

The development of social media has made it possible for more people to participate in political and social life (Gil de Zuniga & Cheng, 2021; Hermida, 2010), to a large extent, should be conducive to promoting citizens' participation in national and social public affairs and can promote democratic development. However, many studies also suggest that social media merely makes the audience mistakenly believe that they are well-versed in national politics and social public affairs (Sokhey & McClurg, 2012; Gil de Zuniga & Diehl, 2019; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2020. In fact, to a large extent, it is merely a satisfaction of keeping in touch with the outside world (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2020; Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021 [10]. In the domestic environment of China, considering the actual usage of media and the consumption attributes of the news preference mechanism, there is still a lack of comprehensive theoretical verification and data analysis. Based on this, we raise the following questions and hypotheses to conduct subsequent research.

R2: Does the use of social media affect NFM's perception of attention to social public affairs?

R3: How does the interaction between social media usage and different types of news (soft/hard news) have a differential impact on the attention paid to public affairs in society?

3. Research Methods and Processes

According to the age structure division of the 2024 sample survey by the China Internet Society (CNNIC), the young group is generally between 20 and 39 years old, and this group still accounts for the highest proportion of Internet usage at 32.8%. Considering the current Internet penetration rate, this study chose to expand the age structure to the young group between 18 and 40 years old as the research subject. To analyze the issues raised above, the following model structure (Figure 1) was set up.

This study was conducted through the online survey of Wenjuanxing. Before the official start of the survey, a total of 105 questionnaires were collected through online data. After eliminating 7 invalid questionnaires, the remaining 98 questionnaires were tested and found to have good reliability and validity. The formal survey period was from November 6th to November 20th, 2024.

A total of 411 questionnaires were collected. After eliminating invalid questionnaires, 392 valid questionnaires were retained. The reliability and validity of these questionnaires were both tested and found to be good, which did not meet the analysis requirements. The scale adopts the Likert scale and sets five measurement dimensions from "completely disagree" to "strongly agree", each assigned a value of 1 to 5 points. The specific measurement method is as follows.

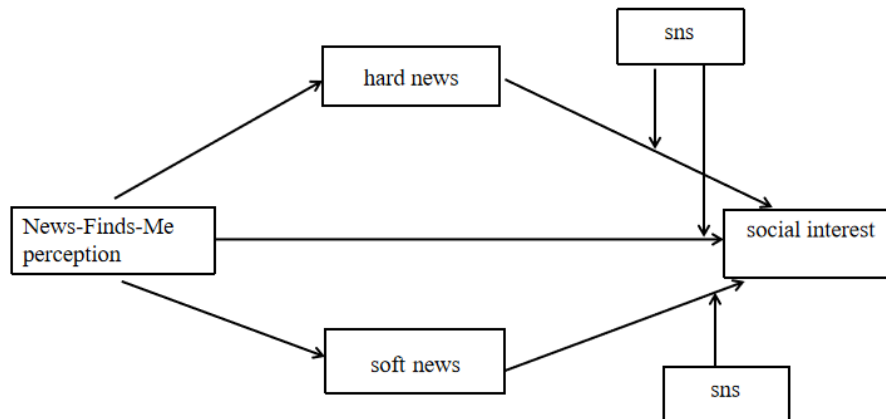


Figure 1 Model

The independent variable NFM perception scale was adapted from Gil de Zuniga et al. (2017; According to Park&Kaye (2021), the questions include five types: "I usually get news unconsciously", "I can learn about what's happening right now without actively seeking news", and "I don't actively care about some news but I still know important news". The response options for each question were measured on five scales from "completely disagree (1 point)" to "completely agree (5 points)" ($M=3.32$, $SD=.77$, $\alpha=.849$).

The operationalized definition of the dependent variable, the degree of social interest, is different from the previous analysis and measurement in Adler psychology. Instead, it combines the enthusiasm for political affairs in the way news is obtained in this study according to Gil de Zuniga et al. (2017; In 2020, Park (2019) improved the research methods on political interests. The questions included six types: "I like to read news related to national politics", "I like to read news on public topics of social affairs", and "I like to pay attention to topic news of my local area and community". The response options for each question range from "completely disagree (1 point)" to "completely agree (5 points)" on five scales ($M=2.90$, $SD=.81$, $\alpha=.887$).

The moderating variable of social network service (SNS for short) was adapted from the research of Song et al. (2021) and Gil de Zuniga et al. (2020). The questions include five types: "I spend a lot of time on social media every day", "I often use social media to keep up with news", "I often use news on social media through others' recommendations", and "I rely on social media to keep up with current affairs news". They are judged from five scales: "Completely disagree (1 point)" to "completely agree (5 points)" ($M=3.58$, $SD=.85$, $\alpha=.872$).

The control variables included gender (44.9% for males and 55.1% for females) and age (18-25 years old, 41.8%; Aged 26 to 30, 30.4%; (31-40, 27.9%), educational background (5.6% for junior high school and below, 11.0% for senior high school (including vocational high school), 58.4% for university (including junior college), 25.0% for postgraduate and above), news interest "Do you often pay attention to news related to political, social and public affairs?" It was measured by the Likert 5-point scale ranging from "completely unconcerned (1 point)" to "very concerned (5 points)" ($M=3.53$, $SD=.99$).

4. Research and Analysis

4.1 Basic Information of the Sample

To describe the basic characteristics of the respondents, this paper mainly designs four characteristic variables: gender, age, educational background, and whether they often pay attention to news related to political, social and public affairs. Descriptive statistical analysis of the control variables was conducted based on demographics, and the results showed that: (1) Gender survey results: 176 males, accounting for 44.9%; There were 216 females, accounting for 55.1%. The difference in the proportion of male and female respondents is relatively small, which to a certain extent enhances the validity of the questionnaire data. (2) According to the survey results, there are 164 people aged 18-25, accounting for 41.8%; 119 people aged 26-30, accounting for 30.4%; and 109 people aged 31-40, accounting for 27.9%. The proportion of people of different age groups is relatively balanced, which is conducive to the validity of the questionnaire data. (3) The results of the educational background survey of the respondents show that 22 people have junior high school education or below, accounting for 5.6%; 43 people have senior high school education (including vocational high school education), accounting for 11.0%; 229 people have college education (including junior college education), accounting for 58.4%; and 25.0% have postgraduate education or above. The educational background of the respondents was mainly bachelor's degree (229 people, accounting for 58.4%) and master's degree or above (98 people, accounting for 25.0%), which indicates that the overall educational level of the respondents is relatively high. This also helps to enhance the respondents' ability to understand and grasp the items of the questionnaire. (4) Finally, the survey results on "whether one often pays attention to news related to political, social and public affairs" show that 339 people, accounting for 86.6%, indicated that the majority of respondents have a high level of concern for political and social affairs.

For the main variables of this study, the reliability and validity of the data were first tested. After verification by Cronbach's α coefficient, the results showed that the coefficients of each variable were all above 0.8, indicating that the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire scale was good and met the conditions for the next research step. Validity analysis was measured by KMO test values, Bartlett sphericity test and cumulative variance contribution rate. After conducting exploratory factor analysis on the overall data of the questionnaire, the KMO was 0.855, the approximate chi-square was 4716.753, the degree of freedom was 210, and the significance test p-value was 0.000. Therefore, the questionnaire met the analysis requirements and was suitable for the next step of analysis.

4.2 Relevant Analysis

To conduct a preliminary analysis of NFM, the correlation analysis method was first adopted for the main variables. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Correlation Analysis of Main Variables (N=392)

	1	2	3
1.NFM	1	.505**	.455**
2.SNS	.505**	1	.473**
3.social interests	-.271**	-.215**	-.272**

The results of the relevant analysis and test show that: (1) The correlation coefficient between NFM and social media usage is 0.505, indicating a significant positive correlation between NFM and social media usage. Furthermore, the correlation coefficient between NFM and social attention was -0.271, indicating a significant negative correlation between NFM and social attention ($P < .01$).

(2) The correlation coefficient between social media usage and social attention was -0.215, indicating a significant negative correlation between social media usage and social attention ($P < .01$).

4.3 Test of Moderating Effects

The following analysis was conducted to verify the moderating effect of social media usage, and the test results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Stepwise Regression Analysis (N=392)

	B	t	p	B	t	p	B	t	p
Constant	-	8.517	0.000**	-	7.455	0.000**		7.861	0.000**
Gender	0.068	1.299	0.195	0.124	2.827	0.005**	0.12	2.828	0.005**
Age	-0.031	-0.582	0.561	-0.045	-1	0.318	-0.046	-1.057	0.291
Edu	-0.045	-0.882	0.379	-0.05	-1.142	0.254	-0.055	-1.301	0.194
News interests	0.117	2.284	0.023*	0.101	2.157	0.032*	0.097	2.137	0.033*
NFM				-0.119	-2.23	0.026*	-0.091	-1.737	0.083
soft news				-0.16	-3.156	0.002**	-0.062	-1.206	0.228
hard news				0.426	9.365	0.000**	-0.154	-3.121	0.002**
SNS				-0.038	-0.715	0.475	0.436	9.513	0.00**
SNS*soft news							-0.113	-2.373	0.018*
SNS*hard news							-0.164	-3.702	0.000**
NFM*SNS							-0.126	-2.565	0.011*
R ²		0.019			0.315			0.368	
Aju R ²	0.009			0.3			0.35		
F	F=(4,387)=1.881, P=0.113			F=(8,383)=21.969, P=0.000			F=(11,380)=20.116, P=0.000		

Note: Dependent variable = Social concern

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

It can be seen from the above table that a higher level of NFM tendency will reduce social attention ($\beta = -.119$, $P < .05$). However, soft news was negatively significant in Model Two ($\beta = -.160$, $P < .01$), indicating that consuming more soft news would reduce social attention. Hard news was significantly positive ($\beta = .426$, $P < .01$), indicating that hard news consumption is conducive to improving outcome indicators. After adding the interaction term, it was found that the edge of the main effect of NFM was not significant ($P = .083$), indicating that its influence was absorbed by the interaction part of social media usage. The main effect of soft news became insignificant ($P = .228$), while hard news still maintained positive significance ($\beta = -.154$, $P < .01$), indicating that the interaction of social media can affect NMF and the attention paid by news types to society.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that NFM perception has a significant negative impact on social attention. That is, when individuals have a strong NFM tendency, they are more inclined to passively accept information rather than actively pay attention to and understand social public affairs, thereby leading to a decrease in social concern. This conclusion further confirms the negative impact of passive information acquisition methods on an individual's social cognition. Meanwhile, the use of social media plays a moderating role between NFM perception and social attention. High social media usage will exacerbate the negative impact of NFM perception on social attention. This is because individuals who use social media intensively will be exposed to more fragmented information pushed by algorithms, further strengthening the audience's NFM perception and thus paying less active attention to social public affairs. The lower intensity of social media

usage has to some extent alleviated this negative impact, which might indicate that when users are not overly immersed in the passive information environment of social media, they still have a certain degree of initiative to understand social public affairs. This discovery makes up for the insufficiency of the news usage mechanism in paying attention to the social domain, and also provides new ideas and directions for future research on the audience's social media usage paths, which has innovative theoretical and practical significance. However, whether the use of social media will affect the audience's attention to social public affairs still needs further exploration. Considering the characteristics of different social media platforms and the differences in user groups, it will also affect news consumption behavior and public participation. This requires more detailed exploration in future research.

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