

# *The Impact of NFM Perception of the MZ Generation Group on Social Attention: From the Perspective of News Types*

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the rapid development of the Internet and social media, audiences have gained more opportunities to access external information through social media and algorithmic recommendations, thus forming the "News-finds -me (NFM)" news acquisition method. This study takes the MZ generation of young people as the research object, aiming to explore the impact of NFM perception on social attention, and focuses on analyzing the mediating role of news type usage preferences. The research results show that NFM perception has a negative impact on the attention to social public affairs, and soft news also has a negative impact on the attention to social public affairs. This study fills the research gap of NFM in the fields of media studies and sociology, providing a new perspective for exploring the news consumption patterns of audiences in the new media environment.

## 1. Introduction

At present, digital technology is comprehensively reshaping the information dissemination ecosystem. Social media and algorithmic recommendations have built a brand-new information distribution network, subverting the traditional way of obtaining news. Users have shifted from active search to passive reception, and information access increasingly relies on social relationship chains and platform algorithmic push notifications. As a generation that has grown up with the Internet, the MZ generation is deeply embedded in the digital social environment, and their information acquisition behavior shows a distinct passivity. The perception of "News-finds -me" (NFM) is particularly prominent in this group. They generally rely on social dynamics and algorithmic information flows to obtain news, and their willingness to actively search decreases. This transformation in the mode of information acquisition has made the content and frequency of news exposure deeply influenced by external push mechanisms, which may in turn change the group's state of attention to social affairs. Exploring the information behavior characteristics of the MZ group under this background has become an important entry point for understanding the changes in contemporary society's concerns.

## 2. Research Review

### 2.1 Social Concern

Social concern, also known as social interest, is a multi-dimensional concept. Putnam proposed the theory of social capital in "Bowling Alone" (2000, pp. 19-20), defining social concern as the concern of social members for public affairs or the pursuit of collective interests. It is emphasized that it is a "coupled state of the continuous attention of social members to public affairs and the pursuit of collective interests" [1]. Leak (2011) holds that social interest is not merely a concern for public affairs, but rather a profound evaluation and attitude. This attitude is not driven by ulterior motives but is based on recognition of others and transcendence of one's own interests. It emphasizes that while social members pursue their personal interests, they should also pay attention to and promote the common interests of society. The "Social Interest Theory" offers different perspectives for examining social concerns, revealing the significance of the degree to which social members pay attention to public affairs in building a harmonious society and promoting social progress.

Since the 1990s, the revolutionary development of information technology has significantly changed the generation mechanism of social members' attention to social affairs. The rapid advancement of information technologies such as the Internet has reshaped the way audiences obtain and share news and participate in public opinion, gradually moving them from marginal positions to the center. This transformation not only redefined the media ecosystem but also had a profound impact on the public's information consumption habits and the social public opinion atmosphere. Especially social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Weibo have expanded the space for public opinion and citizen participation, making it more convenient for people to get involved in social affairs. Groups with a high interest and attention to news and society tend to participate more actively in social discussions and have a higher level of social participation. Groups with low interest in news and low social concern are more likely to avoid news and keep a distance from social affairs.

In addition, while social networking sites provide a large amount of information, they also gradually make their audiences rely on algorithmic push notifications. Lee&On (2013) argued that algorithms are more inclined to push social network affairs rather than public affairs. Therefore, the passive behavior of obtaining information is more likely to only remain in the "informed" state of attention to social topics (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2020). Especially among the younger generation of MZ, due to the popularization of mobile terminals such as mobile phones and tablets, social media platforms have also become the main channel for their news consumption. Therefore, studying the social attention of the younger generation has practical significance.

### 2.2 NFM Perception and Social Concern

In recent years, with the rapid development of algorithmic recommendation technology, NFM (News-finds -me) has gradually attracted academic attention as a new news access paradigm. The core concept is that users do not need to actively search for news. Based on their trust in passively obtained information, they believe that important news will be automatically delivered through social networks, friend recommendations or algorithmic push (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; "2020; "2022; Song et al., 2021; Park & Kaye, 2021).

Existing research indicates that the rise of NFM news access methods is closely related to the rise of the Internet and new media, such as social platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) (Toff&Nielsen, 2018). And this approach is negatively correlated with the use of traditional news platforms (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; (Park&Kaye, 2021) [2] .As social media has become the main

source of information for Internet users, news consumption has gradually shifted from the traditional "active acquisition" to "passive reception". Against the backdrop of fragmented media information and the spread of traffic on social platforms, individuals rarely proactively challenge social algorithms or diversify news acquisition channels (Vraga&Tully, 2021), and accidental news exposure has further reduced the audience's reliance on traditional news (Park&Kaye, 2021). This is because traditional media mainly meet consumers' demand for news notification, while the algorithmic push and 24/7 news availability of online and social media provide more convenient means of news consumption for Internet users (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; "2020; (Park&Kaye, 2021) [3].

Gil de Zuniga et al. (2020) conducted a survey on the perception degree of NFM in multiple countries and found that more than half of the respondents had a strong perception and heavy dependence on the NFM news acquisition method, and the dependence degree among the younger group (aged 18-35) was significantly higher than that among the elderly group. The research of Swart (2021) also confirmed that young people with a higher perception of NFM rely heavily on social media news. With the in-depth research of scholars on the changes in the news consumption characteristics of audiences in traditional media and social media, NFM perception is regarded as a kind of "folk theory", reflecting the public's confidence that social media algorithms can effectively guide the acquisition of public affairs information (Gil de Zuniga&Cheng, 2021). However, this reliance has not translated into a deep concern for social public affairs [4]. Nfm-oriented individuals tend to rely on people around them and social networks to obtain the latest information on public affairs. They usually do not strictly evaluate the accuracy of the information (Anspach, 2017), and high NFM individuals with low cognitive abilities are more likely to misunderstand information or be misled by fake news (Diehl&Lee, 2021). Therefore, the group with a high propensity for NFM lacks in-depth learning and understanding of political knowledge (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2022).

At present, the academic community's research on the perception of NFM overly focuses on the political field and has not extended to other broader dimensions of social public affairs. Moreover, the social media ecosystem in the Chinese context features platform centralization and algorithm localization, so research conclusions based on the Western context urgently need to be verified locally. Although existing literature has revealed the influence mechanism of the NFM model on individual information processing, there is still a gap in research on the impact of passive news consumption NFM tendencies on social attention. Based on this, this study raises the core question: R1: How does an individual's perception of NFM affect their level of concern for social public affairs?

### 2.3 News Types and NFM

News media consumption is a necessary prerequisite for educating citizens to understand political affairs and form informed public opinion (Barabas&Jerit, 2009). In today's rich news and media environment, people have more opportunities to obtain political and current affairs information than ever before (Bright, 2016; Prior, 2005. According to the characteristics of news content, news is usually classified into hard news and soft news. Hard news encompasses content in public domains with high seriousness such as politics, economy, and society. It has high requirements for information accuracy and focuses on announcements, publicity, and education. Soft news encompasses relatively light-hearted content such as entertainment, life, and culture, which is more likely to evoke emotional resonance and meet immediate emotional needs. Park&Kaye (2021) hold that soft news consumption can more significantly promote the formation of NFM perception than hard news. Because soft news is closer to personal life and closely related to personal interests, it is easy to circulate on social media and attract users' attention and interaction.

Newman et al. (2018)'s hybrid approach research indicates that users who focus on soft news are more likely to accept algorithmic content consumption based on friend recommendations and sharing [5-6]. In contrast, hard news, due to its high seriousness and the need for more background information, is difficult to arouse the interest of ordinary users and is also not easy to spread widely on social media.

The NFM structure is the perception of personal news usage (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017). Due to its non-active news consumption mode, some studies have pointed out that news content on social media is more inclined towards entertainment (Gil de Zuniga & Diehl, 2019). Moreover, social media platforms like Facebook tend to push non-public affairs (Lee & Oh, 2013), so the type of news can largely reflect the audience's interest points in news and external things. Generally speaking, individuals with a high NFM tendency usually do not choose hard news (Goyanes, Ardevol-Abreu & Gil de Zuniga, 2023), because they rely more on social media and information passed on by peers.

From the perspective of selective exposure theory, individuals tend to choose news content that aligns with their interests and beliefs (Skurka, Liao & Gil de Zuniga, 2023). Even though aware of the biases in social media push notifications and algorithms, as well as the necessity of news diversity, one would not actively check news that is inconsistent with one's own values (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2022), but rather prefer to select news systems with similar content based on one's own preferences (Joris, Grove) Van Damme & De Marez, 2021 [7]. Since NFM perception weakens the active consumption of news and makes news exposure more dependent on social environments and algorithmic recommendations, conducting research from specific types of NFM preferences is of great value in improving the accuracy of NFM structures in predicting related results (such as exposure to corresponding news types), which can further classify the types of NFM exposure information. The scope of exploration can also be expanded by evaluating the extensibility of the NFM structure in the modern media landscape [8].

Existing research results show that participants' attention to soft news is significantly higher than that to hard news, and groups with NFM tendencies prefer soft news more (Skurka et al., 2023). Compared with individuals who rarely read soft news, respondents who frequently read soft news showed a higher degree of political cynicism (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015), which may imply that the high NFM-perceived group has a significant driving effect in choosing and accessing soft news (Goyanes et al. (2023) [9-10]. Given the universality and richness of entertainment information, pessimists believe that audiences who lack interest in political or public affairs news are unlikely to actively search for news on the Internet (David, 2009). Although current research has not yet clarified whether the NFM tendency leads to a preference for soft news or a reduction in attention to social public affairs due to the focus on soft news, based on the passivity of NFM perception and existing research results, it is reasonable to infer that the exposure rate of NFM-inclined individuals to entertainment soft news may be higher than that to hard news. Based on this, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The NFM-inclined group prefers soft news more than hard news content.

H2: The NFM-perceived group that prefers soft news will pay less attention to social public affairs.

### 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.

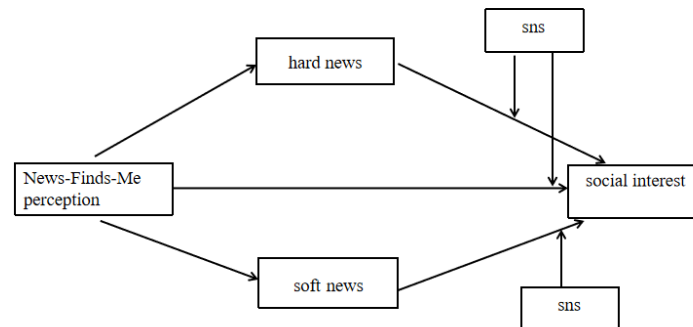


Figure 1 Model

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.

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 mediating variable news type is adapted from Gil de Zuniga et al. (2020). Soft news questions include "the degree of interest in news such as sports, travel, and games". Hard news includes "the degree of attention to political and economic news content", consisting of five questions. The response options for each question range from "completely disagree (1 point)" to "completely agree (5 points)" and are measured by five scales respectively ( $M=3.01$ ,  $SD=.97$ ,  $\alpha=.856$ ).

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

A total of 392 valid questionnaires were obtained in this study. To describe the basic characteristics of the respondents, this paper mainly designed 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. 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. 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  $\alpha$  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.

The results of the relevant analysis and test show that: (1) The correlation coefficients between NFM and soft news and hard news are 0.455 and -0.212 respectively. Therefore, it indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between NFM and soft news, and a significant negative correlation between NFM and hard news ( $P < .01$ ). 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 coefficients between soft news and hard news and social attention were -0.272 and 0.491 respectively. Therefore, soft news showed a significant negative correlation with social attention, while hard news showed a significant positive correlation ( $P < .01$ ). Overall, the results of the correlation analysis test basically verified that there is a certain correlation relationship among the main variables, which meets the requirements for further testing by using the regression analysis method.

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

	1	2	3	4	5
1.NFM	1	.505**	.455**	-.212**	-.271**
2.SNS	.505**	1	.473**	-.161**	-.215**
3.soft news	.455**	.473**	1	-.165**	-.272**
4.hard news	-.212**	-.161**	-.165**	1	.491**

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

### 4.3 Mediating Effect Test

The research conducted an intermediary test analysis on the news types of soft news and hard news respectively based on the model. The analysis results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Test of the Mediating Role of News Types

		B	SE	$\beta$	P	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F
Social interest	constant	4.077	.184		.000	.101	.097	21.921***
	NFM	-.192	.056	-.185	.001			
	Soft news	-.151	.043	-.188	.001			
Social interest	constant	2.345	.212		.000	.270	.266	71.839***
	NFM	-.182	.046	-.174	.000			
	Hard news	.379	.037	.454	.000			

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

The verification results show that, first of all, in the test of the relationship between NFM and social attention, after adding the role of soft news, the negative impact of soft news on social attention remains significant ( $\beta = -.151$ ,  $P < .01$ ). Therefore, soft news plays a mediating role between NFM and social attention. Therefore, it can be predicted that the interaction between NFM perception and soft news will further weaken social attention. Secondly, after incorporating the role of hard news, it was found that the positive impact of hard news on social attention remained significant ( $\beta = .379$ ,  $P < .001$ ). Therefore, hard news plays a mediating role between NFM and social attention. To some extent, this can predict that NFM perception will weaken the positive impact of hard news on social attention.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that NFM perception has a significant negative impact on the attention to social public affairs, which echoes the conclusions in existing studies such as NFM being detrimental to political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2017; Song et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the research found that the NFM-inclined group prefers soft news more, which validates the view of Park&Kaye (2021). Moreover, the preference for soft news further reduces individuals' attention to social public affairs, as soft news pays more attention to personal life and entertainment fields. Long-term exposure to soft news will gradually reduce an individual's interest in social public affairs. Furthermore, the preference for hard news is positively correlated with social attention. However, there is no significant correlation between NFM perception and the preference for hard

news. This indicates that the acquisition of hard news relies more on the active choices of individuals. Individuals with a stronger NFM tendency, due to the lack of the motivation to actively obtain hard news, will also reduce their attention to social public affairs. This discovery not only makes up for the deficiency in exploring the audience's news usage behavior from the perspective of news types, but also provides new ideas for further deepening and expanding the research field of social media in the future.

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