
“Information Modes”: A Framework for Trust and Information Seeking

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Abstract. This study explores how young adults (18–24 years old) in India and the US navigate information in an era of constant online presence. As social media has evolved from an information source to a space where individuals lead significant portions of their social lives, and as generative AI has replaced traditional search engines, this study finds that existing frameworks for information seeking, trust heuristics, and literacy interventions require expansion. In this paper, we highlight the significant role of emotional defense and social dynamics in shaping information seeking, avoidance, and selective processing. Using ethnographic methods, we find that, in an era of being “always on,” young adults strive to maintain emotional equilibrium, subconsciously fluctuating between “information modes”: a conceptual framework describing a range of embodied states that entail varying levels of readiness for deliberative thinking and predisposition toward heuristic shortcuts. Participants in this study primarily engaged in information modes that bypassed traditional media literacy practices—such as critical thinking and source evaluation—because they were focused on entertainment, or “light” content they found soothing, which they saw as not requiring scrutiny. Significantly, information sourced from generative AI often felt “light” because it was perceived to only impact themselves. In this study, content without clear social consequence was a determining factor in what felt worthy of scrutiny. Our findings highlight the crucial role of emotional and social self-regulation in young adults’ everyday practices of information seeking and evaluation, emphasizing the need for literacy approaches that account for the emotional and social dimensions of online engagement when developing interventions for young adults in rapidly changing digital ecosystems.

1 Introduction

Talia, a 24-year-old marketing copywriter from New York, identified as a global citizen and informed consumer of online content. She prided herself on discerning balanced truth on contentious issues, such as the Supreme Court's affirmative action ruling in June 2023. However, when showing her typical routine to our research team, Talia scrolled rapidly through Instagram, briefly pausing on world news before focusing on glossy photos promoting local clothing stores. When asked about this disconnect, she reflected that her browsing patterns were mood dependent: Serious content required mental readiness, which she lacked in contexts like "mornings before coffee." Lighter content, such as fashion promotions, demanded less cognitive effort and preserved her positive mood. Talia's practices as a rational evaluator of information adjusted to her need for "emotional equilibrium," or the dynamic process of regulating affective responses to maintain emotional balance in high-information environments. "Emotional equilibrium," closely related to concepts such as affect regulation and emotional regulation, refers specifically to a prevailing coping strategy we observed that operates through practices to return to a pleasant, stable emotional state that can be maintained during extended online sessions. For Talia, rather than engaging with all content indiscriminately, she, like many of our participants, subconsciously managed her exposure to emotionally taxing information, prioritizing content that preserved her mood and cognitive resources for later engagement.

Based on in-depth interviews with 52 participants, this paper theorizes seven distinct "information modes": embodied cognitive-affective states that shaped how individuals involved in this study engaged with and processed information in digital environments.¹ Our methodology—rooted in ethnographic principles and encompassing diary studies and immersive activities within the interviews—allowed us to examine how young people took in information and applied heuristics in real time and across contexts, revealing the dynamic interplay of their emotional states, social contexts, and cultural beliefs in shaping their information-processing behaviors. These seven information modes mediated the activation of specific heuristics, demonstrating that trust and information processing are not solely driven by cognitive efficiency but are also dynamically influenced by emotional regulation and social context. By situating these findings within broader debates on heuristics, media literacy, and affective engagement, this paper expands traditional models of online trust to account for the interplay between cognitive effort, emotional equilibrium, and the social nature of digital information consumption.

One of the most prevalent information modes among participants was what we term "Timepass" mode: a mindset typically associated with scrolling user-generated content on social media. In Timepass mode, participants were in a more passive and absorbent

1. By "information modes," we do not refer to representational modes, or the various ways media can depict reality through different techniques. We also do not mean the various formats that media can take, e.g., textual, audio, or visual. Rather, information modes are emotionally driven mindsets that characterize changing ways youth process information in a "permanently online permanently connected" era (Klimmt et al. 2017).

state, assuming that content intended for entertainment or self-expression required less scrutiny. Yet they often failed to notice when they remained in this information mode even after shifting to different types of content. For example, the passive, low-scrutiny mindset associated with Timepass frequently carried over into their engagement with generative AI (genAI), even when their queries extended beyond entertainment. Moreover, participants had developed new trust heuristics, specifically adapted for a “post-truth era” (Keyes 2004; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017). While these strategies helped them manage informational and emotional overload, they also introduced new vulnerabilities. One such heuristic, “testing to trust,” reflects this tension: Participants perceived firsthand experimentation—such as testing health-related personal testimonies on themselves—as a valid method for evaluating credibility, reasoning that a source’s experiences and outcomes might not apply to the participants and their contexts, because many realities can be true at once (Xu et al. 2024; Lim et al. 2022). While belief in testimonials predates the internet, “testing to trust” is specific to the post-truth era, in which objective reality has been supplanted by multiple subjective realities and traditional credibility markers are rejected in favor of emotional resonance (Hannon 2023). “Testing to trust” is a heuristic that presumes that the best guiding light to action is not to ascertain veracity, but simply to take action and ascertain the subjective truth afterwards.

Information modes therefore shape not only what information individuals consume but also how they react, interact, and take action. They illuminate the central role of emotion in the mechanics of trust heuristics for young people today, suggesting that shortcuts and approaches to vetting information—or not—are currently less about the preservation of cognitive resources than of emotional ones. By framing information engagement as a dynamic, situational process rather than a universal human cognitive function, this study contributes to broader discussions on media consumption, adolescent well-being, and the evolving role of trust in digital environments globally (Couldry 2012; Ghai et al. 2022; Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Stoilova 2023). As media forms continue to converge and blur distinctions between information, entertainment, and social interaction, understanding how users adapt their information processing strategies becomes increasingly vital. This research highlights the need for critical frameworks that account for the fluid, affective dimensions of media literacy.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Literacy and Information-Seeking Behaviors

Media literacy traditionally focused on the skills required to access and interpret media messages (Aufderheide 1997). With the rise of interactive digital platforms, however, individuals began not only accessing and interpreting media messages but also creating and participating in media production. The idea of “prosuming,” or the dual act of

producing and consuming media, has become central to understanding new media literacy because it more aptly reflects complex dynamics of agency, interactivity, and the circulation of information across digital environments today (Bruns 2008; Lee et al. 2015). The interactive relationship between individuals and media highlights a reciprocal process in which users shape and are shaped by content (Jenkins et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2016).

Yet key works on media and new media literacies have often emphasized universal principles and skills in their frameworks—such as rational and critical thinking (Bago, Rand, and Pennycook 2020; Hobbs 2010; Potter 2016)—while giving limited attention to cultural, emotional, and contextual variations in how individuals process and trust information (Dezuanni 2018; Kellner and Share 2007). Francesca Tripodi's work has meaningfully demonstrated, for example, that conservative Christians in the US apply interrogative practices of interpretation, learned in Bible study, to their processing of popular media and news (2018). She terms this “scriptural inference,” demonstrating that information literacy is not a universal rational skill but a culturally situated practice. Media literacy must account for such kinds of variations to remain relevant in increasingly globalized and fragmented digital spaces (Buckingham 2013). Social media literacy frameworks attempt to address this complexity by integrating interdisciplinary insights into motivations, processes, and effects of social media use across contexts. However, these frameworks often remain centered on individual rationality as the ultimate arbiter for evaluating and judging new media (Cho et al. 2022).

Against this backdrop, Hassoun et al. (2023) make a significant contribution by introducing the concept of “information sensibility,” which they define as information seeking motivated by a socially informed awareness of information's value. This perspective shifts focus from individual rationality to instinctive responses shaped by social contexts. While this approach advances our understanding of social motivations in information-seeking behaviors, it leaves unexplored the granular mechanisms driving socially informed awareness across diverse online contexts. Building on Hassoun et al.'s framework, our study introduces the concept of “information modes”: dynamic combinations of motivations, contexts, and behaviors that mediate how individuals engage with digital information.

The concept of information modes draws on Ahmed (2014)'s notion of “mood work,” which distinguishes moods from emotions by their prolonged duration and influence as an “affective lens” shaping perception and interaction. Moods are sustained affective states that underpin how individuals navigate their environments (see Gregg and Seigworth (2010)). Extending Ahmed's work into digital environments, this study explores how emotional responses interact with social contexts to shape information-seeking behaviors. We explore subjective experiences across platforms, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how digital environments and platform-specific dynamics mediate trust and emotion (Bucher 2018; Sundar 2008). In doing so, this work contributes to affective

media studies, digital sociology, and platform studies (Bramsen and Austin 2022; Fuchs 2021; Steinert and Dennis 2022). While much of this literature examines how emotions are conveyed or manipulated in digital environments through platform design, we shift focus to subjective experiences of mood and cultural logics that influence agency in information engagement.

2.2 Trust Heuristics

Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts that enable efficient reasoning under conditions of uncertainty or overload (Kahneman 2015; Metzger and Flanagin 2013). Research on heuristics such as source credibility has detailed their cognitive trade-offs as well as their blind spots and potential social harms (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders 2010; Chen 1994). In digital environments characterized by information abundance and rapid consumption cycles, young people increasingly rely on heuristics to manage overload while meeting social pressures for quick opinion formation (Melumad, Inman, and Pham 2019; Lin, Spence, and Lachlan 2016). Rather than evaluating heuristics solely as cognitive tools with positive or negative outcomes, recent scholarship examines them as socially situated practices tailored to specific contexts (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd 2015). For example, Sundar's MAIN model emphasizes how platform affordances like interactivity shape credibility assessments through heuristic cues (Sundar 2008). Building on this work, our study explores how trust heuristics evolve in real-time interactions within highly social online ecosystems.

Three key contributions frame our approach: First, we argue that "defense motivations" in heuristic use are less about protecting beliefs than preserving desired emotional states (Chaiken and Ledgerwood 2012). Defense motivation, as conceptualized in the heuristic-systematic model, reflects the desire to maintain self-definitional beliefs—those closely tied to one's identity and values—against perceived threats. This motivation has been theorized as leading to selective processing of information (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Chaiken 1980). Extending this idea, we suggest that defense of an emotional equilibrium has taken precedence over defense of self-concept per se. We posit that this was prevalent among participants as "digital natives" in reaction to information overload and the experience of constant exposure to news about the world that feels negative, upsetting, and dysregulating (Lupinacci 2021). As the bulk of the content is entertainment, the constant barrage and rapid switch of information primarily poses a threat to their immediate emotional response rather than any self-definitional beliefs, which are more stable. Second, we challenge traditional assumptions that personal relevance leads to slower central processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Instead, we find that when information is perceived as affecting only the self—rather than broader social networks—it is more readily "tested" through experiential methods such as trial-and-error engagement. Third, by introducing the concept of "information modes," we expand existing models to account for the interplay between cognitive effort, emotional equilibrium, and social context. In doing so, we contribute to interdisciplinary

conversations at the intersection of affective media studies and digital sociology while offering practical insights into how young people navigate trust in an era defined by constant connectivity.

Throughout this manuscript, we treat the concepts of trust and credibility interchangeably, while preferencing use of the term “trust” to relay our findings. Fogg and Tseng (1999) and Metzger et al. (2003) distinguished between the two terms, with credibility judgments seen as momentary evaluations of specific content or sources and trust judgment as sustained interrelational perceptions between two entities that inform credibility judgments. Here, we de-emphasize this distinction to better reflect our participants’ context and our analytical focus: As our participants occupied an online environment saturated with rapidly consumed and discarded content, they did not draw a clear line between credibility and trustworthiness. Their judgments were largely immediate and situational rather than based on ongoing, long-term assessments. Yet their judgments were more instinctive emotional reactions than thoughtful verifications of truth or accuracy. We thus privilege the term “trust” over “credibility” to foreground the rapid, subjective, and affective nature of these judgments that govern participants’ interactions with information.

2.3 Generative AI

Many discussions of the trustworthiness of genAI tend to frame the topic either as an institutional matter or as a capabilities and literacy matter. The institutional approach details technological, social, and regulatory challenges and hypothesizes or tests structural solutions to increase trust in genAI (Lenat and Marcus 2023; Dunn et al. 2023; Li et al. 2023; Kenthapadi, Lakkaraju, and Rajani 2023; Baldassarre et al. 2023). The capabilities approach focuses on how individuals understand what is and is not trustworthy, and what user-level interventions or technological affordances can boost their ability to understand and assess genAI trustworthiness (Xu, Fan, and Kankanhalli 2023; Ali et al. 2021).

By focusing on structural factors, the institutional approach often prescribes too little agency to individuals. On the other hand, in centering individual understanding, the capabilities approach underexamines the influence of their broader context. Furthermore, both approaches tend to treat trust in genAI tools and content as an isolated phenomenon that is unique and separate from existing trust attitudes and practices on the internet as a whole. By divorcing social actors from the ability to change, influence, and shape cultural evolution, or conversely, removing them from the social context, we lose the ability to understand why and how emerging and even marginal practices become social systems. In contrast, our approach, based on the principles of ethnography, empirically contextualizes trust in genAI within existing online trust practices as well as broader social pressures and cultural beliefs (Hine 2020).

3 Methods

3.1 Overview

To explore how young people deploy trust heuristics on social media, we conducted interviews, immersive activities, and diary studies with 52 participants aged 18–24 years. We focused on this generation due to their reputation as “digital natives,” for whom adopting new technologies is unremarkable (Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008). In the US, we sampled for racial and gender diversity. In India, we included various ethnoreligious groups and participants who identified as female or male (see Table 1). We also tracked education and income levels and recruited participants from areas with varied community density in both the US & India. This diversity aimed to minimize findings limited to specific demographics or cultural settings. The sample size of 52 participants for this qualitative study was determined at the outset of the study, and was informed by our prior experience with research on this population in India and the US, ensuring it was sufficiently large to reach data saturation while staying within research budget constraints. We approached participants using the online recruitment platform Respondent.io, open invitations, and referrals. Recruitment tools were informed by a multidisciplinary literature review to ensure effective participant selection.

We incorporated two field sites: Bangalore metropolitan area in India ($n = 26$) and the New York metropolitan area in the US ($n = 26$). Conducting research across two field sites allowed us to consider how cultural and geographical contexts shape heuristic processing, while also enhancing the robustness of our generalized findings through their consistency across the two distinct cultural settings. Both sites were selected as Tier 1 urban centers known for their dynamic, youthful populations and technological sophistication, making them ideal settings for exploring how young people engage with and evaluate digital content. By comparing these two sites, we examined the influence of global digital trends and local cultural factors, providing a nuanced analysis of how contextual differences shape the cognitive and emotional processes behind trust and information-seeking behavior. This approach aimed to go beyond region-specific findings, offering insights applicable to understanding how individuals worldwide navigate digital spaces.

Across both field sites, we included participants with varying levels of genAI literacy based on self-reported familiarity with and usage of genAI tools: 9 highly familiar, 40 familiar, and 3 unfamiliar. We categorized participants based on their self-reported level of AI-literacy during the in-person interview, the second phase of the study. Since adoption of AI tools was very rapid and unpredictable during data collection, we did not conduct benchmark testing for AI literacy, and did not aim for a specific distribution of AI literacy in our sample to mirror the general population. Instead, we sought diverse representation for self-reported AI literacy.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from May to July 2023 in three phases: In Phase 1, participants completed a digital reflective study, cataloging the social media platforms they visited and the content they deemed “trustworthy” or “untrustworthy” and why. Participants submitted short answers, screenshots, and links through Google Forms. In Phase 2, we conducted 90-minute in-person interviews in participants’ spaces, observing unspoken trust attitudes and practices. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and video-recorded for specific segments. We also made field notes and conducted thematic analysis using qualitative coding techniques (Saldana 2021). In Phase 3, we conducted remote 60-minute follow-up interviews and discussed initial findings with participants to validate and develop them, following member-checking practices (Birt et al. 2016).

Analysis occurred alongside data collection. We used iterative, open-ended coding across all phases. Researchers processed fieldnotes and transcripts independently, generating discrete observations for each participant that were compiled into one data codex. We then labeled sets of observations with emergent thematic codes, followed by collaborative sessions among co-authors to examine these codes and the underlying observations, to create and evolve final insights (Williams and Moser 2019). Throughout analysis, we incorporated global scholarship, including Indian perspectives, to avoid limiting our understanding of tech-mediated information-seeking behaviors to Western findings (Athique and Parthasarathi 2020; Couldry and Mejias 2021). We applied Indian scholarship to determine whether these concepts provide greater context, validating that they are not region-limited but applicable to other cultural contexts.

4 Findings

This research was conducted at a critical juncture for young people’s information journeys—at a time when genAI was first introduced to the market and young people were adapting to this disruption and incorporating it into their lives. In order to understand how genAI shapes young people’s trust behaviors and heuristics, we first present findings about how their information-seeking behaviors have evolved agnostic of any new tools (Section 4.1).² Then, we consider the implications of introducing genAI alongside these new behaviors (Section 4.2).

2. We acknowledge the distinction established by prior scholarship between information seeking, which is a purposeful search for information, and information scanning, which is a more incidental form of exposure and intake of information, and that this distinction is particularly important for understanding youth, who increasingly encounter and consume content through algorithmically curated feeds, often without expressly searching for it (Hassoun et al. 2023). Our work aims to bring more understanding to how this is experienced by young people, why it occurs, and what harms and risks are involved. We employ the term “information seeking” in this paper to convey that while youth may not always explicitly intend to find specific content online, they are often engaging with online information in pursuit of particular affective experiences, driven by social and psychological motivations both conscious and unconscious.

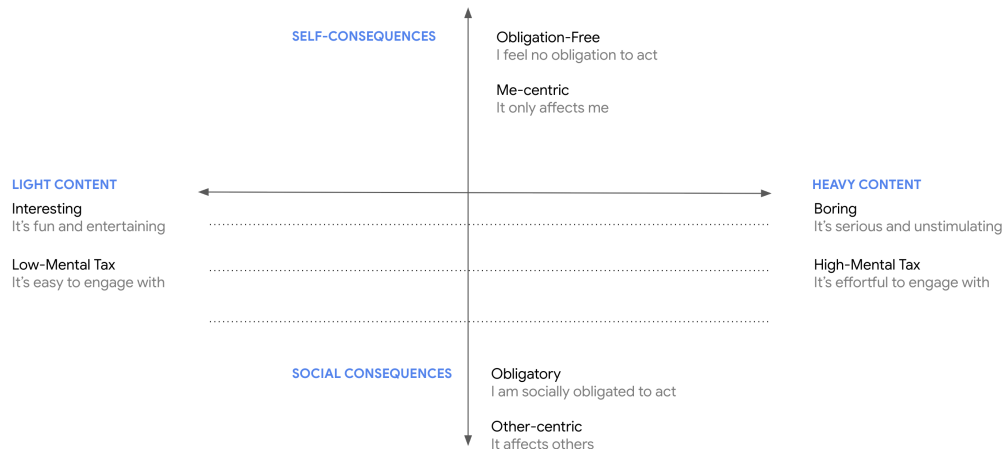


Figure 1: Participants perceived and reacted to the value of content along two key spectra.

4.1 “Information Modes” as a New Model for Information Seeking

Kathy (21, USA), a cheery but busy college freshman, was excited yet overwhelmed by the demands of computer science coursework, maintaining friendships, and finding an apartment for her summer internship. Despite recognizing the importance of “heavier” content, such as political and environmental news, she found it hard to resist the pull of “lighter” content:

[My feed] sends me videos like today’s news or what’s going on in pop culture or skincare or clothing...I don’t personally seek out news. When you are constantly exposed to [news like school shootings], you feel more sad. You want to watch something that brings you joy or brings you entertainment...[Though] obviously you should be aware of what’s going on in the world.

Kathy’s quote highlights how intuitive feelings of attraction and repulsion influenced how she navigated digital space, lingering on certain kinds of information and bypassing others. Kathy was not alone. Most of our participants sought and avoided online content in terms of two key variables: content “weight” and content “sociality.” The concept of weight refers to whether content felt emotionally “light” or “heavy.” Content that had low-mental tax and was entertaining or soothing was considered light. Content that had high-mental tax and was boring or triggering was considered heavy. Content sociality, on the other hand, refers to whether it was perceived as impacting “just” the participant (self) or involving others (social). The former felt “obligation-free,” while the latter conferred an obligation to act after they consumed it because it engaged their sense of social responsibility, requiring them to consider how their actions, or inactions, might affect others within their network (see Figure 1).

Drawing on notions of content weight and sociality, we formulated the concept of “information modes,” or the emotional mindsets that people were in when engaging with

online content.³ These modes capture the shifting states that influenced how participants approached and processed digital information, highlighting an interplay between mood, engagement, and the nature of the content itself. Emotion is central to our definition because participants did not consciously and rationally determine where content fell along the spectra—they reacted instinctively. We identified seven key information modes that participants inhabited, distinguished by their motivations for spending time in each mode and the trust heuristics they deployed when in that information mode (see Table 1).⁴ Of these seven modes, participants preferred certain modes more than others—and each mode shaped how and when they deployed different heuristics to trust online information (See Figure 2).

Information modes as a framework complements but is distinct from mood management theory, which examines how people use media selection to regulate emotions and fulfill psychological needs. Zillmann (2000) argued that individuals often engage with media to manage their moods in a subconscious process, while subsequent scholarship has emphasized the close relationship between emotions and social and psychological motivations; for example, a person might seek out emotionally moving content to be entertained or to feel social connection and validation (Zillmann 2000; Nabi et al. 2022; Oliver 2008; Sheldon and Bryant 2016). The concept of information modes retains a focus on subconscious emotional regulation and its close ties to motivations, but it highlights that this process is not shaped by the individual but by the dynamic interaction between the nature of the content and the user's engagement with it. This reciprocal relation is particularly pronounced in social media contexts, where the rapid creation, consumption, and interaction with content limits individual autonomy over media selection and reactions, making this mood regulation a process mediated by the different content contexts online.

Participants spent most of their time in Timepass mode. In the Timepass information mode, participants, on the surface, sought to assuage boredom by passively consuming content, and, more deeply, sought to soothe their central nervous system by disengaging. This was exemplified by participant behaviors like scrolling through TikTok or Instagram, watching videos, and reading posts and comments served by these platforms' algorithmic feeds. In Timepass mode, content's trustworthiness was less important than its entertainment value. While in this mode, young people unconsciously considered trust and trust heuristics as irrelevant, and did not employ any literacy skills. This was because they viewed the content they consumed as "only" for entertainment or soothing purposes. Gaurav (23, IND) was a recent college graduate who loved sports and was working in a tech job. To his mind, when consuming entertainment in Timepass mode,

3. While our seven information modes capture all the online contexts and trust heuristics observed in our data, they are not meant to be a timeless and exhaustive list of information modes.

4. Existing literature has shown that individuals are most influenced by media when they anticipate engaging in related discussions with their peers (Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994; McLeod 2001). This work aims to contribute to this scholarly conversation by adding new dimensions of influence, such as contextual cues embedded in platform design and the appearance of viewpoint inclusivity. It is notable that in today's polarized environment, young people try to avoid this mode.

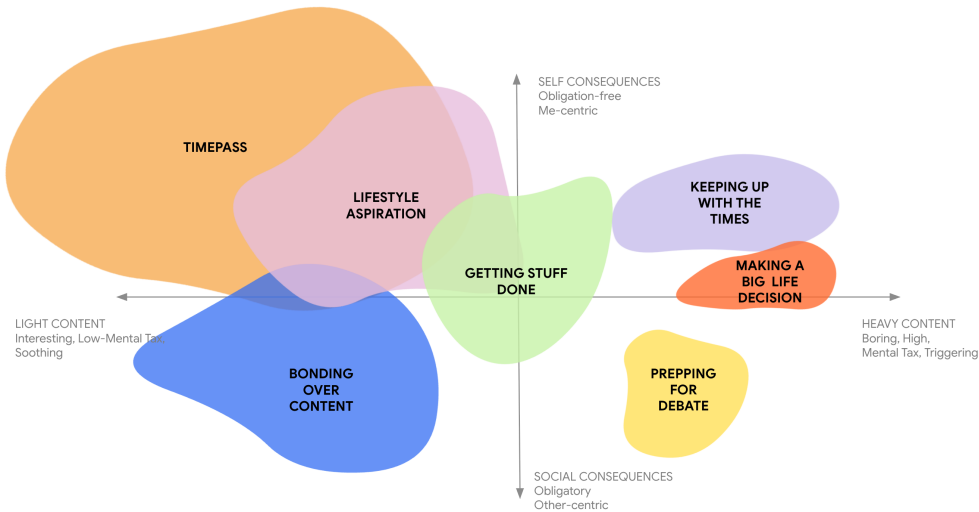


Figure 2: Map of information modes, sized to indicate proportion of time spent.

caring about veracity was missing the point: “If it’s just for humor, the fun entertainment industry and all, you can contradict yourself.”

This highlights the way in which, in Timepass mode, the boundaries between information consumption and entertainment blur, reducing the importance of trust and veracity in favor of emotional engagement and immediate gratification.

Participants spent comparatively little time in two modes: “Keeping up with the Times” and “Prepping for Debate.”⁵ In Keeping Up with the Times, participants wanted to stay up to date on important topics. In Prepping for Debate, they wanted to learn about topics in-depth to feel safe from potential peer judgment in discussions. Out of the seven information modes we discovered, these two modes were the only ones in which literacy skills—vetting institutional credibility, expertise, and objectivity—were relevant. These modes required engagement with news cycles, which participants found draining and upsetting (see Figure 2). As a result, participants actively sought to avoid these modes. When they were forced into Keeping Up with the Times mode or Prepping for Debate—for example, for school or work—they applied heuristics that decreased the amount of time and energy they had to spend in these modes. Neil (22, USA), a native New Yorker attending a leading fashion and design college, described the start of each class as an opportunity to impress classmates by sharing relevant news. To stay prepared, he engaged with Keeping up with the Times mode. However, Neil relied on time-saving strategies, like reading only headlines from trusted content creators or outlets, and asking generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to summarize discussion topics for him.

5. We estimated this time based on screenshots participants shared of time spent on different apps, observation of their phone habits, written exercises, and their retrospective narrative during the interviews.

Table 1: Information Modes and the key motivations, emotions, actions, and heuristic

Mode	Motivation	Trust heuristic	Representative quote
Timepass	To assuage boredom and feel good	If it's entertainment, it doesn't matter if it's trust-worthy or not.	Gaurav (23, IND): "If it's just for humor, the fun entertainment industry all, you can contradict yourself."
Lifestyle aspiration	To imagine or work toward reaching ideals and improving yourself	Creators who look and think like me are more trustworthy than experts. It's faster and more reliable to test a lifestyle tip on myself than to research it. GenAI can answer my doubts because it aggregates perspectives.	Mehul (21, IND): "[Andrew Tate] might be wrong, he might be right, but the way he is influencing young men in society is quite motivating actually. [Because of him] I go to the gym more, work harder more...I want to get that rich."
Bonding over content	To invest in online communities and unlock a sense of collective belonging	Once I've joined a community that shares my values, I can automatically trust content that other members share. Content shared in the community doesn't have to be fact-checked since it's just to bond over.	Avery (20, USA): "There's a sense of community in [sharing info]. With fandom, it's not harmful to hype yourself up over something that doesn't end up being true...[But] sometimes the news sources are less informed than the fandom is. The fandom notices every little thing."
Getting stuff done	To complete annoying but necessary tasks with maximum efficiency	GenAI is unbiased and accurate, because it scours the net and aggregates info. Because I am just jump-starting my info journey, scrutiny can wait for later. If I can imagine how to do this, or I can check what genAI is doing, I can just trust what genAI gives me.	Irene (18, USA): "As long as I understand and I know what I'm talking about, at the end of the day it doesn't matter how I got there, especially if it's just like, stupid assignments."
Keeping up with the times	To stay up-to-date on important topics and feel like a well-informed citizen	I trust one-time-vetted sources to tell the truth. Just knowing the bare minimum (e.g., headlines) is good enough to keep up. It is easiest to agree with surrogate thinkers I've selected in the past. If I see something several times, there must be truth to it.	Paresh (21, IND): "I will wait for a trusted source to post [about a news event before reading it]...Each news source might have a different take, like, it's complicated. So I just stick to the ones I trust."
Prepping for debate	To learn enough about topics that you fear others may test and judge you on later	The source has to be "citable" for me to trust it, that is, others need to know and trust this source too. I need to see the same info from multiple sources in different formats before I feel confident in my take. If it tells me "both sides" of a topic, then I'm inclined to trust. Sponsorships or ads on serious content immediately means it can't be trusted.	Talia (24, USA): "Something that is a little bit controversial and there seems to be various perspectives...I don't like saying a perspective unless I have enough information, otherwise I get scared. So I read to not be scared."
Making big life decisions	To acquire additional knowledge to make an important life decision	I trust an everyday person's perspective over "official" sources because they'll tell it to me straight. I'm getting a visceral emotional reaction, so it must be true. Unpolished visuals means emotions and reactions are more real, so I trust it more.	Claire, (22, USA): "A few people said that the price for the program was not worth what you get out of it...So that's something that has stuck with me heavily."

The desire to maintain a steady emotional state explains the uneven distribution of time across information modes in online navigation, as observed in our data. It also

accounts for participants' stated preference for certain modes, such as Timepass mode, over others, like Prepping for Debate. Talia (24, USA), a marketing copywriter in New York, explained, "If I'm not in the mood to see something serious, I'll keep scrolling...I don't want to start my day with negative energy." Talia's phrasing describes infectious energies, moods, and visceral forces driving her everyday practices, habits, and conscious thoughts (Ahmed 2014; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). She emphasizes the importance of maintaining mood over engaging with content that would disrupt it, and in this way tells us more broadly about how individual agency operates in relation to affect (Stewart 2007). That is, her capacity and willingness to process certain types of information carefully—in ways that would typically be thought of as optimally, rationally, and without reliance on shortcuts—was first shaped by ways of feeling and a desire to maintain an emotional equilibrium.

This article puts forward the term "emotional equilibrium" to refer to the dynamic state in which an individual maintains emotional balance by regulating their affective responses to external stimuli, particularly in environments of high informational or emotional demand. Drawing from the concept of homeostasis, our notion of emotional equilibrium refers to the way our participants employed adaptive strategies to preserve a subjective sense of well-being, often by minimizing exposure to emotionally taxing content or situations (Gross 2002). In digital contexts, this state reflects a subconscious effort to navigate information flows in ways that reduce emotional overload, maintain mood consistency, and safeguard resources for future engagement. In an era of protracted engagement and challenging digital contexts, the defense of an emotional equilibrium has become central to the ways young adults seek, avoid, and process information. Specifically, departing from classical theories of heuristics that posit cognitive efficiency as the primary driver of quick, more peripheral modes of information processing (Chaiken 1980; Kahneman 2015; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), we found the preservation of emotional equilibrium to be a central driver of patterns of information seeking, avoidance, fact-checking, and trust. Regulation appeared to influence the deployment of trust heuristics more than cognitive effort alone.

Information overload—or the overwhelm caused by excessive digital information, surpassing cognitive capacity and leading to decision-making difficulties, reduced attention span, and mental fatigue—drives the desire to maintain emotional equilibrium (Katz et al. 2021). To put this differently, having grown up with a constant flow of content of unreliable quality and tone, for our participants, being a "digital native" meant that coping mechanisms and adaptations for overload were also native to them and therefore difficult to identify in themselves. We observed that participants moved fluidly between different information modes and trust contexts, driven by instinct and emotion. Since information modes are differentiated by both the type of content being consumed and the user's underlying motivation for consumption, mode shifts were marked and observed either by a change in the content itself or by a transformation in the participant's motivation and resulting action from that content, such as a comedic video suddenly moving into a

promotion of a lifestyle product, or a participant who initially described viewing a piece of content for entertainment then suddenly engaging with comments and applying that content in practice. Many of these transitions were prompted by user behavior but mediated by algorithmic recommendations, such that they occurred instinctively, without conscious or articulated intention. Participants navigated content and signaled instinctive emotional attraction or repulsion by moving forward or back, yet they generally lacked a clear sense of informational direction or goal. This scrolling behavior can be considered an adaptive strategy for navigating information overload, helping them conserve decision-making power and emotions as they move through never-ending content. As a result, participants would switch quickly, almost automatically, between information modes, seeking in their digital journey across modes to maintain a steady emotional state. However, because participants switched rapidly between modes, they did not consistently apply heuristics. They would often unconsciously extend their attitude and behavior toward trust heuristics from Timepass into other modes, while believing that they were in control of their consumption.

I just like to read through [Facebook]...Everybody my age will see [Facebook content] and be like, “This is so ridiculous.” And not get angry with it...I think a lot of us are just like, “Oh my God, this is so funny that people will actually think that, it’s so ridiculous.” – *Jamie (22, USA)*

For Jamie, low-quality content was a form of entertainment that she encountered with a relatively open and passive mindset. As a result, she rarely reported or blocked such content, keeping her and others continually exposed to this inaccurate and harmful information and vulnerable to unconscious normalization and even internalization. Over the course of the interview, Jamie went from calling such low-quality content “fake news” to “sort-of fake, not super-fake, news.”

We observed these dynamics at play in many different cross-cultural scenarios. For example, Safia (24, IND) said she began watching Andrew Tate videos as entertainment. Andrew Tate is a controversial internet personality. While Safia originally disagreed with Tate’s views that women should be nurturing and dress femininely, as she consumed his content out of boredom, she described feeling more receptive to some of his views on traditional femininity over time. Safia said that as a result, she started wearing *kurta*, an Indian dress, over pants more often.

If you’d asked me three months ago “What about Andrew Tate?”, I would’ve yelled left, right, and center...Most of the time he is just yelling and saying it in a wrong way. But then he does make sense. [*laughs*] I have to change my wardrobe. I was about to wear pants, like, just jeans and shorts, but then I’m like, “Okay, no, let’s just wear this colorful *kurta*.” – *Safia (24, IND)*

As Safia’s experience shows, while in Timepass mode, participants believed that they did not need to engage any critical thinking or media literacy skills to vet information

they consumed. They did not believe that Timepass content—even if it was manipulative or misinformation—could shape their opinions or beliefs because it was not meant to be taken seriously. This made them vulnerable to harm, as consuming content without critical thinking inadvertently led them to internalizing ideas without scrutiny. For Safia, the content she had initially intended to consume only for entertainment in Timepass mode followed her as she shifted to consuming content for wardrobe tips in Lifestyle Aspiration mode, ultimately influencing her to take actions that she would have deemed misaligned with her values at the outset. Participants were spending so much time in Timepass that they became accustomed to consuming content passively. When they fluidly shifted from Timepass mode to other modes, like Safia did, they unconsciously carried over a passive approach to information, and failed to realize when they had to activate less habitual literacy practices and guard against unconscious influence on their beliefs, knowledge, or actions.

“Information modes” thus reveal when and why different heuristics become relevant by highlighting how the trustworthiness of content matters in context. It reveals clear patterns in how young people are spending their time online, and why, which illuminates the limited extent to which traditional skills and heuristics for vetting and trusting information are activated. These findings challenge the idea that users embark on linear information journeys armed with one-size-fits-all literacy practices. Rather than rationally completing linear information journeys, users are unconsciously and emotionally reacting as they navigate online content. During this study, participants were strongly favoring modes of information seeking and processing that felt soothing and inconsequential.

4.2 Generative AI as a New Tool for Information Seeking

During this study, participants viewed text-based genAI chatbots as a new and improved source for information seeking that did not radically break with more familiar domains, namely search engines and social media. For example, many participants felt genAI was a faster, more tailored search engine: They could ask a specific prompt and receive a single answer without having to sort through links. They often perceived the single answer as equally credible to search engine results, but faster and more accessible.

ChatGPT is pulling from this archive of information and sometimes that information could be stuff that’s on Google. I used to rush to my phone to go to Safari, but now it’s straight to ChatGPT. – *Neil, 22 (USA)*

In treating genAI like a search engine, they had formed a flawed mental model of how large language models (LLMs) worked: They imagined that the genAI tool was scanning the vast database of the internet and providing a synthesized top result. They assumed top answers could be afforded a high degree of trust and credibility because search results were perceived to filter and rank for quality.

Participants also imagined genAI as providing what we term a “social thermometer”

of public opinion. Participants gauge a social thermometer by reading comments to understand how others are responding or if they are correcting what is being shared. This is a common practice on social media and a critical part of young people's opinion formation (Hassoun et al. 2023). Since they misunderstood genAI to be scanning the internet, they imagined that it was distilling all thoughts shared online into a consensus opinion. As such, they perceived genAI as a "better" social thermometer relative to social media, synthesizing the wisdom of the crowd while saving them the energy of reading opinions themselves.

Overall, participants valued applicability and efficiency over accuracy when evaluating genAI tools and its outputs. When prompted, participants expressed awareness that genAI results were not always accurate. However, they expressed comfort with "good enough" outputs, rationalizing that when it comes to genAI, perfect is the enemy of good: They prized the tool's efficiency above all else.

When the quiz will be open for five minutes, we have ChatGPT in another window and quickly copy paste copy paste copy paste...Out of ten [questions], I got six correct. So, it's a pretty bad score...[But I still use ChatGPT], because at least you're getting six. In Google, you'll not get that. You'll get some random stuff, you'll not get answers. – *Chana (20, IND)*

Despite recognizing ChatGPT's low accuracy rate, Chana found its efficiency, specifically the way it formats information, to be directly applicable to her exams and too valuable to discontinue using the tool.

While some of these attitudes have changed since the introduction and widespread adoption of LLMs, the point is that users were driven to engage with LLMs through heuristics developed in relation to the pressures of information overload, emotional overwhelm, and anxieties about social judgment amid polarization. Within this context, dialogue with LLMs rapidly became part of participants' daily routines. In the process, we observed that they imported "old" or existing heuristics into this significantly new context.

For example, participants viewed genAI as a safe space where they could ask questions and conduct online activity without social risk or judgment. As is common for young people in this age cohort, they were keenly aware of and anxious about how they were perceived by their social circles. However, there may be a period effect whereby this age cohort now has heightened social pressures thanks to online interactions. Many participants expressed fear of social sanction or "being canceled," being embarrassed for not knowing the answer, or simply making social connections annoyed.

With genAI, young adults did not have to exercise their social communication skills to handle interpersonal conflict or differences of opinion. Neil (23, USA) was concerned about how studying abroad would impact his relationship with his girlfriend, but rather than speaking to her about it, he sought out discussion and tips for long-distance

relationships from ChatGPT. Ismael (24, USA) used genAI to quickly learn personal finance terms that his wealthier peers used casually—terms they could judge him for not knowing—such as “liquidity pool” or “token sale.” Talia (24, USA) could learn about fraught topics, such as the Israel–Palestine conflict and Supreme Court rulings, without having to know how to ask questions about a sensitive topic. She used genAI tools like Bard to “educate” herself first before she discussed these topics with friends.

Participants in both India and the US viewed genAI as judgment-free in part because it was perceived to be non-human. In India, our participants valued genAI for its confidentiality, unlike the potential risk of a human violating confidentiality. In the US, the primary draw of genAI was that it could not “cancel” them like their peers can. In both cases, using genAI to attenuate some of the potential social risk was appealing. It is unsurprising that participants liked using genAI if it meant avoiding negative peer interactions or feeling like they were a burden on their friends. Social mistakes were a source of the negative emotions they sought to avoid, and so, finding ways to avoid social mistakes or taking social risks altogether was a primary driver of their online behaviors. GenAI was another tool in service of this goal.

The point here is that the interplay between emotional regulation and information processing becomes even more consequential with the introduction of generative AI. As participants integrated genAI into their everyday tasks, they often encountered AI-generated information while in lighter, more self-focused information modes, especially Timepass and Getting Stuff Done. In these modes, content felt low-stakes and primarily self-directed, activating minimal feelings of social obligation or scrutiny. According to the information mode framework, when content feels like it will not impact others, young people are primed to treat it as not requiring traditional vetting, even if they consciously know better. This means genAI outputs, especially when consumed in a casual or private setting, can slip under the radar of critical thinking—not because participants lack media literacy, but because the emotional and social cues that typically trigger evaluative behaviors are not present. Thus, the emotional logics that structure young people’s navigation of digital space shape not only how they engage with content, but how and whether they vet the trustworthiness of genAI itself.

Notably, participants were not oblivious to the risks and harms associated with genAI. Yet they perceived harms from technology as inevitable and outside of their ability to influence. As a result, rather than opting out of technology, which they feared would negatively affect their future, or fight technology, which they perceived as futile, they preferred to master it. They acknowledged the harms of genAI, but the drive for efficiency overrode their concerns.

I don’t think it’s bad to use [genAI] for anything...It’s really useful time efficient. I feel like I don’t lose trust [in genAI] because it’s like, we know it’s technology, and technology always has its downsides and limitations.” – *Kathy, 21 (USA)*

More to the point, young people's mindsets have evolved within a post-truth era, that is, one where they spend significant amounts of time simply existing online, immersed in environments where information is rarely evaluated through clear-cut notions of accuracy or objectivity. This context has primed them to approach LLMs with a high degree of acceptance and even trust, despite being fully aware of the tool's fallibility.

5 Discussion

5.1 Implications of Information Modes for Trust

We suggest that information modes have emerged as a coping mechanism in response to information overload in the context of digital media (Bawden and Robinson 2008; Schmitt, Debbelt, and Schneider 2018). Many participants felt pressured to stay alert on social media but found the constant flow of information, particularly news, to be exhausting and emotionally overwhelming. It is a well-documented phenomenon that young adults are experiencing higher levels of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress compared to previous generations (Goodwin et al. 2020; Grelle et al. 2023). While previous generations have experienced periods of global unrest, loss of faith in institutions, and uncertainty, newer generations face periods of uncertainty alongside a barrage of real-time, on-the-ground footage and constant updates. Despite growing global awareness of mental health challenges, individuals continue to bear greater responsibility for protecting their mental health than organizations, such as workplaces (Greenwood and Anas 2021; Breuning 2019). Information modes appear to be a "tactic"—in the sense of an improvisational practice employed by individuals who lack formal power or control over a system but need to survive in it—for managing information overload and the need to take responsibility for one's own mental health (Certeau 1984). Switching between modes to achieve emotional equilibrium is a "tactical" response young adults have developed to navigate in this information landscape.

This tactical approach to information consumption has significant implications for trust mechanisms in digital environments. Perceptions of trust in digital content vary across contexts: on social media, who shares a story and the outlet can affect how trustworthy a post seems, and audiences report that presentation cues—ad placement, load times, and mobile compatibility—are important to their trust judgments (Sterrett et al. 2019; Harris 2016). Our findings on information modes align with this understanding, suggesting that trust heuristics are not universally applied but shift depending on users' current emotional and cognitive states. This dynamic nature of trust presents challenges for traditional approaches to information literacy and fact-checking interventions.

Strategic avoidance of "heavy" content, and the resulting inadvertent disengagement from traditional literacy practices, bears important implications for how social media and news platforms better safeguard their users from disinformation. Most information

literacy interventions assume people are interested in the veracity of information, but we find that this is true only in very low-frequency modes. For example, information literacy interventions often encourage people to consider signals of accuracy or trustworthiness—such as evaluating the credibility of the source through crowd-sourced judgments—or provide tips for literacy skills, such as lateral reading between sources (Caulfield 2024; Breakstone et al. 2021; Pennycook and Rand 2019). However, we find that these tips and skills are relevant only when participants are in the mindset of either Prepping for Debate or Making a Big Life Decision. Moreover, due to the sheer amount of time spent in Timepass mode, when participants thoughtlessly and frequently switched to other modes, they would often apply their mindset and behaviors from Timepass to other modes they would switch to, before switching back to Timepass mode again. The overall effect of rapid, unconscious switching appears to be a lowered threshold for trusting information—even in contexts where participants claim to care about veracity.

The limited time spent in modes focused on veracity helps address a long-standing issue in information literacy research: the low usage of interventions like fact-checking labels (Clayton et al. 2020). Our findings provide insight into this phenomenon, showing that young people are rarely in the relevant information modes. Expecting people to engage with questions of trustworthiness and accuracy while they are in a completely different mindset means that, at best, they ignore the intervention. At worst, they become irritated and disengage entirely. Interventions should be aligned with a person's information mode to be effective.

To design more effective interventions, in both more traditional spaces for information seeking and emergent ones, we can align them with a person's information mode. This approach requires a shift from universal, one-size-fits-all strategies to more nuanced, context-aware interventions. Given the prevalence of Timepass mode and its influence on other modes, interventions should consider how to make critical engagement more appealing or seamlessly integrated into casual browsing behaviors. This might involve gamification elements or social features that align with the low-effort, entertainment-focused nature of Timepass. Interventions targeting Timepass mode might also consider helping users consciously recognize they are moving away from Timepass mode and activating their cognitive transition into more critical information modes, deploying “credibility nudges” proven effective at combating misinformation at these critical junctures (Butler, Prike, and Ecker 2024; Hwang and Lee 2025; Pennycook et al. 2020). Understanding and responding to information modes offers a promising avenue for improving digital literacy and trust-building efforts. By recognizing the dynamic nature of trust and the tactical ways young adults navigate information overload, we can develop more effective, context-sensitive approaches to promoting critical engagement with online content. This nuanced approach not only addresses the challenges of information overload but also acknowledges the real ways people feel and think when they both consume and produce digital content today.

5.2 Implications for Generative AI and the Future of Online Information-Seeking Behaviors

This research was conducted in the summer of 2023, a critical juncture for young people's information journeys. OpenAI had just launched their chatbot, and young people were adapting to this disruption by reacting to the genAI content trickling into their feeds, producing genAI content themselves, and testing the limits of genAI chatbots. Participants were already seeking to minimize their time in "heavy" modes, where literacy skills matter most. GenAI chatbots fit neatly within that desire by providing a way to quickly find relevant information. For example, several participants would ask AI chatbots potentially contentious questions, such as whether climate change was likely to worsen pandemics, rather than having to do a deep dive into a fraught topic themselves. They outsourced the emotional labor of looking, erroneously viewing it as the same as outsourcing to search engines, even though this has been proven not to be true and different harms have been shown, such as a propensity to echo user beliefs over truth ("sycophancy"), generate false information ("hallucinations"), and erode cognitive abilities ("cognitive debt") (Sharma et al. 2025; Salvagno, Taccone, and Gerli 2023; Kosmyrna et al. 2025). We hypothesize that, as genAI tools become more integrated into everyday life, the time young people spend in high-literacy modes is poised to shrink further. This suggests that, while genAI chatbots are structured like a search engine insofar as they require a query, they were not internalized as such. Rather, they were seen as "light." Heuristics that applied to user-generated content carried over.

To this point, several of our participants were already corresponding with ChatGPT, for example, with requests for dating or dieting advice. Traditionally, young people have sourced this kind of information through user-generated content on social media in Timepass mode, seeing it as a kind of content that—recalling our participant Gaurav—is not about veracity but rather tips to test on yourself (Xu et al. 2024). That our participants were already turning to genAI for "light" advice that they did not feel required fact-checking suggests that the importation of information modes across diverse types of platforms and content will hold true with genAI. This highlights the need to shift from traditional information literacy interventions, like fact-checking, which place the burden on users, to alternatives such as policy solutions or technological guardrails that address the behaviors observed in this study. While our participants' relationship with genAI was still in flux when our data collection concluded, we hypothesize that several of the behaviors we observed will become more pronounced as young people continue to integrate genAI content and tools into their lives. In fact, since our study, when participants were only engaging with genAI in text, AI tools utilizing audio and video modalities have become more commonplace, but the genAI content and practices that have proliferated continue to prioritize entertainment and efficiency. Young people's relationships with LLMs are shaped not by naïveté, but by adaptive, pragmatic literacy—one that reflects the fluid, fragmented, and socially embedded information ecosystem they've grown up in.

6 Conclusion

We found that young people, struggling to cope with information overload and the intensifying social pressure to know more and achieve more, are seeking out pockets of “lightness” online. To maximize time spent in emotional equilibrium online, they are switching rapidly and unconsciously between emotional states, and implementing new trust heuristics that emphasize real-world action, social presentability, and instinctive response. We suggest building on our study’s findings with quantitative research on how young users spend their time (e.g., through digital diaries or device tracking) and how different content influences their emotional states (e.g., through biometric data), with the research design explicitly informed by the seven information modes. The purpose of this study, differentiated from other quantitative studies on how users spend time online, would be to validate the seven information modes outlined in this paper, quantify the time users spend in each mode, and help identify digital or physiological markers for when users enter or switch between modes. This research would enable practitioners to design and deploy more effective interventions both within modes and during mode inflection switch points. To design more effective interventions, we need to better understand young people’s information modes and their desire for emotional equilibrium. This understanding will help us design better online spaces that make young people feel safe, affirmed, and in control.

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Data availability statement

Not applicable.

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Ethical standards

The study plan was reviewed by experts in human subjects research, legal, security, and privacy at Google. We consulted academics and experts who specialize on topics of trust, genAI, and youth.

All participants provided both written and verbal informed consent prior to commencing the study, and were reminded they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Raw research data were deleted within 30 days of the final reporting.

Keywords

Young adults; information seeking; emotion; trust heuristics; generative AI