Influence of news interest, payment of digital news, and primary news sources in media trust. A moderated mediation model.

Vara-Miguel, Alfonso
Department of Marketing and Media Management, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain.
Corresponding author: avara@unav.es
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4271-1858

Medina, Mercedes
Department of Marketing and Media Management, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain
Email: mmedina@unav.es
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-6811

Gutiérrez-Rentería, María Elena
School of Communication. Universidad Panamericana. Guadalajara. México
Email: egutierr@up.edu.mx
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5431-8223

Biographical notes:

Alfonso Vara-Miguel (PhD in Communication) is associated professor in the School of Communication of the University of Navarra (Spain) where he teaches Economics, Media Management and Financial Journalism. He is member of the Spanish research group Digital News Media Research Group, and coauthor of the Spanish edition of the Digital News Report, published annually by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of Oxford University. He is also researcher at IBERIFIER – Iberian Digital Media Research and Fact-Checking Hub, funded by European Commission CEF-TC-2020-2 (European Digital Media Observatory), 2021-2024 (ref. 2020-EU-IA-0252).

Mercedes Medina (PhD in Communication from the University of Navarra and Master in Arts in Communication from the University of Westminster) is Associate Professor at the School of Communication at the University of Navarra (Spain). She is the main researcher of the project "From the architecture of listening to the social footprint: good practices in content production" (2019-2022) funded by the Spanish Government and the coordinator of the Media Markets and Media Companies Research Group. Her teaching and research focuses on media economics, media companies and media audience research. Since 2016, she has been the editor of the journal Communication and Society (JCR Q2).

María Elena Gutiérrez-Rentería earned a doctorate in public communication from the Universidad de Navarra and is a Professor in the School of Communication at the Universidad Panamericana in Guadalajara, México. Her bachelor's degree is in business and finance and has a degree in anthropology and ethics. Dr. Gutiérrez Rentería participated as a visiting professor at the College of Media & Communication, at Texas Tech University in the United States. She was a member of the National System of Researchers in Mexico. Gutiérrez-Rentería currently serves on the editorial board of The International Journal on Media Management and is the author of the Mexican country profile published each year by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, at Oxford University.

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The present study examined the mediating effect of the main type of news source used by audiences in the relationship between interest in the news and media trust. Additionally, the moderating role of the payment for digital news were explored. Based on 12,252 respondents in six countries (United Kingdom, United States, France, Spain, Germany, and Finland), the study confirms that the type of news source has a significant mediation effect in the relationship between interest and the media trust. The research also shows that paying for digital news has no influence on the relationship between interest in news and media trust and does not influence the type of source usually chosen to be informed, neither influence the indirect effect of interest in media trust

Keywords: media trust; paywall; media exposure; media sources; news interest.

Introduction

Trust in journalism is critical for society's good functioning. While a certain level of scepticism is desirable in a healthy democracy, the news media can only play its social role adequately if trusted. Moreover, the abundance of news caused by the emergence of new media players – social media, digital born media – has raised concerns about low trust in media and the potential risk that democracy might suffer (Waisbord, 2018). For most citizens, the news is the main source of information about the public affairs that matter to and interest them (Strömbäck et al., 2020). The news help citizens to participate in the public sphere and help them to satisfy their need for orientation and understanding of their society, through the gatekeeping and interpretation of different events that are part of the media agenda (Henke et al., 2020; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2020). As citizens do not have the resources, the time, nor the experience to verify whether the facts are true or not, trust in the media is an essential mechanism in the relationship established between news firms and citizens (Coleman, 2012; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Although research on trust is abundant, the field of journalism studies has seen a rapid increase in research since the early 2010s (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Fisher, 2018), partially due to empirical evidence showing a decline in media trust over the recent years (Edelman, 2018; European Commission, 2017; Newman et al., 2017; 2018).

This drop in media trust has occurred in a new information market characterised by an increase of the news supply and by the emergence of new sources of information that compete for people's time and attention (Marta Lazo & Farias Batlle, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The appearance of new players in the media arena has coexisted with the reduction in the number of traditional media and the diminished influence of the existing ones in digital platforms (Marta Lazo & Farias Batlle, 2019). The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism observed that, over the 2012–2017 period, the biggest change has been the growth of news accessed via social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (Newman et al., 2017).

If the audiences are losing their trust in the media, this could have relevant consequences for the media industry. On one hand, media trust drives the selection of news outlets by the audiences and it is a necessary precondition for the news media to have social effects (Ladd, 2012; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). On the other hand, trust can be understood as an asset on which news organisations capitalise to generate reputation and financial sustainability (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009). Furthermore, the business model of news media already challenged by dwindling advertisement revenues will be increasingly pressured as the news media lose consumers and this will weaken professional journalism and its important democratic role (Nielsen & Selva, 2009; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019).

Last but not least, in this new media market, new populist attitudes and political parties have been born, whose main aim is the spread of disinformation, fake news and rumours (Benkler et al., 2018; Ha et al., 2019; Humprecht, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). These populist attitudes are relevant for media trust, as many citizens might still consider the media as part of the corrupt establishment, which is against the true interest of the people (Flew, 2019; Markov & Min, 2020).

The research about media trust

The first studies about media trust put the focus on the confidence that an individual or institutional source generated in the people with their clear persuasive messages (Berlo et al., 1969; Hovland et al., 1951). In successive years, the research was broadened to the trust in the channels or medium through which the news was spread. Research on media trust refers in these studies to the trust that the people had in a particular medium, such as newspapers, television or radio (Abel & Wirth, 1977; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Roper, 1975; Westley & Severin, 1964). In the 1980s, Gaziano reviewed the notion of trust as a one-dimensional concept and began to analyse some dimensions or elements related to trust in or credibility of the media (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). More recently, new studies have analysed the so-called fake news and the rise of disinformation in democratic societies (Ha et al., 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Recent research has established that levels of media trust differ depending on whether it refers to news overall, news that people use, or news in digital and social media (Newman & Fletcher, 2018), and on whether it refers to an unspecified referent (such as 'the press' or 'the media') or to specified news sources (Daniller et al., 2017; Eberl, 2019). Media trust might also differ depending on whether it refers to national versus local media, across individual news media, or across the coverage of different topics (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Metzger et al., 2003). Studies have shown that the more general the way in which the object of trust is measured, the worse the evaluations are, due to accessibility bias. According to Daniller (2017), the accessibility bias suggests that asking about pre-specified news sources of any kind, whether one's own or what one believes others are watching and reading, will generally lead to higher levels of trust in the press (Daniller et al., 2017). Measuring generalised trust in 'the' media might not actually tap recipients' trust in the news media they use in their daily life (Engelke et al., 2019). Finally, prior studies have found a strong link, a so-called 'trust nexus' between trust in the news media and citizens' approval of political institutions (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2017). The argument is that citizens' trust in the news media is related to the way they look at and trust other political institutions and in democracy in general (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). In conclusion, the highest and nonspecific level of trust in the media, as a social institution, is closely related to the degree of trust that citizens have in other institutions, such as their government, their politics or their economic groups. The greater the distrust in the institutions, the greater the scepticism in the media (Llamero et al., 2019).

Because of all these different terms and methodologies around the notion of media trust, the research lacks consensus on what media trust is and how to measure it. For instance, Hanitzsch et al. (2017) define media trust as 'the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner' (Hanitzsch et al., 2017), but – as noted by Kiousis and Spiro (2001) and Kohring and Matthes (2007) - the terms trust and credibility are used interchangeably within the literature. In this research, we follow what Engelke et al. (2019) posit as the most common position, here treating credibility as 'one of several antecedents of the more complex concept of journalistic trustworthiness' and viewing credibility as a form of believability, that only partially captures the concept of trust. From the methodological point of view, the vast majority of quantitative research on news media trust deals with responses to close-ended questions that use a scale and pre-established categories. However, as Fisher (2016) and Daniller et al. (2017) point out, close-ended question items about

'trust in media' are not enough to unveil what people actually think and how they interpret the concept. An important aspect of this framework is the suggestion of Strömback to focus on trust in the messages coming from news media rather than on media as institutions or organisations. This allows researching not only how news media trust at different levels of analysis are related to each other, but also whether, how and to what extent news media trust at different levels of analysis are related to news media use. It might very well be the case that news media trust at one level of analysis does not have much of an impact on news media use, while news media trust at another level has a more significant impact (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Interest in news and media trust

Interest in news and media trust are two key concepts in the field of journalism and media studies. Interest in news, as measured by the amount of time and attention that individuals devote to consuming news content, has been widely studied in the literature. However, the relationship both variables has received less attention. Research has shown that interest in the news is just correlated with trust in the news media. Thus Schranz, Schneider and Eisenenegger (2018) and Mor and Reich (2018) found that individuals who reported being highly interested in news were also more likely to trust the media (Mor & Reich, 2018; Schranz et al., 2018). As Tsfati and Capella (2003) concluded, people act rationally and go to the media to be informed of what is happening to save time and resources. Therefore, it would not make sense for citizens to use media that they do not trust. Consequently, we can expect that those who show greater interest in the news manifest a greater trust than those who are more uninterested (Kiousis & Spiro, 2001; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Conversely, low trust in the news would lead to less interest in news. In other words, in environments in which distrust in news media is higher, people are less likely to be exposed to different sources of information and to critically evaluate them (Humprecht, 2019).

Trusting the media 'in general' means trusting the entire news selection, editing and distribution process and the journalistic criteria underlying that process. Media trust has an effect on people's behaviour, both individually and socially. As Tsfati and Capella (2003) concluded, people act rationally and go to the media to be informed of what is happening to save time and resources. Therefore, it would not make sense for citizens to use media that they do not trust. Consequently, we can expect that those who show greater trust in the media manifest a greater habit of consuming information than those who are more distrustful (Kiousis & Spiro, 2001; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Thus, the first hypothesis of this study addresses the key question of the relationship between interest in news and media trust:

> H1: Individuals who have a high level of interest in news are more likely to trust the news than those who have a low level of interest

Type of media sources and media trust

In recent years, the proliferation of new media sources has significantly impacted the landscape of traditional journalism and media trust. As consumers have increasing access to a wider array of news outlets and sources, as social media platforms and digital-born outlets, legacy media, which refers to traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio that have been established for a long time, are no longer the only source of news and information for the general public. The dominance of these traditional news organizations has been challenged and more control has given to individuals over the news the consume, making the reliability and credibility of these sources a subject of debate (Stromback et al 2020; Fawzia et al, 2021).

Researchers have found that people who were more interested in the news were more likely to seek out diverse sources of information (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, 2005; Tsfati & Peri, 2006), thus media trust could be influenced by factors such as the exposure to different type of sources of

news. The selective exposure of media theory suggests that, because audiences are not capable of paying continuous attention to all information at all times, they must inevitably choose the sources of information that will provide them with the greatest benefits. When audiences find information that lacks trust, they will seek information elsewhere (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973). Likewise, in assessing the value of a source, audiences are more likely to choose sources they trust over sources they distrust (Hawkins et al., 2001; Wheeless, 1974) and audiences tend to pay more attention to news of higher utility while dismissing news of lower utility (Knobloch et al., 2003).

Based in these assumptions, there are evidences that legacy media legacy media outlets are generally seen as more reliable and trustworthy than digital media. The lack of trust in news media is related to less use of these and greater use of non-mainstream information sources. According to most majority of the studies, there is a positive relationship between trust and consumption of traditional media: those who trust the media show a greater tendency to choose traditional media to be informed, while alternative media have served as a refuge for citizens who are most dissatisfied with traditional news channels (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Jackob, 2012; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Ladd, 2012; Mourão et al., 2018). Also, Fletcher and Park (2017) showed in 11 countries that the preference for non-mainstream news sources (digital-born outlets, blogs or social media) was found to be associated with low levels of trust in news (Fletcher & Park, 2017). And comparing young audiences in Israel, Norway and the United Kingdom, Elvestad and Feuerstein (2018) found out that the students from all these countries had higher trust in traditional news media than in social media.

On the contrary, the exposure to digital news was negatively correlated with news media trust (Elvestad et al., 2018). Similar conclusions were drawn by other scholars, who showed that media distrust was positively associated with the preference for and exposure to alternative sources, especially social media (Henke et al., 2020; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

However, some studies have shown no significant associations (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Bennett et al., 2001; Prochazka, 2020), and others have found only partial evidence for an association, finding that the use of some media types (primarily television) predict general trust in news media (Arlt, 2018). Overall, studies have shown that more trust in specific media types (e.g. television or newspapers) corresponds to more use of these media (Kiousis, 2001; Yamamoto et al., 2016).

Therefore, the type of media could operate as a mediator between the audience's interest in the news and the trust it places in it, in such a way that the degree of interest will be conditioned by the type of source used to be informed. The mediation analysis is utilized to test whether a proposed causal effect of X on Y may be transmitted through a mediating (M) variable (Hayes. 2022). In our study, we analyzed whether the direct relationship between interest in the news (independent variable X) and trust in the news (dependent variable Y) is mediated by the type of media chosen to be informed (mediator variable M). Thus, the model will represent a general causal conception of the relationships among X, Y, and M.

The payment for digital news as moderator of interest in news and type of media source

Despite the great advantages and gratifications that digital newspapers provide to the audiences, most of them avoid paying for digital news. The reasons for this reluctance to pay are multiple and heterogeneous: from the abundance of free digital information supply (Cea-Esteruelas, 2013; Himma-Kadakas & Kõuts, 2015), the payment methods used (Zhang & Nguyen, 2004), the type of news format or the type of media source (Chyi & Chadha, 2012; Chyi & Lee, 2013); the perception of low quality of the content supplied by media firms (Himma-Kadakas & Kõuts, 2015) or the growing popularity of social media as free providers of news (Oh, Animesh, & Pinsonneault, 2016).

Similarly, the evidence in relation to the factors that affect the probability of paying for online content is multiple and, in some cases, contradictory (O'Brien et al., 2020). Most of the studies have studied the influence of sociodemographic variables -sex, age, income and education- and variables related to how citizens get news -frequency of consumption, type of media source, level of interest in news, use of social media to be informed- (for a deeper study of the factors affecting the payment for digital news, see O'Brien et al. 2020).

There are few studies that explicitly address the direct relationship between media trust and payment for digital journalism. [AUTHOR] concluded that the likelihood of paying for digital news is higher if the media trust is lower [AUTHOR]. According to these authors, those who distrust the media 'in general' are willing to pay for the *specific* media that deserve their trust. Consequently, the higher the media distrust, the higher the incentives they have to pay for the news provided by those media that are worthy of their trust [AUTHOR].

However, there are hardly any studies that have analyzed the influence that the decision to pay for news can potentially have on the selection of media used to get information. The payment for digital news can potentially influence the type of media source chosen by audiences and indirectly, moderate the relationship between interest in news and media trust. For example, those news organizations that charges for news may attract a certain type of reader who is willing to pay for high-quality journalism, while those media based on free–model can attract to a type of audiences less interested in news.

> H2. There is significant effect between the payment for digital news and the type of news source used to be informed.

Payment for news, therefore, could act as a moderator of the relationship between interest in the news and the type of source chosen to get information, and would indirectly influence the relationship between interest and trust.

Whereas mediation analysis focuses on analyzing *how* an effect operates, moderation analysis is used when interest is directed toward questions about *when* that effect operates. Under which circumstances, or for which type of people, does X influence Y. In other words, when does affect X affect Y and when does it not, or when does X affect Y strongly versus weakly, or positively versus negatively? Moderator variables represent those circumstances or situations that influence the size of X's effect (Hayes, 2022). Also known as statistical interaction, moderation is of great relevance in research, as the introduction of a moderating variable into a theoretical explanation can deepen our understanding of the relationship between one variable and another (Holbert & Park, 2020).

Our interest in paying for digital news is twofold. On the one hand, we want to know if the direct effect between interest in the news and media trust is moderated or not by the payment for digital news. There are no studies that analyze this question. Previous studies on trust in e-commerce suggest that trust and perceived risk of a product have a strong impact on purchase intention (Kim, Ferrin & Rao 2008). Also, some studies on trust demonstrates that trust in a firm positively influences the purchase intention of users (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ang, 2021) and people with a higher level of media trust system generally show a higher willingness to pay for digital news (Mor & Reich, 2018; Schranz et al., 2018). Otherwise, the economy of gratuity can lead to the lower demand for the news quality and news are managed as mere commodities (Sjøvaag, 2015; Pickart & Williams, 2014).

Our assumption is that those who paid for digital news should have a higher level of interest in news compared to those who accessed free digital news, as the act of paying for news creates a sense of value and commitment, leading to a higher level of interest in news content and consequently, a higher media trust, as seen above. The relationship between interest in news and media trust would be affected by the act of paying (or not), in such a way that among those who pay for digital news the intensity of the relationship is greater than among those who do not pay.

H3. The direct effect of interest in news on the media trust is moderated by the payment for digital news.

Secondly, we consider whether paying for digital news affects the indirect effect that the type of media introduces in the relationship between interest in the news and media trust. According to the theory of selective exposure, people will be willing to pay for those media that best meet their interest in information and therefore, paying for digital news can moderate the effect that the type of media has indirectly on the relationship between interest and trust in the media.

H4. The relationship between the interest in news and the type of news source is moderated by the payment for digital news.

H5. The indirect effect of the interest in news on media trust through the type of source is moderated by the payment for digital news.

In sum, all hypothesized relationships are shown in the model shown in Figure 1. Firstly, the model represents a general causal conception of the relationships among the interest in news (X), media trust (Y), and the type of news source (M). All paths (a, b, and c-prime) in this model represent the direct effect of one variable on another. In this conception, path a represents the assumption that the interest in news (X) is antecedent to the type of source (M), whereas path b represents the assumption that the type of news source (M) is antecedent to media trust (Y). As seen in Methodology section, the indirect (or mediational effect) of X on Y is calculated as product of paths a and b. Path c-prime represents the direct effect of X on Y after controlling for the proposed mediation. Within this conceptual framework, all paths are unconditional (i.e., the relationships among the variables are not moderated by other variables).

Secondly, the model represents the effect that the payment for digital news (mediator variable W) has on the influence that the interest in news has directly in media trust (H4), and in the indirect effect that the type of source chosen by the audiences has in the relation between interest in news and media trust (H3).

Figure 1. Moderated mediation. Process Model 8.
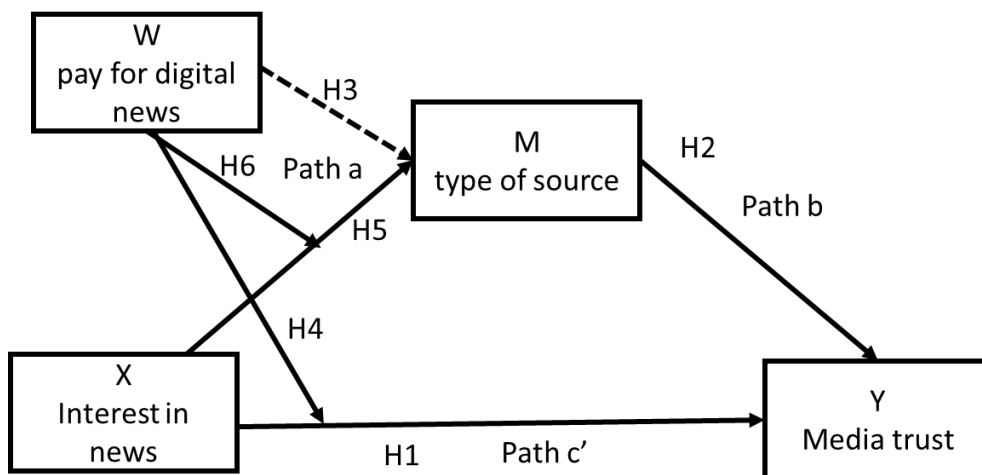
Methodology

Sample, Variables and Measurement

Data collection

The analysis is based on data corresponding to the six countries from the survey carried out for the Digital News Report (2020): United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), France, Spain, Germany and Finland. Samples were drawn from panels within each, with respondents invited to complete the survey on the basis of quotas for age, gender, and region. YouGov, using an online questionnaire in late January–early February 2020, conducted the survey fieldwork, commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The data were weighted to targets based on census/industry-accepted data, such as age, gender, region, newspaper readership and social grade, to reflect the population of each country. The number of respondents was more than 2,000 in each country (N = 12,252). The sample is reflective of the adult population (18+) with access to the Internet. As the survey deals with news consumption, it filtered out anyone who said that they had not consumed any news in the past month (average around 3%) in order to ensure that irrelevant responses did not adversely affect data quality (see Table 1). It is important to keep in mind that the data are drawn from an online panel, and as a result, the respondents do not represent a random sample.

Table 1. Sample Size and Internet Penetration (2020)

| Country | 2020 | |
	Sample Size	Internet Penetration
UK	2011	95%
US	2055	89%
France	2038	92%
Spain	2006	93%
Germany	2011	96%
Finland	2050	94%

Source: Internet World Stats: http://www.internetworldstats.com.

Dependent variable: media trust

We measured the dependent variable, the media trust of the audience, through the following question: *'Thinking about news in general, do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'I think you can trust most news most of the time'*. The responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (M = 3.01, SD = 1.10).

This unidimensional measure of media trust was used following the method of previous studies like the Digital News Report 2017 in Australia (Watkins et al., 2017), Edelman's Global Trust Barometer (from 2018 to 2020), the Pew Research Centre survey on the modern news consumer (from 2016 to 2021) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (from 2012 to 2021), which ask participants to rank their trust in news media along a multi-point scale. According to Williams (2012), this analysis would be included within the conceptual category of trust as "informational trust", to differentiate it from interpersonal trust and institutional trust. Most trust concepts in journalism studies therefore conceptualise trust in the media as a generalised attitude towards the media rather than something specific to situations or single outlets (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Engelke et al., 2019). This method might allow the comparison of respondents' level of trust and distrust across different news media types and/or cross nationally.

Independent variables:

The interest in news

Interest in news was measured by the following question: *'How interested, if at all, would you say you are in the news?* The responses ranged from 1 (not at all interested) to 5 (extremely interested).

The type of source

The following question was used to measure the type of main source used by respondents to be informed: *'You say you've used these sources of news in the last week. Which would you say is your*

main source of news?'. The respondents had twelve alternatives, which were recoded into a new variable with four categories: 1 (traditional news sources, which included television, radio and print sources), 2 (digital editions of traditional news sources), 3 (native media) and 4 (social media).

The payment for digital news

The variable payment for digital news is derived from the question *'Have you paid for online news content, or accessed a paid for online news service in the last year?'*, and the possible answers were Yes (1) or No (0).

The control variables

The control variables included in the analysis are gender [male (1) or female (2)]; household income [low (1), medium (2) or high (3)]; age (where all the responses were recoded in seven categories: 1 (18 to 24), 2 (25 to 34), 3 (35 to 44), 4 (45 to 54), 5 (55 to 64), 6 (65 to 74) and 7 (75 or more)); education level, which was derived from a question containing ten educational alternatives and recoded into five categories: 1 (Primary school or less) 2 (completed Secondary school or Bac-A levels), 3 (completed professional qualification) 4 (completed bachelor's degree) and 5 (postgraduate, completed master's or doctoral degree); and political alignment ('ideology'), with seven categories ranged from very left-wing (1) to very right - wing (7). Previous research mentioned these sociodemographic factors as the most influential variables, which contribute to the variance of media trust perceptions (Elvestad et al., 2018; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Newman & Fletcher, 2018; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Table 2 shows the frequencies for each control variable in all the selected countries (pooled and by countries).

Table 2. Frequencies (%). Control variables, pooled and by countries

Variable	Categ.	POOLED	UK	US	FR	SP	GER	FIN
	N	12,171	2011	2055	2038	2006	2011	2050
Gender	1. Male	46.9	45.4	47.1	44.8	48.8	48.8	46.6
	2. Female	53.1	54.6	52.9	55.2	51.2	51.2	53.4
Household Income	1. Low	30.0	27.3	26.7	36.5	33.0	27.0	28.5
	2. Medium	45.9	41.6	48.3	40.3	45.7	49.3	50.1
	3. High	24.1	31.0	25.0	23.2	21.4	23.8	21.4
Age	1. 18-24	10.2	10.0	12.6	9.5	7.8	9.6	11.5
	2. 25-34	14.5	14.0	18.4	13.1	14.4	14.7	12.2
	3. 35-44	16.5	17.1	16.9	15.1	19.6	14.2	16.1
	4. 45-54	16.9	17.4	11.8	17.7	19.7	18.2	16.7
	5. 55-64	23.0	16.4	23.2	23.3	27.4	24.6	22.9
	6. 65-74	15.4	19.3	12.5	18.7	9.8	14.6	17.8
	7. 75 or more	3.5	5.9	4.7	2.6	1.4	4.1	2.6
Education	1. Primary or less	24.2	26.3	4.7	28.6	42.3	22.0	22.0
	2. Secondary	32.1	16.0	41.5	34.9	23.3	43.9	32.5
	3. Prof. qualification	8.8	15.8	9.6	5.6	4.0	7.4	10.3
	4. Graduated. Bach.	24.0	31.2	33.0	18.3	24.6	16.7	20.1
	5. Postgraduate	10.9	10.7	11.2	12.7	5.7	9.9	15.0
Ideology	1. Very left-wing	6.1	3.7	11.9	8.0	3.6	3.0	6.6
	2. Fairly left-wing	21.5	17.6	16.1	26.1	33.9	14.6	22.2
	3. Slightly left-of-centre	17.4	19.8	12.9	10.2	18.5	21.9	20.2
	4. Centre	22.0	22.2	24.1	16.0	18.6	37.4	11.0
	5. Slightly right-of-centre	14.5	19.7	9.7	8.8	12.3	17.3	18.5
	6. Fairly right-wing	12.7	14.9	12.7	19.5	9.8	4.4	17.2
	7. Very right-wing	5.7	2.2	12.7	11.4	3.2	1.3	4.3

Data analysis

The statistical analyses encompassed the following stages: (i) descriptive analysis of the structure of the sample, (ii) correlational analysis across the variables included in the study, (iii) mediation analysis, and (iv) a moderated mediation analysis using the IBM SPSS macro – PROCESS (model 8; Hayes, 2018). PROCESS is widely used in social sciences for computing complex models that include both mediating and moderating variables. To date, PROCESS is still the recommended instrument to calculate advanced models that specify moderated mediation processes (Field, 2017; Hayes, 2018). The macro is based on linear regression analysis. Finally, the inferences about the conditional and indirect effects for the statistical analysis were based on percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (n = 10,000 samples; 95% lower and upper percentiles) significantly different from zero (Hayes, 2018; Hayes and Scharkow, 2013).

The mediation analysis is utilized to test whether a proposed causal effect of X on Y may be transmitted through a mediating (M) variable (Hayes. 2022). The moderation analysis is used when interest is directed toward questions about when that effect operates. Under which circumstances, or for which type of people, does X influence Y. Moderator variables represent those circumstances or situations that influence the size of X's effect (Hayes, 2022). Also known as statistical interaction, moderation is of great relevance in research, as the introduction of a moderating variable into a theoretical explanation can deepen our understanding of the relationship between one variable and another (Holbert & Park, 2020).

Finally, conditional processes analysis is the analytical integration of mediation and moderation analysis. It is used to analyze whether the mechanism by which one variable influence another

through one or more mediators is dependent on the value of one or more moderator variables (Igurtua and Hayes, 2021). Whereas mediation analysis focuses on *how* an effect operates and moderation analysis focuses on *when* that effect exists, conditional process analysis answer questions about the *when of the how*. In our case, under what circumstances (payment or not) the type of news source influences in the relationship between interest in news and media trust. In other words, the indirect effect and the direct effect of interest in news (X) in media trust (Y) is moderated by the payment for digital news (W), and the moderation of the indirect effect takes place due to digital news also moderating path a.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Before specifically addressing the hypotheses, it is useful to present some descriptive statistics of the main variables in the six countries. Table 3 shows the proportion within each country of trust in the news media. As a whole, only 36.6% of the respondents trust most news most of the time (M = 3.01, SD = 1.10). Figures vary from France where only the 23.3% of the respondents strongly agree/tend to agree with the sentence (M = 2.71, SD = 1.00) to Finland (56.5%) (M = 3.40, SD = 0.96)

Table 3. Media trust. Frequencies, means and standard deviations. Pooled and by countries

	POOLED	UK	US	FR	SP	GER	FIN
Strongly disagree [1]	10.9	10.1	21.2	13.7	10.9	6.3	3.3
Tend to disagree [2]	22.6	27.5	24.3	27.0	24.1	16.3	16.7
Net distrust [1+2]	**33.5**	**37.6**	**45.5**	**40.7**	**35.0**	**22.6**	**20.0**
Neither agree nor disagree [3]	29.9	33.4	25.7	36.0	28.7	32.2	23.5
Tend to agree [4]	31.6	27.8	22.5	21.5	29.5	38.8	49.3
Strongly agree [5]	5.0	1.1	6.3	1.8	6.9	6.4	7.2
Net trust [4+5]	**36.6**	**28.9**	**28.8**	**23.3**	**36.4**	**45.2**	**56.5**
Means	3.01	2.82	2.68	2.71	2.98	3.23	3.40
SD	1.10	0.99	1.21	1.00	1.11	1.00	0.96

The descriptive data of the independent variables (see Table 4) show that overall, 62.1% of news users across the six selected countries are extremely/very interested in news (M = 2.17, SD = 0.91). Nevertheless, there are significant differences among the selected countries. Respondents from France show the lower level of interest, where only 45.2% declare being extremely/very interested in news (M = 2.56, SD = 0.92), while the German interviewees are the most interested in information (71% are extremely/very interested; M = 2.07, SD = 0.88).

Secondly, reluctance to pay for digital news is widespread in the six selected countries: only 13.6% of the respondents paid for online news content or accessed a news service in the last year. American and Finnish respondents show the highest tendency to pay (20.4% and 19.6%, respectively, paid for digital news), while only 7.7% of British respondents did it.

Finally, 53.4% of the news users prefer traditional news sources as the main way to be informed, followed by their digital editions (26.1%). Conversely, 20.5% of the respondents use non-traditional sources as the main source of news, which includes social media (15%) and digital-born media (5.5%). By countries, Americans are least likely to use traditional media (66.1%) while Finnish (87.4%), British (84.7%) and Germans (84.0%) show the highest frequencies of being informed mainly through traditional news sources.

Table 4. Frequencies (%). Independent variables. Pooled and by countries.

		POOLED	UK	US	FR	SP	GER	FIN
How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news?	Not at all interested [1]	1.2	1.0	2.0	1.9	0.8	1.0	0.5
	Not very interested [2]	5.8	5.9	5.8	10.4	3.5	4.2	4.6
	Somewhat interested [3]	31.0	40.5	26.2	42.4	26.0	23.8	27.2
	Very interested [4]	39.0	36.8	33.9	31.7	45.8	43.2	42.5
	Extremely interested [5]	23.1	15.9	32.1	13.5	23.9	27.8	25.2
	Mean	2.17	2.39	2.12	2.56	2.11	2.07	2.13
	SD	0.91	0.85	0.99	0.92	0.83	0.88	0.86
Pay for digital news	Yes [1]	13.6	7.7	20.4	10.8	12.7	10.4	19.6
	No [0]	86.4	92.3	79.6	89.2	87.3	89.6	80.4
Main source	Traditional news sources [1]	53.4	46.4	48.6	63.2	53.6	62.1	46.7
	Digital edition tradicional [2]	26.1	38.3	17.5	15.4	21.6	21.9	40.7
	Digital-born outlets [3]	5.5	2.3	12.2	6.0	5.5	5.2	3.6
	Social media [4]	15.0	12.9	21.6	15.4	15.0	10.8	9.0

Correlations

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the key variables. The correlation analysis indicates that all the key variables have a statistically significant and positive relationship with each other. Thus, this correlation matrix indicates that significant positive relations were found between the interest in news and media trust (r= 0.138, p<0.01), between payment for digital news and media trust (r=0.022, p<0.05) and between payment for digital news and type of source (r=0.030, p< 0.05). Also, there were found negative significant relations between interest in news and the type of news source (r=-0.137, p<0.01). The negative sign indicates an inverse relationship between interest in news and the use of traditional media as main wat to get news. In other words, those who are more interested in the news tend to get their information regularly through the traditional media, and on the contrary, the most disinterested choose more alternative media such as social media or digital born outlets.

However, the analysis of the correlations by country (see Table 5) shows in all countries a significant relationship between interest in the news and trust in the media [UK (r= 0.111, p<0.01); US (r=0.072, p<0.01); RF (r=0.142, p<0.01); GER (r=0.189, p<0.01); END (r=0.085, p<0.01); SP (r=0.117, p<0.01)]. There is also a significant relationship between interest in the news and the type of source [UK (r=-0.153, p<0.01); US (r=-0.188, p<0.01); RF (p=-0.116, p<0.01); GER (r=-0.100, p<0.01); END (r=-0.193, p<0.01); SP (r=-0.130, p<0.01)] and between the type of source and media trust [UK (r=-0.197, p<0.01); US (r=-0.072, p<0.01); RF (p=-0.161, p<0.01); GER (r=-0.232, p<0.01); END (r=-0.119, p<0.01); SP (r=-0.152, p<0.01)]. However, there is no significant relationship between payment for digital news and media trust, except in the US (r=0.128, p<0.01) and Finland (r=-0.051, p<0.05) or between payment and the main type of source, except Germany. (r=0.048, p<0.5).

Tabla 5. Means, standard deviations and Pearson correlation analysis of key variables

Pooled	M	SD	1	2	3	4
(1) Interest in news	3.77	0.908	1	-0.137**	0.138**	0.096**
(2) Type of source	1.82	1.076	-0.137**	1	-0.162**	0.030**
(3) Media trust	2.97	1.085	0.138**	-0.162**	1	0.022*
(4) Pay for digital news	0.18	0.384	0.096**	0.030**	0.022*	1
UK						
(1) Interest in news	3.61	0.854	1	-0.153**	0.111**	.119**
(2) Type of source	1.82	0.986	-0.153**	1	-0.197**	0.008
(3) Media trust	2.82	0.987	0.111**	-0.197**	1	0.009
(4) Pay for digital news	0.1	0.303	0.119**	0.008	0.009	1
US						
(1) Interest in news	3.88	0.991	1	-0.188**	0.072**	0.137**
(2) Type of source	2.07	1.212	-0.188**	1	-0.072**	-0.010
(3) Media trust	2.68	1.212	0.072**	-0.072**	1	0.128**
(4) Pay for digital news	0.26	0.437	0.137**	-0.010	0.128**	1
France						
(1) Interest in news	3.44	0.918	1	-0.116**	0.142**	0.042
(2) Type of source	1.74	1.113	-0.116**	1	-0.161**	0.030
(3) Media trust	2.71	1.009	0.142**	-0.161**	1	-0.001
(4) Pay for digital news	0.17	0.379	0.042	0.030	-0.001	1
Germany						
(1) Interest in news	3.93	0.877	1	-0.100**	0.189**	0.042
(2) Type of source	1.65	0.99	-0.100**	1	-0.232**	0.048*
(3) Media trust	3.23	1.004	0.189**	-0.232**	1	-0.009
(4) Pay for digital news	0.15	0.357	0.042	0.048*	-0.009	1
Finland						
(1) Interest in news	3.87	0.859	1	-0.193**	0.085**	0.130**
(2) Type of source	1.75	0.895	-0.193**	1	-0.119**	0.035
(3) Media trust	3.4	0.958	0.085**	-0.119**	1	-0.051*
(4) Pay for digital news	0.23	0.422	0.130**	0.035	-0.051*	1
Spain						
(1) Interest in news	3.89	0,834	1	-0,130**	0,117**	0,046*
(2) Type of source	1,92	1,183	-0,130**	1	-0,152**	0,037
(3) Media trust	2,98	1,117	0,117**	-0,152**	1	0,007
(4) Pay for digital news	0,16	0,369	0,046*	0,037	0,007	1

Note:**$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$, n= 12171. Means and standard deviations are reported before standardizing the variables

Mediated moderation analysis

The full model is comprised of two regression submodels (table 6). The model 1 entails regressing the type of source (M) onto the interest in news (X), the payment for digital news (W), and the interactive term (XW). The results of the pooled countries show that although the relation between interest in news and the type of news source is significant (b=-0.182, SE=0.012, p<0.001), there is no significant relation between payment for digital news and the type of news source (b=-0.090, SE= 0.122, p=0.461). Thus, H3 is not confirmed. Furthermore, the interaction between interest in news (X) and payment for digital news (W) was not statistically significant (b=-0.053, SE.=0.030, p=0.074), suggesting that the payment (W) does not moderate the effect of interest (X) on type of source (M). Thus, H4 is not confirmed.

In the second regression submodel, the media trust is regressed onto (a) interest in news (X), (b) payment for digital news (W), (c) the interaction term (XW), and (d) the type of source (M). We see that the interest in the news has a significant effect on media trust in presence of the type of news source (b=0.119, SE=0.013, p<0.001), confirming H1. Also, the type of news source has a significant effect on media trust (b=-0.151, SE=0.009, p<0.001), supporting H2. Those who use traditional media as main source are more likely to trust news than those who use alternative media.

The second regression also show that there is no direct relationship between payment and media trust (b=-0.214, SE=0.122, p=0.080). However, the interaction term was significant (b=-0.064, SE.=.0030, p=0.032), indicating that the direct effect of interest (X) on media trust (Y) was moderated by the payment for digital news (W). Thus, H4 was supported.

Finally, H6 suggested that the indirect effect of interest in news (X) in media trust (Y) through the type of media (M) will be moderated by the payment for digital news (W). The test of the index of moderated mediation indicates that the moderated indirect effect was not statistically significant, as the null of 0 falls between the lower and upper bound of the confidence interval] (index =-0.008, SE = 0.005, 95% CI = [-0.017, 0.001], so H& was not supported.

Table 6: Moderated mediation analysis. Pooled countries.

POOLED Direct Relationships	B	T values		
Interest in news → Source	-0.182***	-14.585		
Payment for news → Source	-0.090	-0.738		
Source → Media Trust	-0.150***	-16.075		
Interest in news → Media Trust	0.133***	11.683		
Interest*Payment → Source	0.053	1.789		
Indirect Relationship	**Effect**	**SE**	CI Low | High	T values
Direct effect: Interest → Source → Trust	0.133***	0.011	0.111 | 0.155	12.090
Indirect effect: Index of Moderated Mediation	-0.008	0.005	-0.017 | 0.001	-1.600
R^2	0.039			
N	11510			

*B= Unstandardized Coefficient. $p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

The detailed analysis by country shows identical results (see supplementary table). Figure 2 shows a summary of the results of each of the hypotheses.

Figure 2. Moderated mediation. Process Model 8.
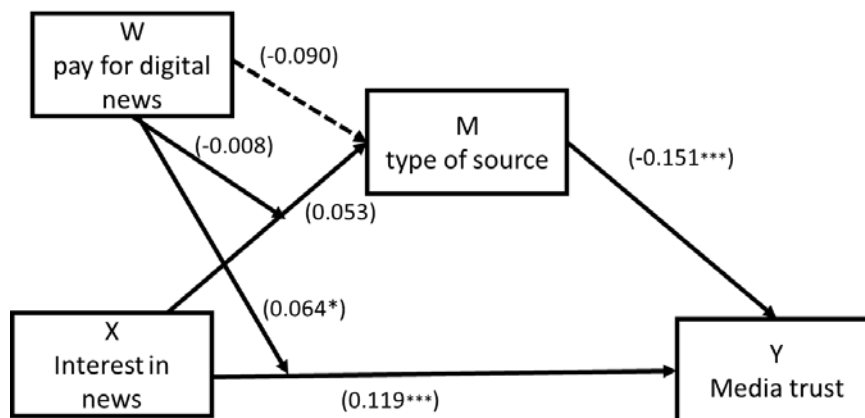
Discussion

The present study examined the mediating effect of the main type of news source used by audiences in the relationship between interest in the news and media trust. Additionally, the moderating roles of the payment for digital news were explored.

First of all, the data confirm that there is a strong relationship between the interest in news and the degree of trust that citizens have in the news. Those who trusted the most showed more interest in news than those who were most *sceptical*, even in those countries where institutional distrust towards the media is very high, such as the US (45.5% of respondents disagree with the idea of trusting most of the news most of the time) or France (40.7%). This finding seems especially relevant because there are hardly any studies that relate the two variables, despite the huge literature around the concept of news interest (from the fields Philosophy and Sociology of knowledge to more recent studies on uses and gratifications in the field of Communication (see Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973; Levy, 1977; van der Wurff, 2011).

More important, the research shows that the relationship between interest in news and media trust is indirectly mediated by the main type of news source chosen by individuals to be informed. This mediation happens in two ways: it reinforces the interest-trust relationship between those who regularly use traditional media; and conversely, it weakens that relationship among those who use alternative sources such as digital -born outlets or social media. Thus, the data complement the findings of previous studies on the relationship between media trust and the use of traditional media, which were still the favourite sources of information for those who most trust the news. Conversely, the more sceptical (taken the term as synonym of distrustful people) were more inclined towards alternative digital sources.

This fact has two implications. On the one hand, the traditional media continue to be the informative referents for those who frequently are interested and trust the news. On the other hand, the traditional media are no longer media references for the most *sceptical*, who preferred digital alternatives outside the legacy brands. In some way, and especially in France and Spain, non traditional sources such as social media, digital-born outlets and blogs have become the *refuge* of those who usually distrust the news. As a consequence, strengthening legacy brands as main news sources of citizenship might help to restore trust in professional journalism. Moreover, professional journalism must win back trust by distinguishing its reporting style from the sensationalised and emotionalised content of online disinformation. Furthermore, when leading news outlets fail simultaneously, social and alternative media, which lack quality control, can replace them as the main information source (Humprecht, 2019).

This study also analyses the moderating effect that paying for digital news could have both on the direct relationship between interest in news and trust, and on the indirect relationship that the type of source exerts between interest and media trust. First, the data shows that paying (or not paying) for digital news has no influence on the relationship between interest in news and media trust. Those who are more interested in the news tend to show more trust in the news, regardless they pay or not for digital news.

Secondly, the fact of paying (or not) for digital news does not directly influence the type of source usually chosen to be informed. A priori, it would expect the existence of a relationship between payment for news and the choice of traditional media (offsite and online), but this does not happen. In other words, the most interested individuals are more likely to use traditional brands, regardless they pay for digital news or not. Consequently, the indirect effect of interest in news in media trust through the type of source is not moderated by the payment for digital news. As seen above, the test of the index of moderated mediation indicates that the moderated indirect effect was not statistically significant.

This fact has serious managerial implications for those media companies that are currently implementing expensive news subscriptions or payments systems. Interest in the news seems to

be a not sufficient condition for people to pay for digital news. Furthermore, the purchase for news is indifferent to individuals when choosing the main source to get news and when trusting media. In other words, is not the paying intention who influences in the media trust but the main media source used by individuals.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the literature on news media trust in several ways. First, we analysed trust in news using a contemporary data set in six countries that are representatives of three different types of media system. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the factors that influence media trust in order to provide some insights for media managers who are struggling on an uncertain tide between fulfilling their public service mission and earning enough revenue to sustain their companies. Following Liu & Lu (2020) and Strömbäck et al., (2020) the current digital context allows more citizens to access information, but trust in information has decreased due to the endemic problems of the journalistic profession and by the abundance of non-professional sources, some informed by partisan interests, others the result of ignorance, which have managed to immerse readers in labyrinths of disinformation.

This study confirms previous findings about the strength of the association between traditional media and media trust, and shows evidence that alternative media have become a refuge for those who express greater distrust in the news. More importantly, this research demonstrates the close relationship between interest in news and media trust, an issue barely explored in previous studies. The most important implication is that the news organisations have a task prior to regaining the trust of their readers: to recover the interest of citizens and fight against the news indifference. From the perspective of achieving a more informed public opinion, the existence of a knowledge gap between news interested and news indifferents worrying in a scenario where trust and attention is declining. Additionally, it is in the interest of traditional news organisations to maintain and increase trust in the news. A citizenry that distrusts the news is a citizenry that does not use legacy media. Strengthening traditional and legacy brands might help to restore trust in professional journalism.

The essential characteristic of news interest is that it responds to the human need of knowing the adequate elements of judgement about the social environment, which help them to decide in the best possible way (Muñoz Torres, 2002). As this interest is not identical towards all the objects that make up reality (if it were, nothing would attract attention), there is a graduation that is influenced by factors that affect the two elements, the object and the subject. Clearly, in the search for certainties that allow people to act, trust in the news is a determining factor. If information helps to reduce people's uncertainty, trust in that which satisfies interest is particularly essential. But note that the first thing is interest and the second, trust. For those who are not interested, trust in information is useless. And conversely, although interest in news is not synonymous with trust in news, this research shows that people who are uninterested in news are much more likely to be untrusting of news compared to the generally trusting group, confirming Toff's data in UK, US, India and Brazil (Toff et al, 2021)

More worrying, in a scenario where trust in news is declining, a new gap is emerging between two groups. Those *interested group*, who trust the news and become increasingly more interested about social issues; and an indifferent *group*, who tend to be more distrustful and more unconcerned about social issues and the news. The number of people that show indifference and avoid the news is on rise (Blekesaune et al, 2012; Strömbäck et al, 2013). The reasons behind the current growth of the group of indifferents/news avoiders remains unclear and require a deeper research (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). For these authors, a lack of trust in the news is one of the causes for intentional news avoidance. Newman and Fletcher's (2017) study also support this statement. Analysing open-ended answers to why people do not trust the news, they find that respondents perceive the media as biased and as pushing for their own political and economic

interests. As a consequence, such news avoiders simply do not know what to believe (Toff & Nielsen 2018).

Limitations

The research is not free of limitations. Firstly, as mentioned, we relied on a single question for measuring news media trust. This variable has been operationalised as a single dimension and has not been recognized for its multidimensional nature. The respondents have to interpret the concept of trust, while they can have different meanings of the term when responding. Although employing a detailed scale of media trust which could include several components or dimensions of trust should be desirable in further research, the different possible nuances that fit into the definition of media trust do not detract from the validity of the generic answer about media trust analysed in previous research (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Ladd, 2012; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Yale et al., 2015). All of them shared the notion that what matters is trust in the news coming from news organisations.

Finally, it should be noted that the sample is based on an online survey, and although the internet penetration is higher in all the selected countries, it does not reach to all the population. Also as with all surveys of media use, reliance on recall means that the data may not always provide a completely accurate picture of people's actual news media use (Prior, 2009). Despite all of these important limitations, a survey is a good realistic option for addressing our hypotheses and research questions. Others passive tracking systems are not able to record how people use social media, and data collected by social media platforms themselves are very rarely made available to outside researchers.

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