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## Social media driven mediatization of youth in BRICS

Zamaswazi P. Cele<sup>1</sup>✉, Marina G. Shilina<sup>2,3</sup>, Ndivhuho Tshikovhi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Durban University of Technology, KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa*

<sup>2</sup>*Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation*

<sup>3</sup>*Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Federation*

✉Zamaswazi.pc@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Over the years, social media has emerged as the largest source for global communication. In post-COVID-19 times and especially in the New Reality, social media consumption patterns have shifted significantly. As these platforms become more open and widespread, they also exacerbate issues related to information and news consumption, mediation and mediatization. This is particularly crucial for young populations in developing nations such as those in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group, who face both high external pressures and internal challenges. Examines the state of social media usage among youth in BRICS countries, focusing on data from 2023 to find the specificity of social media driven mediatization. Research indicates that youth in BRICS nations have been active social media users over the past decade. The authors identify key consumption patterns among Generation Z and millennials in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa in 2023, and conduct a comparative analysis of social media usage in these nations. Provides a brief overview of the mediatized challenges posed by social media in the BRICS nations, particularly the spread of fake news. The study reveals that the increasing reliance on social media for news and information by younger generations underscores the need for identifying specific field of media studies in BRICS countries (Media Studies based on the concept of BRICSology). The conclusion highlights the social media consumption patterns and challenges that need attention in future research.

**Keywords:** mediatization, media studies, generation Z, millennials, media challenge, BRICSology

**Author's contribution.** *Zamaswazi P. Cele* – development of the research idea, research data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing. *Marina G. Shilina* – data analysis, manuscript writing and editing. *Ndivhuho Tshikovhi* – data analysis, manuscript editing.

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## Социальные медиа как фактор медиатизации молодежи в странах БРИКС

З.П. Селе<sup>1</sup>  , М.Г. Шилина<sup>2,3</sup> , Н. Чикови<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Дурбанский технологический университет, Квазулу-Натал, Дурбан, Южно-Африканская Республика

<sup>2</sup>Российский экономический университет имени Г.В. Плеханова, Москва, Российская Федерация

<sup>3</sup>Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова, Москва, Российская Федерация

 Zamaswazi.pc@gmail.com

**Аннотация.** В последнее время социальные сети стали крупнейшим источником глобальной коммуникации. В постковидное время, особенно в так называемой новой реальности, модели потребления информации в социальных сетях существенно изменились. Платформы стали более открытыми и популярными, что приводит к обострению проблем, связанных с обработкой информации, потреблением новостей, коммуникацией и медиатизацией. Понимание этих вопросов особенно значимо для молодежи в развивающихся странах (Бразилии, России, Индии, Китае, Южной Африке), которые сталкиваются с сильным внешним давлением и внутренними вызовами. Рассматривается использование социальных сетей молодежью в странах БРИКС с фокусировкой на данных 2023 года, чтобы выявить актуальную специфику медиатизации. Исследователи констатируют, что молодые люди в странах БРИКС – активные пользователи социальных сетей на протяжении последнего десятилетия. Авторы определяют ключевые модели потребления цифровой информации поколения Z и миллениалов в Бразилии, России, Индии, Китае и Южной Африке в 2023 году, проводят сравнительный анализ использования социальных сетей в этих странах. Представлен также краткий обзор проблем медиатизации в социальных сетях, в частности распространение фейковых новостей. Исследование показывает, что растущая зависимость молодого поколения от социальных сетей в контексте получения информации определяет необходимость выделения особой области медиаисследований в странах БРИКС (на базе концепции БРИКСологии). В заключении выделены модели потребления информации в социальных сетях и проблемы, на которые стоит обратить внимание в будущем.

**Ключевые слова:** медиатизация, медиаисследования, поколение Z, миллениалы, медиавызов, БРИКСология

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## Introduction

Social media has experienced significant growth over the years, with youth, Generation Z and millennial, being a particularly active demographic groups. In 2020s, nearly 95% of millennial use social media, with 86% engaging daily (Rideout, Craig Watkins, 2019). Social media driven far-reaching mediation provokes significant social effects (Hu, 2024), for example in the area family bonds (Tabatabaei et al., 2024). In this era of New Reality, characterised by global transitions and ideological conflicts, young generations who grew up with gamification (Varghese, Deepa, 2023; Conlin, Santana, 2021; Volkova, 2013) face the pressure of rapidly changing information flows in political, economic, cultural and other spheres.

Social media offers timely updates and wide dissemination of information, and one of the primary opportunities and challenges associated with social media is news consumption and lack of control over content (Galindo, Garcia-Marco, 2017). Social media platforms often serve as the first source of global news, making the verification of information crucial, especially in political contexts. Murray points out that millennials are particularly vulnerable to scams and fake news due to their heavy social media usage<sup>1</sup>. Headlines on social media target millennials, who are likely to engage with these stories (Levy, Akiva, 2019).

Since the onset of the New Normal and the spread of COVID-19, the specifics of social media consumption have evolved. Social media has become a crucial platform for sharing updates about the pandemic, personal stories, and initiating conversations that often becomes trending topics worldwide, f. e., on political issues and campaigns (Paul, Das, 2023). Social media has established itself firmly in developed countries, while developing nations are striving to catch up with this technological era. Despite potential challenges, developing countries like South Africa have shown significant growth in social media usage<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays, social media driven mediation transformed into specific mediatization. The increasing openness and global reach of social media have introduced new challenges, particularly for young users. This is particularly crucial for young populations in developing nations such as those in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group, who face both high external political pressures and internal challenges.

BRICS countries as a growing world union bears the responsibility to adapt and thrive their youth in a globally connected world which means in particular higher level of effective and responsible use of social media.

A decade ago, global statistics indicated that millennials in BRICS countries extensively used social media for news consumption (Gangadharbatla et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, C. (2023). Gen Z and Millennials More Likely to Fall For Fake News Than Older People, Test Finds. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/06/28/gen-z-and-millennials-more-likely-to-fall-for-fake-news-than-older-people-test-finds/?sh=33ba21a35885>

<sup>2</sup> Cowling, N. (2023). Main sources of news in South Africa in 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1318943/main-sources-of-news-in-south-africa/>

2014). This research aims to explore the specificities of social media usage among young people (individuals aged 16–24, so called Generation Z and the 25–34 age group, which primarily includes millennials) in the BRICS nations, focusing on information and news consumption data from 2023.

The aim of the study is to describe social media usage specifics of Generation Z and millennials in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa in 2023, identifying their social media consumption patterns and media driven challenges.

### Methodology of the research

First, the identification of the main features of social media consumption patterns by Generation Z and millennials in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa in 2023 is providing through the secondary open data analysis. The second step is to conduct a comparative analysis of social media usage specifics in these BRICS nations. Finally, we identifying the challenges associated with social media, directing attention to areas that require future research.

### Results and discussion

**Brasil.** Bianchi (2023) explains that Brazil has experienced significant growth in social media usage from 2019 to 2023, with a consistent increase in engagement, particularly among Generation Z and millennials (Gen Y)<sup>3</sup>.

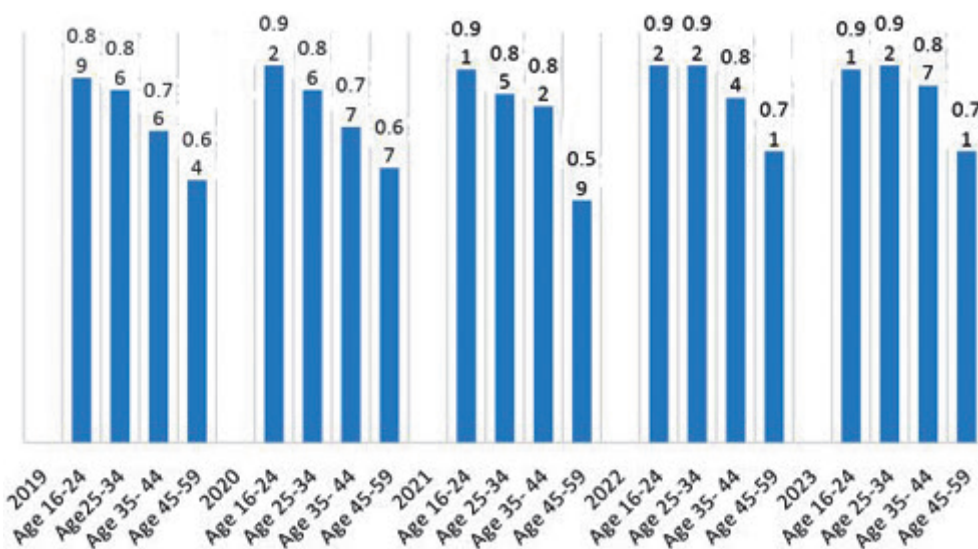


Figure 1. Age group of consuming social media in the five years

Source: compiled based on Bianchi, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Bianchi, T. (2023). Penetration rate of social media use among internet users in Brazil from 2017 to 2023, by age. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1083577/brazil-social-media-usage-rate-age/>

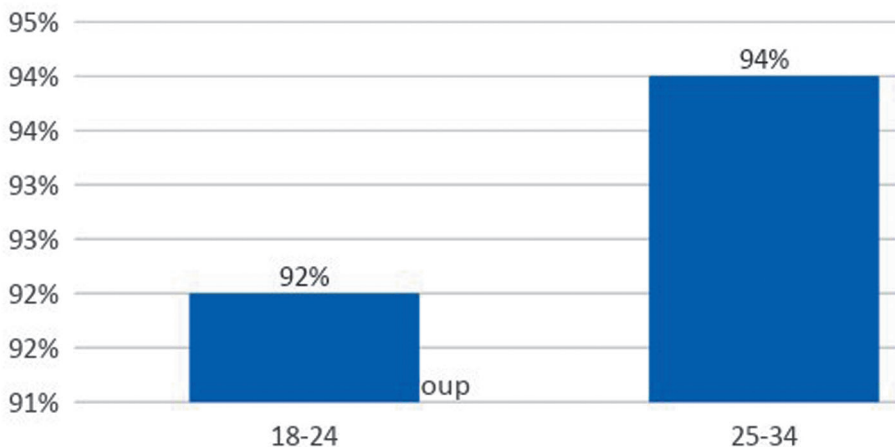
Figure 1 highlights this trend, showing that in 2019, 89% of individuals aged 16–24 used social media, a figure that rose to 91% in 2023. This 2% increase indicates a growing engagement among Generation Z. Similarly, the 25–34 age group, which primarily includes millennials, saw a rise from 86 in 2019 to 92% in 2023, marking a 6% increase.

These statistics confirm that social media usage in Brazil is on a steady incline, especially among younger generations. The rise in social media and internet usage has also transformed how news is disseminated. News is no longer confined to traditional media; it has migrated to social media platforms to ensure that the youth remain informed about global events.

Moreover, social media usage is not limited to younger age groups. Individuals aged 45–59 have also shown a growing interest in social media, with usage rates increasing from 64% in 2019 to 71% in 2023, a 7% rise.

Thus, this data underscores the broader trend of increasing social media adoption across various age groups in Brazil, with a particularly notable uptake among Generation Z and millennials. This shift highlights the growing importance of social media as a primary source of information for Brazilians.

**Russia.** In 2023, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM)<sup>4</sup> conducted a survey to gauge public opinion on social media usage and to understand the demographics and motivations behind internet consumption.



**Figure 2.** Age group consumes social media platforms

Source: compiled based on VCIOM, 2023.

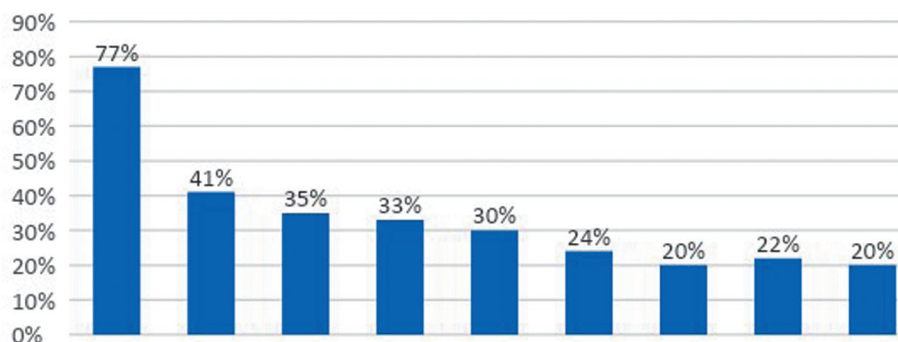
The results revealed that 80% of Russians use social media platforms almost daily. Figure 2 shows that this usage is predominantly among millennials, with 94% of individuals aged 25–34 using social media, closely followed by the

<sup>4</sup>VCIOM (2023). Social Networks and Messengers: Involvement and Preferences: Most of the Russians use social media platforms and messengers on a daily basis. Every second Russian signs up with a new platform only as a last resort. Retrieved from <https://wciom.com/press-release/social-networks-and-messengers-involvement-and-preferences#:~:text=Eighty%2Dsix%20percent%20of%20the,34%2Dyear%2Dolds>



younger generation (aged 16–24) at 92%. This indicates that millennials are the most active social media users in Russia.

The survey also explored the types of content consumed on social media. It was found that Russians engage with various platforms for different purposes. Figure 3 highlights that news is the most consumed content, with 77% of respondents indicating they use social media to stay informed (chart column 1 – News, 2 – Education, 3 – Humor, 4 – Entertainment, 5 – Science, 6 – Travelling, 7 – Nature & pets, 8 – Psychology, 8 – Medicine).



**Figure 3.** Content consumed by Russians mostly

Source: compiled based on VCIOM, 2023.

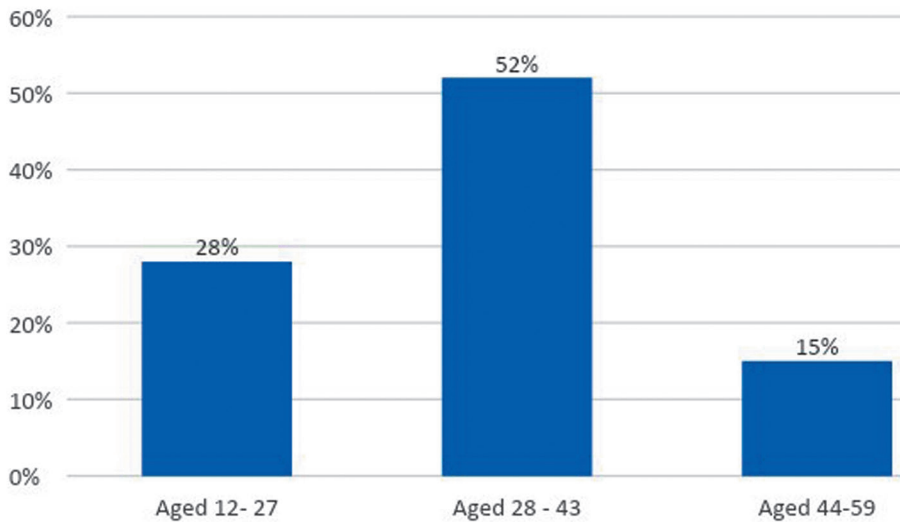
In Russia, the changes in global and local social media landscape after 2022 provokes even more challenges addressing the spread of fake news on social media, as a significant portion of Russian youth relies on these platforms for their news. Given the high engagement levels, especially among millennials, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information on social media is crucial for informed public discourse.

**India.** India, with its substantial population, ranks among the leading countries in internet access and social media adoption (Mude, Undale, 2023). In 2019, the number of social media users in India was recorded at 330 million, with projections suggesting this figure could rise to 448 million by 2030.

Figure 4 highlights that millennials are the primary social media users in India. Specifically, 52% of individuals aged 28–43 spend the most time on social media, followed by the 12–27 age group at 28%, and the 44–59 age group at 15%.

Rajput (2014) notes that the Indian government has actively supported digital initiatives, which have significantly contributed to the growth of social media usage among millennials. These initiatives aim to educate citizens and facilitate their adaptation to the digital landscape, including social media platforms.

This governmental support has been instrumental in fostering digital literacy and engagement, particularly among younger generations. The increasing social media usage among millennials reflects this successful integration into the digital space, underscoring the transformative impact of these initiatives on India’s social media landscape.



**Figure 4.** Social media users in India

Source: compiled based on Mude, Undale, 2023.

**China.** According to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)<sup>5</sup>, social media consumption is highest among individuals aged 30 to 40, who account for 20% of users. Figure 5 reveals that they are followed by those aged 40–49 and 50–59, each comprising 17% of users. This data illustrates that social media usage is widespread across various age groups in China, with those aged 20–29 (and 60 and above) each representing 14% of users.

The Chinese government places significant emphasis on regulating social media, particularly concerning political content and public postings. Since December 2012, regulations require individuals to provide personal details to online service providers to use the internet and social media platforms. These measures are part of the government’s broader strategy to monitor and control online discourse, ensuring that social media remains a regulated space, particularly regarding politically sensitive content.

This regulatory environment underscores the unique dynamics of social media usage in China, where digital platforms serve as both a venue for public expression and a closely monitored space by the authorities.

In fact, despite the presence of such modern social media platforms as Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform with more than 500 million users, the use of social media in China is not so widespread among younger generations.

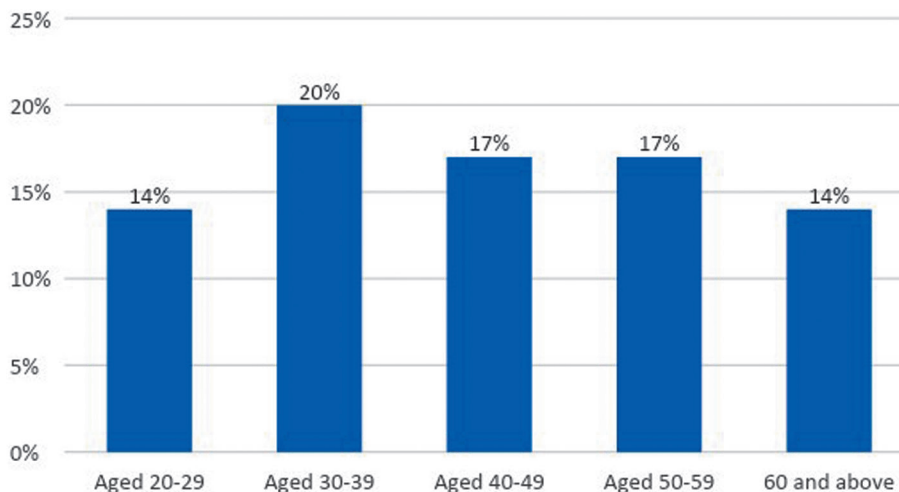
**South Africa.** In 2023, the population of South Africa was recorded at 60.14 million, with 43.48 million internet users (McInnes, 2023)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> CNNIC. (2023). The 51st Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development. Retrieved from <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202307/P020230707514088128694.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> McInnes, K. (2023). South African Social Media Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-south-africa>

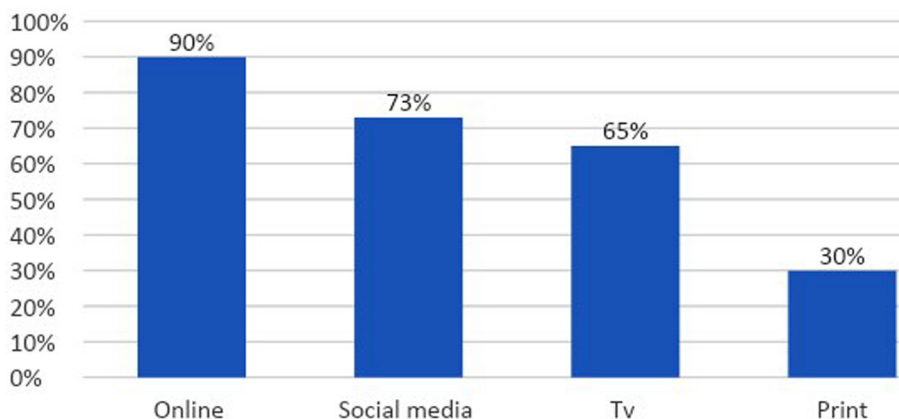
Figure 6 explains that in South Africa, 90% of the population prefers to get their news online, followed by 73% who use social media, 65% who watch TV, and 30% who still use print media. This shift indicates a clear transition from traditional media to digital platforms for information and news consumption.

McInnes highlights the growth of social media usage in South Africa over the years. 25.8 million of 43.48 million internet users are active social media users. The primary reason for using social media is to find information, suggesting there is still room for further growth in social media adoption in South Africa.



**Figure 5.** Age group of social media users in China

Source: compiled based on CNNIC, 2023.

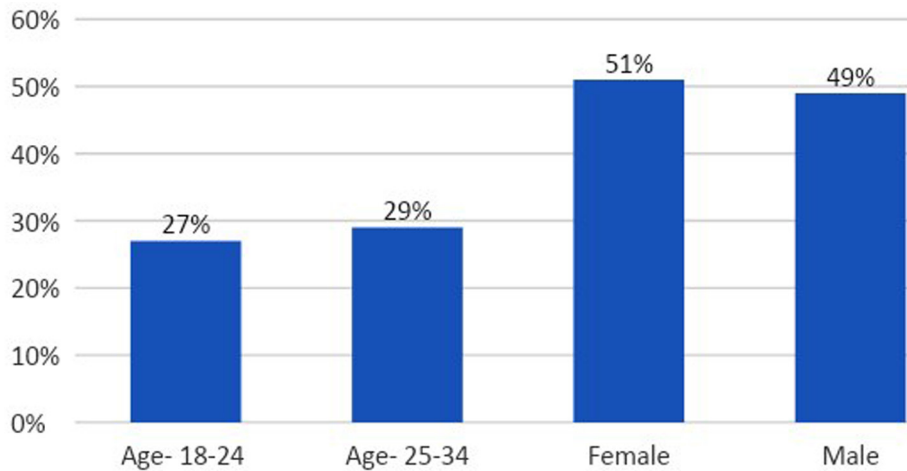


**Figure 6.** Main News stream in South Africa

Source: compiled based on Cowling, 2023.

Figure 7 shows the predominant users of social media by age group. Millennials (aged 25–34) are the largest group at 29%, followed by the 18–24 age group at 27%. Thus, more than a half of social media users (56%) are young people.





**Figure 7.** Social media consumption in South Africa

Source: compiled based on McInnes, 2023.

Additionally, the data reveals that there are more females (51%) than males (49%) among social media consumers. These figures indicate that females aged 18–34 are the active social media users in South Africa. This trend highlights significant opportunities for targeting this demographic group in digital strategies and initiatives aimed at development and engagement.

In total, youth in South Africa is not the main group of social media consumers with less the one third part of users.

The provided analysis of the 2023 statistics on the predominant young users of social media from BRICS countries shows that youth continue to consume a significant amount of social media, consistent with patterns observed a decade earlier by Gangadharbatla, Bright, and Logan (2014). The age group from 25 to 43 years is the most active on social media across these nations. Specifically, the age group 25–34 recorded the highest usage rates: 92% in Brazil, 94% in Russia, 52% in India (age group 28–39), 20% in China (age group 30–39), and 29% in South Africa.

So digital natives from Generation Z are paradoxically less “mediated” by social media than millennials (Gen Y). Many millennials primarily use social media for personal expression and social validation, often lacking awareness of global events. The pressure to post frequently and achieve social media popularity can overshadow their engagement with meaningful content. Generation Z with its less presence on social media is actually consumes less information and news, which means that it is susceptible to the influence of misinformation, disinformation and fake news.

It means that millennials are more exposed to potentially misleading information, as they are likely to encounter and follow up on attention-grabbing headlines (Levy, Akiva, 2019). The allure of sensational headlines often leads to the spread and belief in fake news, which is a significant concern.

Despite the prevalence of fake news, people will not stop using social media. Even more, users frequently share news articles without verifying their accuracy, sometimes causing harm (Moravec et al., 2018). According to these researchers, 23% of social media users have admitted to sharing fake news either mistakenly or intentionally, and around 60% have encountered fake news despite that it left them confused. That is millennials are more likely to be at risk while consuming information and news on social networks.

The research demonstrates that social media usage is on a steady incline, especially among younger generations such as Generation Z and millennials from BRICS nations in 2023.

The increasing consumption of social media, particularly for obtaining information and news by youth definitely depends on state support. As it was found different state approaches give different results. In India, the initiatives of the government to support digital initiatives and citizens education and facilitate their adaptation to the digital landscape, including social media platforms, reflect their successful integration into the digital space. In China, despite the presence of several national wide-spread social media platforms, the usage of social media by younger generations is only up to 20%. In South Africa, more than a half of social media users are young people. In Brazil and Russia, the highest rates of social media consumption reflect in particular the state attention to internet development.

## Conclusion

The rising amounts of young users in social media highlights the focuses of ongoing research and challenges for practice. The main reasons to use social media for youth, especially for digital natives, are socialization, self-actualization, satisfaction of psychological needs, and media activity in the social and political context. The specific of media consumption faces the problem of gender differences (like in the South Africa), gender identity and even a sort of specific social media addiction.

The rise of social media and internet usage also means the rise of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017), news and fake news (Zhang, Ghorbani, 2020) and underscores the necessity of identifying their features that can help young users recognize and avoid it (Zhou et al., 2020).

In developing countries, like BRICS nations, fake news presents a major challenge in the social media landscape, especially concerning politics, where informed decision-making is crucial for the health of democracy. South Africa is facing significant fallout from disinformation, particularly as the 2024 elections approach, with the potential for digital disinformation to change the narrative and mislead the public.

The widespread failure to verify information sources on social media erodes public trust and underscores the need for vigilance.

The increasing consumption of social media, particularly for obtaining information and news by younger generations needs specific support in theory and practice both.

From the theoretical point of view, BRICS group as a developing countries union demonstrates national specifics of social media usage by younger generations which has to be identified into common research paradigm relevant for all BRICS countries, like BRICSology media studies paradigm. It opens up more specific framework of the reasearch like Afrikology in Afican Studies or Sovietology in Soviet/Russian Studies.

Enhancing digital literacy and critical thinking skills among young users is essential to mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation and to promote a more informed and engaged citizenry.

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#### **Bio notes:**

*Zamaswazi P. Cele*, PhD student, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, 41/43 Sultan Rd., Greyville, Durban, 4001, South Africa. ORCID: 0009-0004-6344-5709. E-mail: zamaswazi.pc@gmail.com

*Marina G. Shilina*, Grand PhD in Philology, Professor, Professor of the Department of Advertising, Public Relations and Design, Plekhsnov Russian University of Economics, 36 Stremyanny Per., Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation; Professor of the Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University, 9 Mokhovaya St, bldg 1, Moscow, 125009, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X. E-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

*Ndivhuho Tshikovhi*, PhD in Social and Political Sciences, Researcher Fellow, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, 41/43 Sultan Rd., Greyville, Durban, 4001, South Africa. ORCID: 0000-0002-3647-9223. E-mail: NdivhuhoT@dut.ac.za

#### **Сведения об авторах:**

*Селе Замасвази Притти*, аспирантка факультета управленческих наук, Дурбанский технологический университет, Южная Африка, Дурбан, 4001, Грейвилл, Султан Роуд, д. 41/43. ORCID: 0009-0004-6344-5709. E-mail: zamaswazi.pc@gmail.com

*Шилина Марина Григорьевна*, доктор филологических наук, профессор кафедры рекламы, связей с общественностью и дизайна, Российский экономический университет имени Г.В. Плеханова, Российская Федерация, 117997, Москва, Стремянный пер., д. 36; профессор кафедры рекламы и связей с общественностью, факультет журналистики, Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова, Российская Федерация, 125009, Москва, ул. Моховая, д. 9, стр. 1. ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X. E-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

*Чиковхи Ндивухо*, доктор социальных и политических наук, научный сотрудник факультета управленческих наук, Дурбанский технологический университет, Южная Африка, Дурбан, 4001, Грейвилл, Султан Роуд, д. 41/43. ORCID: 0000-0002-3647-9223. E-mail: NdivhuhoT@dut.ac.za