

# Bias in Personalized Social Media Content: Impact on Romanian Generation Z Decision Making

Monica Wolff <sup>1</sup> and Cella-Flavia Buciuman <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Management, Politehnica University of Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania

<sup>2</sup>Department of Management, Politehnica University of Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania

[monica.wolff@upt.ro](mailto:monica.wolff@upt.ro)

[cella.buciuman@upt.ro](mailto:cella.buciuman@upt.ro)

**Abstract:** In an era dominated by personalized digital experiences, social media platforms play an increasingly influential role in shaping young adults' perceptions and decisions. With the use of algorithms that personalize social media feeds for individual users, concerns have arisen regarding the extent to which such personalization reinforces preexisting biases and influences user behavior, with a focus on how it influences biased decisions in a variety of contexts, including political opinions, lifestyle choices, and shopping habits. This study investigates the impact of personalized social media content on the decision-making of Romanian Generation Z users. The research analyzes how personalized feeds shape perceptions, preferences, and decisions by examining algorithmic bias in content curation and exposure to diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, the study examines digital literacy and critical thinking by exploring how aware Generation Z is of algorithmic personalization and its potential biases, providing information on its ability to engage with digital content critically. In this context, it is important to mention that throughout the article, we provide users' perspectives on how they perceive, feel, and think about the influence that the media has on their daily lives. Given the lack of research on the willingness of Generation Z to share information on social networks, we also addressed this issue. The data for this research were collected using a questionnaire conducted on a sample of Romanian university undergraduate students, all part of Generation Z. Based on the collected data, we present the results regarding the awareness of the participants about personalized content, their perceptions of bias, and the influence this has on their decision-making. The findings contribute to understanding the implications of algorithmic personalization for young adults in the Romanian context, highlighting the importance of critical social media literacy and promoting informed decision-making in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Personalized Social Media Content, Algorithmic Bias, User Decision-making, Social Identity.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networks are an essential component of daily life in the digital age, especially for Generation Z, also known as "digital natives" (Chang and Chang, 2023; Katz et al., 2022). Social networks have given this generation, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, unprecedented access to information and connectivity through social networks. However, the individualized way the content is delivered on these platforms raised concerns about bias and how it impacts decision-making processes (Fitri and Hariyanto, 2024). Recent studies have shown that Gen Z individuals spend a significant amount of time on social networks (Jayatissa, 2023; McKee et al., 2023; Rózsa et al., 2024; Van Ouytsel, 2021), with research indicating that they dedicate an average of 2 hours and 22 minutes daily to these platforms (Vițelar, 2019). This substantially impacts how people obtain information, develop opinions, and make decisions, relying on social networks to stay informed and consider it their main source of news and information. However, Rózsa et al. (2024) consider that an in-depth analysis of how Generation Z uses social media privacy is still incomplete. Current research mainly examines the effects of social networks on the social and psychological characteristics of Generation Z and aims to understand the impact of social networks on interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging to a social group, and the ability to establish and maintain friendships (Penttinen et al., 2022; Bartsch and Kloss, 2019; Boyd, 2014). As mentioned in (Rózsa et al., 2024) previous studies on Generation Z show a greater willingness to share personal data to obtain various benefits and to overcome the anxiety resulting from the fear of missing out (FOMO) on the gratifying experiences others are having (Lyngdoh, 2023), and leading them into risky and inappropriate social behavior.

Research refers to the algorithms that social networks use to personalize the content provided as echo chambers or filter bubbles, where users are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their values and beliefs (Kitchens et al., 2020; Modreanu and Andrisan, 2022). Furthermore, Kitchens et al. (2020), claim that social media platforms are increasingly criticized for promoting environments that limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially driving users toward more extreme ideological positions. A study by Bakshy et al. (2015) on 10.1 million US Facebook users found that more than 80% of friendships on the social media platform shared the same political affiliation, highlighting a lack of ideological diversity in the information Facebook users encounter through their social connections. The study by Kitchens et al. (2020) finds important variations in the various ways social media platforms deliver content to users, with Facebook being the most comprehensive

representation of features that could influence users' decisions about how to consume information. It also supports the idea that platforms are unlikely to unilaterally provide outside researchers with adequate data on the implementation and effects of algorithmic filtering procedures.

In Romania, the interaction Generation Z has with social networks follows global trends, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being particularly popular among this demographic (Statista, 2024) with a promising future supported by entertaining and educational content and the new service, TikTok for Business. However, the specific impact of personalized content and potential biases on Romanian Generation Z decision-making processes remains understudied. This research aims to address this gap by examining the extent to which biased social media content influences the decision-making of Romanian Generation Z individuals. The study uses a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire administered to Generation Z students in Romania. By investigating social media usage patterns, perception of personalized content, and self-reported decision making processes, this research aims to provide information on the relationship between biased social media content and Generation Z decision making behaviors.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for several reasons. First, it can inform digital literacy initiatives aimed at helping young people navigate the complex information landscape of social networks. Second, it can provide valuable information for policymakers and platform developers to address issues of algorithmic bias and information diversity. Finally, it contributes to the broader academic discourse on the social impacts of personalized digital media in an increasingly connected world.

## 2. Review of the Literature and Development of the Research Hypothesis

### 2.1 Generation Z

Generation Z, as the first generation of tech-savvy, is extremely online, learning, shopping, working, dating, and making friends online. They switch between social media feeds, applications, and websites, each contributing to their online ecosystem differently. Generation Zers, who grew up with social networks, design their online personas more carefully than previous generations. Despite their commitment to online media consumption, they are more inclined to adopt trends of anonymity, more personalized feeds, and a smaller online presence (McKinsey, 2024). Currently accounting for more than 30% of the global population, Gen Z is predicted to constitute up to 27% of the workforce by 2025. 98% of Gen Zers own a smartphone, representing almost one third of today's social media influencers. Generation Z will be history's largest, wealthiest, and highest-spending generational cohort and will likely be the only generation ever to reach 2 billion people. Additionally, it is likely the most globally influential generational cohort in history that has a direct impact on how other generations consume (World Data Lab, 2024). In the research conducted by McKinsey (2022) in all generational cohorts on the topic of social media use, respondents indicated more positive than negative effects, despite Gen Z reporting more negative effects. Compared to respondents from lower-middle-income countries, those from high-income countries (as defined by the World Bank) were twice as likely to report that social networks harmed their lives (13 % vs. 7 %). Female Gen Zers were more likely than their male counterparts to believe that social media negatively affected their body image (32% vs. 16%), self-confidence (24% vs. 13 %), and FOMO (32% vs. 22%). Algorithms used by social media networks impact how this generation builds up an understanding of the world around them, but users' awareness and experiences with algorithmic news selection are poorly understood (Swart, 2021). Therefore, this article seeks to understand how these algorithms limit exposure to different perspectives by favoring and recommending content that supports users' preexisting opinions and preferences. By doing this, it intends to clarify the possible implications for users' critical thinking, social dynamics, and ideological polarization, with an emphasis on how this phenomenon specifically impacts Generation Z as a demographic that is heavily reliant on technology.

### 2.2 Social Media Influence

Social media influence can be addressed by shaping user behaviors with the support of certain platform algorithms that can foster information-limiting environments (Kitchens et al., 2020). Therefore, this can significantly influence selection bias by prioritizing content that aligns with users' past behaviors, preferences, and beliefs. Key biases in social media content that can influence Generation Z's choices are:

**Tailored Recommendations:** refer to algorithms that examine user data, including likes, shares, or browsing history, to select content, prioritizing information aligned with users' engagement. This limits engagement with varied or opposing perspectives, increasing selection bias.

**Optimization Emphasizes User Engagement:** social media platforms are designed to boost interactions and often highlight sensational or emotionally charged content. Such content typically aligns with users' existing beliefs, restricting the variety of information they interact with.

**Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles:** in these strategies, individuals interact primarily with those who share similar views in self-reinforcing echo chambers created by uniform content. This strategy amplifies selection biases by restricting access to different perspectives or factual information.

**The Privacy-Personalization Paradox:** while Gen Z values personalized experiences, there is a tension between personalization and privacy concerns. This paradox can influence how Gen Z interacts with and perceives personalized content (McKee et al., 2023; McKinsey, 2024).

**Short-form Content Bias:** especially on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The preference for short-form visual content can lead to oversimplification of complex issues and potential misinformation.

**Confirmation Bias:** occurs because personalized content tends to confirm users' existing beliefs and preferences, making it less likely for Gen Z to encounter challenging or diverse perspectives (Vițelar, 2019).

**Selective Information Avoidance:** Generation Z users may actively avoid content that challenges their views or is difficult to understand, further reinforcing existing biases.

Accordingly, we propose the first research question:

RQ1: To what extent does exposure to biased content shared by social networks (e.g., friends, family, influencers) on social media platforms influence users' opinions and behaviors?

### 2.3 Social Media Algorithms

According to Swart (2021) two important factors that determine which information sources a person is exposed to on social media are algorithmic filtering and social network homophily. Social media algorithms work as guides, searching through large amounts of information to curate personalized experiences for each user. One of the key aspects of social networking algorithms is their ability to analyze user behavior and preferences. It is essential to understand these algorithmic mechanics for companies and any other content producers looking to increase their reach and engagement. All these things can be achieved with the advances of AI technology, which is capable of processing large amounts of data in real-time and predicting user preferences and interests with surprising accuracy by recognizing patterns and correlations within these data (Poleac, 2024).

Social media networks use several types of algorithms as presented in the next paragraph.

Facebook employs various metrics, such as user activity, engagement, and demographics, to tailor content. Taking into account factors such as time, type of content, and levels of engagement, it evaluates posts based on anticipated user interest. Furthermore, the algorithm segments individuals into interest groups, significantly affecting the volume of news that users encounter (Thorson et al., 2019). X's (previously Twitter) emphasizes content that acquires greater engagement, establishing a feedback loop that enhances the visibility of trending posts. To assemble content on the Explore page, the platform's recommendation algorithm considers user actions and preferences as well (Garz et al., 2023). The Instagram algorithm places significant emphasis on engagement metrics, including likes, comments, and shares, frequently at the cost of content quality or user preferences. Research conducted by Gross et al. (2024) indicates that Instagram's algorithm consistently limits specific content types, especially those concerning social and political matters, which conflicts with the platform's professed dedication to free expression. The study argues that Instagram's algorithm utilizes psychological strategies to boost user engagement and duration on the platform, highlighting ethical issues regarding user manipulation. TikTok's algorithm is among the most sophisticated systems and the most captivating when compared to other social media algorithms. The flow experience, which includes enjoyment, focus, and altered perception of time, significantly influences both directly and indirectly the behavior associated with TikTok addiction. The study by Yao et al. (2022) emphasizes the interconnectedness of TikTok addiction and algorithm enhancement, indicating that users find themselves in an "entertainment loop."

Based on these premises, through this research we also aim to answer the following questions:

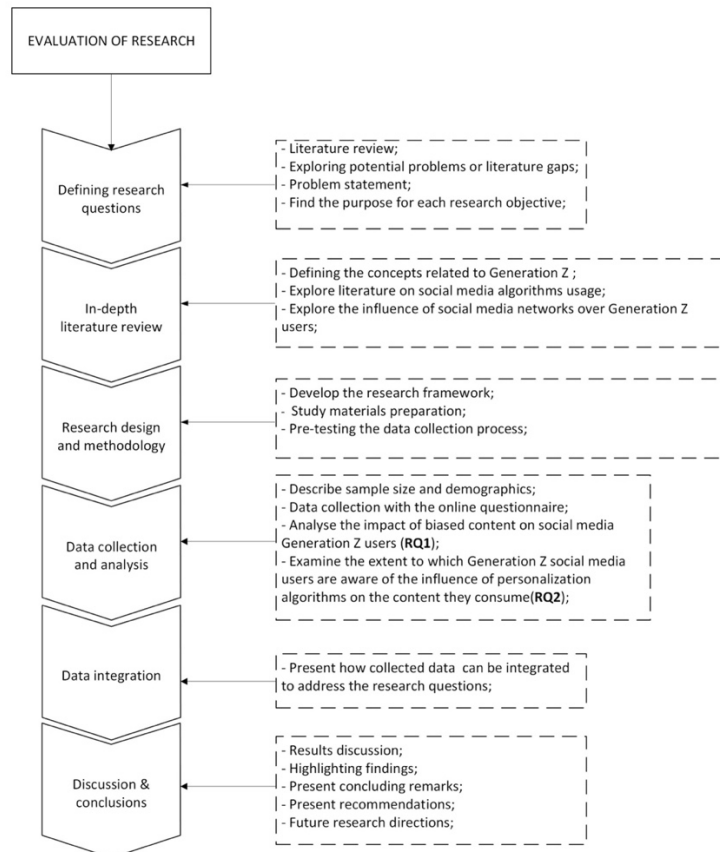
RQ2: To what extent are Generation Z users aware of the biases and influences of personalization algorithms on the content consumed?

### 3. Methodology

The methodology outlines the systematic approach adopted to explore the impact of biased personalized social media content on Generation Z in Romania. Romania boasts one of the fastest Internet connections in Europe, facilitating constant access to social media platforms. Romania's unique context, situated at the intersection of traditional and modern EU influences, promises to offer a more nuanced understanding of how young Romanians engage with personalized content. Analysis of these cultural particularities can provide valuable insights into how local values influence digital behavior. Romania can be considered a representative case for other countries in Central and Eastern Europe that share similar social, economic, and cultural characteristics. Thus, the study contributes not only to understanding the national context but also to providing a broader perspective on the global impact of algorithmic personalization on Generation Z.

The research framework involves going through a sequence of steps, starting with defining the research questions and exploring the existing literature on social media algorithms and their influence on users, particularly Generation Z. The research design incorporates the preparation of study materials and the pre-test of the data collection process to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, as shown in Figure 1.

Data collection was carried out in November 2024. Initially, subjects were selected as representatives of Generation Z (regardless of age). Subsequent analysis indicated that the vast majority of respondents were over 18 and, therefore, considered primary decision makers in their own lives. The research instrument was a questionnaire designed in Office Forms and distributed online to 250 respondents. However, only 189 respondents provided answers.



**Figure 1: Research Methodology**

The sample was selected to represent Generation Z (over 18 years), with the majority of respondents (78%) falling within the 18-21 age group and the remaining 22% within the 22-27 age group. The gender distribution of the respondents was 60% male, 39% female, and 1% other or undeclared. The majority of the respondents (80%) were undergraduate students, 6% were master's students, 3% were college graduates, and only 2% were high school graduates. The 18-27 age group is going through a transition phase during which people develop their sense of identity, pursue education, make decisions about their careers, and form social connections. These

processes are influenced by the personalized content to which they are exposed. They also extensively utilize social networks, ranking among the most active segments on these platforms and frequently engaging in algorithmic content. This demographic's extensive use of social media facilitates the study's objective of assessing the impact of algorithms on individuals.

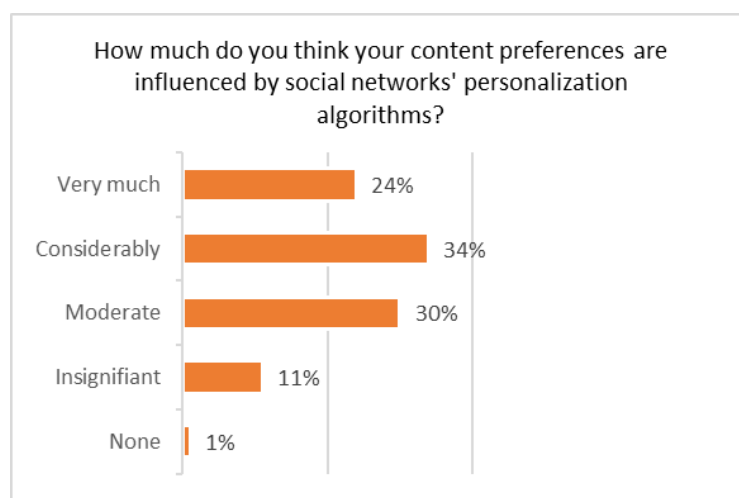
The collected data were analyzed to address the main research questions: the impact of biased content on social networks (RQ1) and the awareness of personalization algorithms among Generation Z users (RQ2).

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The analysis of the conducted study will start with the observation that almost 40% of the respondents, representatives of Generation Z, choose to spend between 2-4 hours daily on social media platforms, and another important part, 23%, spend double time (4-6 hours) on the same social networks. This time span suggests that for a large part of Generation Z, social networks are no longer just a tool for entertainment or connection, but an integral part of their daily routine. The results indicate that the introduction of critical thinking-oriented digital literacy among Generation Z is vital. This would help them recognize and manage algorithmic influences and their impact on their behavior.

The social media platforms most frequently used by respondents in order of preference are Instagram (87%), YouTube (80%), TikTok (56%) and Facebook (40%), according to the survey. Not far from these results is the ranking presented in the latest report presented by Opeepl (2024), where YouTube remains the most popular platform. In both the present research and Opeepl (2024), YouTube and Instagram dominate as the top platforms, with usage rates of approximately 80% and 76-87%. This consistency suggests that the Romanian Generation Z aligns with global trends regarding platform preferences. However, this study highlights that the usage of TikTok in Romania (56%) is less than the 68% reported worldwide by Opeepl, indicating possible regional differences in platform popularity, which could stem from cultural or accessibility factors.

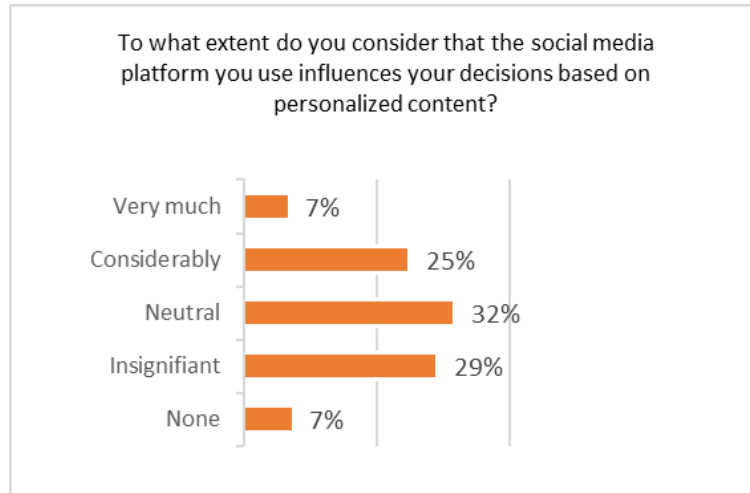
The section further presents an in-depth analysis of the survey results. It examines how Generation Z in Romania perceives biases in personalized social media content and how these biases impact their decision-making processes. When answering questions about algorithmic personalization, the perception of personalized content, and information-seeking behaviors, certain patterns and relationships in the data can be revealed. The study results indicate how subjects, representatives of Generation Z, perceive the influence of algorithms on their content preferences, evaluate the importance of personalized recommendations, and navigate the possible risks of algorithm-based information ecosystems. The results provided a significant perspective on the equilibrium between algorithmic functioning and user freedom of choice, emphasizing the importance of awareness, autonomy, and diversity in information access. Figure 2 presents the study findings on the impact of personalized algorithms on user preferences.



**Figure 2: The influence of personalized social media algorithms on content preferences.**

Nearly 60% of the respondents are convinced that social network algorithms have a "considerable influence" or "very great influence" on their content preferences. This result indicates significant validation of the role these algorithms play in shaping user interaction. Those who fall into the "moderate influence" category also show

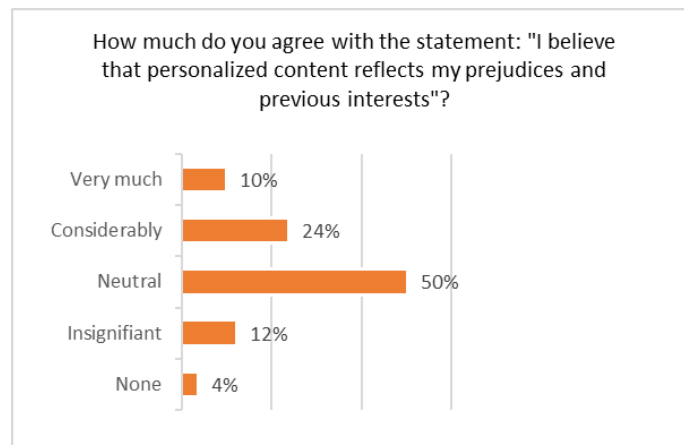
significant engagement, these are about 30% of respondents. So, while some users do not feel overwhelmingly affected, they still recognize the presence of algorithms in their content consumption. Only 11% of the respondents mentioned that they feel minimally influenced by these algorithms, and only one respondent said that she is not influenced at all. This indicates that very few users are interested in the effects of personalization on social networks. Figure 3 illustrates the findings of the survey investigating the influence of social networks on decision-making processes.



**Figure 3: The Influence of Personalized Content on Social Media in User Decision-making**

Only a small proportion of the respondents (7%) mentioned that social networks do not influence their decisions. This suggests the existence of a segment of users who may be less engaged in personalized content or who rely on other sources for decision-making. Almost a third of the participants (29%) perceive a minor impact from social networks. This shows that while they recognize some level of impact, it does not significantly alter their choices. At the same time, a high percentage of respondents (32%) have a neutral attitude, which could translate into an ambiguous position or a balanced view on the influence of social networks. They recognize the potential for influence but are not very convinced of its effect. In contrast, almost a third of the respondents (25%) reported that social networks have a considerable or very significant impact on their decisions. This group is very likely to actively interact with personalized content and understand its role in shaping preferences. Furthermore, only a small number of respondents (7%) believe that social networks have considerable influence on their decisions. This highlights that only a small number of users perceive a significant impact of social networks.

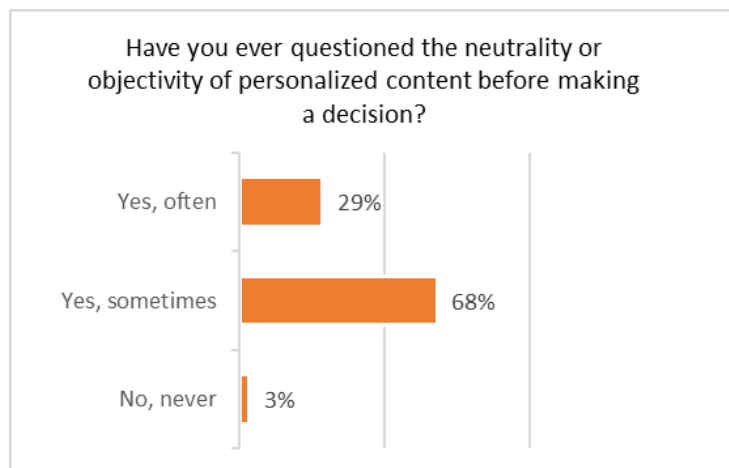
In conclusion, the majority (61%) of the respondents believe that social networks have a negligible or neutral impact on their decision-making process. This may indicate a growing skepticism about the authenticity and reliability of personalized content. On the contrary, the 32% who consider the influence to be considerable or very considerable highlight a substantial group that is actively involved and has confidence in the information presented through social networks. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that social networks can serve as a powerful tool for consumer decision-making, particularly among younger populations.



**Figure 4: Perception of Personalized Content as a Manifestation of Personal Prejudices and Previous Interests.**

Figure 4 shows the perceptions of the respondents about personalized content. A significant proportion of respondents (50%) selected the neutral option. This suggests a degree of uncertainty or an ambiguous stance on the impact of personalized content on reflecting pre-existing biases and interests. This could suggest that users are not aware of the mechanisms behind personalization or have not formed a conclusive opinion about its potential to reinforce existing views. The combined response of "To a great extent" (24%) and "Very much" (10%) indicates that about a third of respondents agree that personalized content reflects their preconceptions and interests. This indicates a significant awareness among a category of subjects, representatives of Generation Z, of the potential for personalization found in social networks that can easily create echo chambers or reinforce existing biases. However, a smaller share (16%) disagreed with the presented statement, so they responded with "no" (4%) and "insignificant" (12%). This means that a small percentage of respondents believe that personalized content does not significantly reflect their pre-existing views. By analyzing the responses to this question of exploring the neutrality or objectivity of personalized content, we can provide insights into attitudes toward personalized media and decision-making processes.

In Figure 5, a very small proportion of respondents (3%) mentioned that they never questioned the neutrality or objectivity of personalized content. This may suggest that there is a high level of trust in the algorithmic systems responsible for curating this content. These individuals perceive algorithms as normally reliable and objective. At the same time, this response can also be translated as confidence in their ability to independently assess the credibility and accuracy of the information presented without critical judgment at all.



**Figure 5: Assessing the Impact of the Neutrality of Personalized Content in Decision Making**

Most of the respondents (68%) responded that they sometimes question the neutrality or objectivity of personalized content. This response indicates a slightly skeptical attitude and possible critical analysis of algorithmically processed information. These individuals are aware of potential biases or external influences on algorithmic results, and this may cause them to periodically evaluate the validity and impartiality of the content they consume. This category of Generation Z respondents probably values algorithmic transparency and is likely to seek additional sources of verification to validate information before making decisions. Another category of respondents (29%) reported that they often question the neutrality or objectivity of personalized content, indicating a greater awareness of the potential biases inherent in algorithmic personalization. This group may have a deeper understanding of phenomena such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, and the spread of misinformation, leading them to critically analyze the information presented.

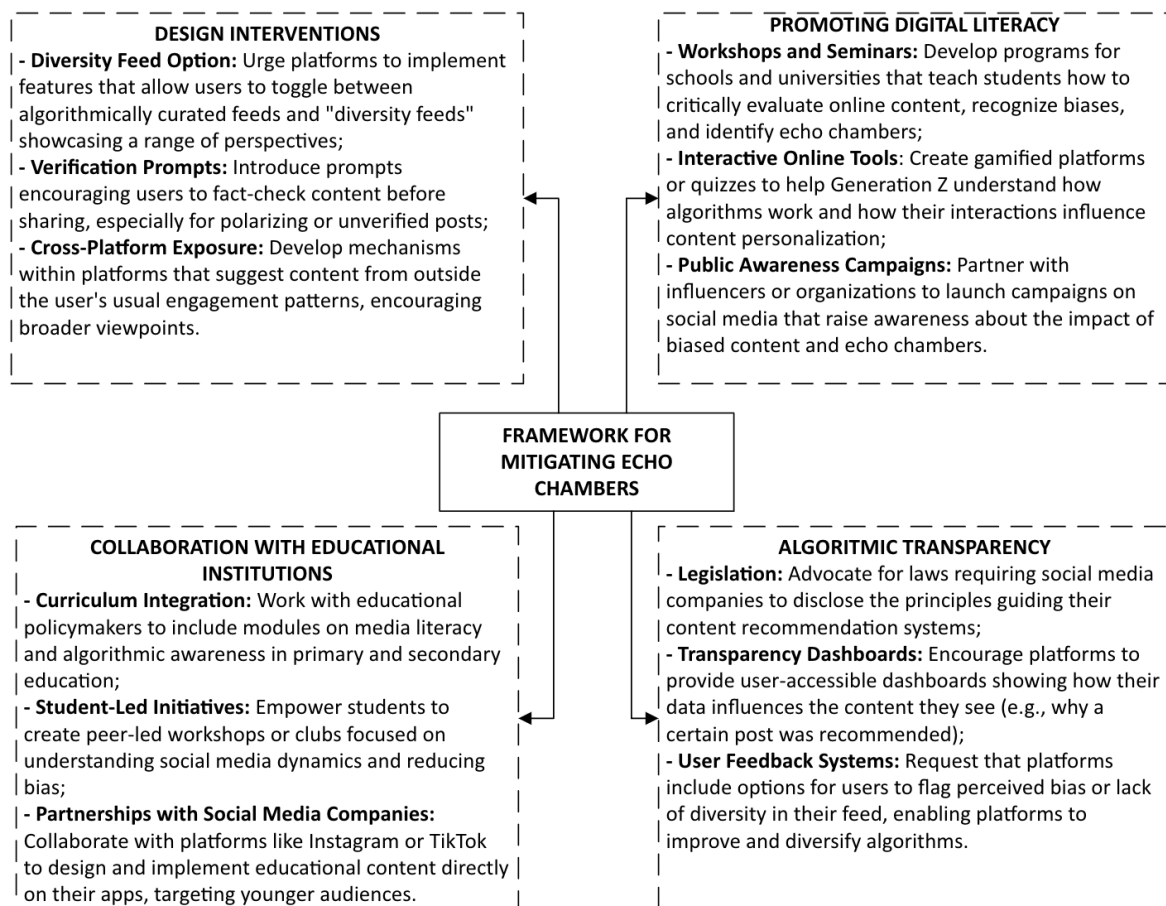
## 5. Conclusions

The results of this study offer perspectives on how personalized social media content influences the decision-making processes of Romanian Generation Z individuals. To answer RQ1, the study reveals that users' beliefs and behaviors are notably affected by exposure to biased content on social media, particularly through connections with friends, family, and influencers. Although most of the respondents indicated neutral or slight influence, a significant number recognized substantial effects, highlighting the widespread influence of tailored

content on shaping choices and preferences. To minimize potential biases, the importance of increased awareness and a thorough evaluation of personalized guidance is highlighted.

In addressing RQ2, we identified that Romanian Generation Z individuals exhibit moderate to high awareness of the biases and influences present in social media personalization algorithms. Most of the respondents admitted to doubting the neutrality and objectivity of personalized content, with many actively seeking diverse viewpoints to combat algorithmic biases. This indicates an increasingly critical awareness among this demographic, underlining their ability to navigate the intricacies of algorithm-based information environments with enhanced agency and digital skills.

This research emphasizes the necessity of promoting critical social media literacy, allowing Generation Z to engage thoughtfully with personalized digital content. Some constraints must also be recognized. The research sample mainly comprised Romanian university undergraduate students, which may not fully reflect the larger Generation Z population, including people from various educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, the dependence on self-reported responses through a questionnaire can create biases, such as social desirability bias, where respondents respond as they believe to be favorable or anticipated. Since the research was carried out at one specific moment, it fails to reflect possible variations in perceptions, behaviors, or decision-making processes as time progresses. Recognizing these limitations underscores additional research's need to fill these voids and expand on the results, promoting a more comprehensive grasp of Generation Z's engagement with tailored social media content. Figure 6 offers a perspective for addressing the risks of echo chambers and promoting balanced content consumption for Generation Z on social media as future research directions.



**Figure 6: Framework for Mitigating Echo Chambers in Personalized Social Media Content**

Greater understanding would be achieved by grasping how prolonged interaction with algorithm-driven content influences social behaviors and critical thinking as time progresses. Furthermore, more research is needed to assess the effectiveness of digital literacy programs in enabling Generation Z to critically evaluate curated content. Examining how the provision of targeted educational programs can reduce susceptibility to algorithmic biases is essential.

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