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Why people avoid political news? Findings from quantitative and qualitative studies on news consumption in Poland

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THREATPIE

Theoretical background

- Political Information Environment (van Aelst et al., 2017): a supply side and a demand side.
- Consequences of *selective news exposure*: knowledge gaps between the informed and the ignorant or misinformed and increases attitudinal polarization (Hopmann et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2017).
- Consequences of *news avoidance*: implications for several aspects of citizens' lives, including health (Narayan, Case, & Edwards, 2011; Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein, 2017) that seem to be relatively significant during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- News avoidance has been remaining at the same high level for years now (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Nielsen 2020) despite changes that have been introduced to supply side of the political information environment.

Research questions:

RQ1: How often do Polish media users avoid political news?

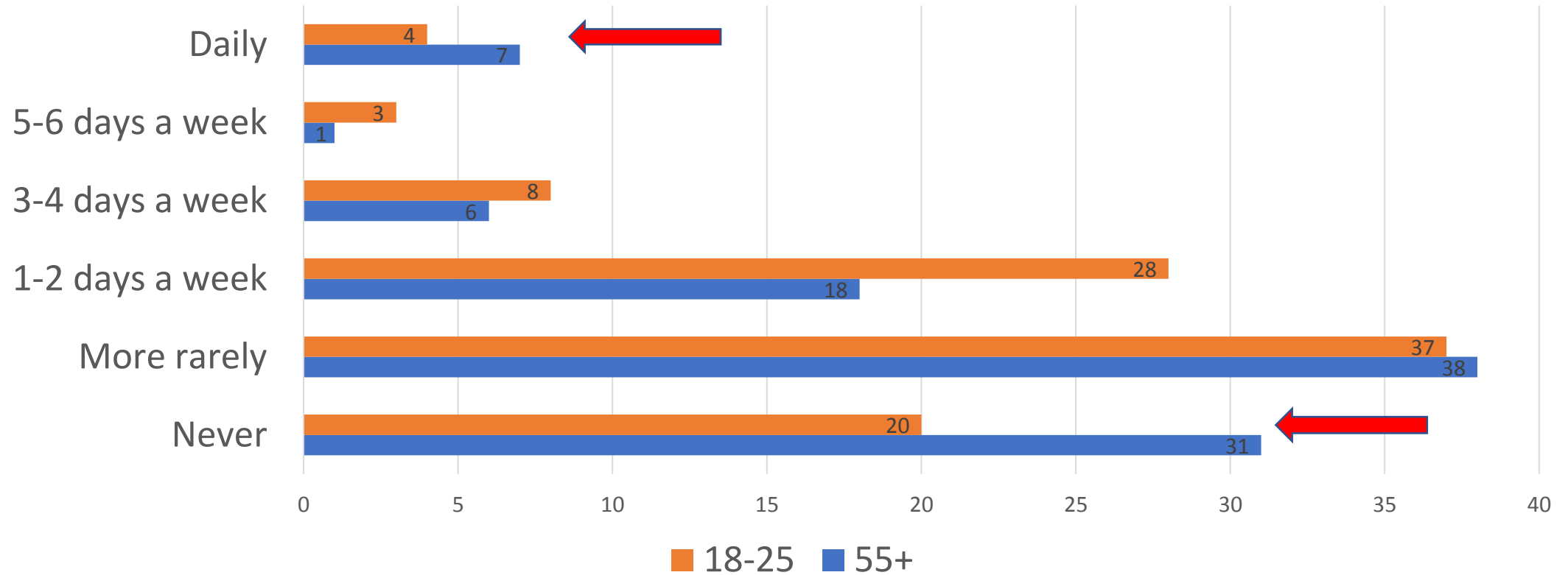
RQ2: What are the main reasons of news avoidance of the Polish news media users?

RQ3: Are there any differences in frequency and reasons for news avoidance across generations of the Polish media users (the youngest adults and the eldest ones)?

Methods

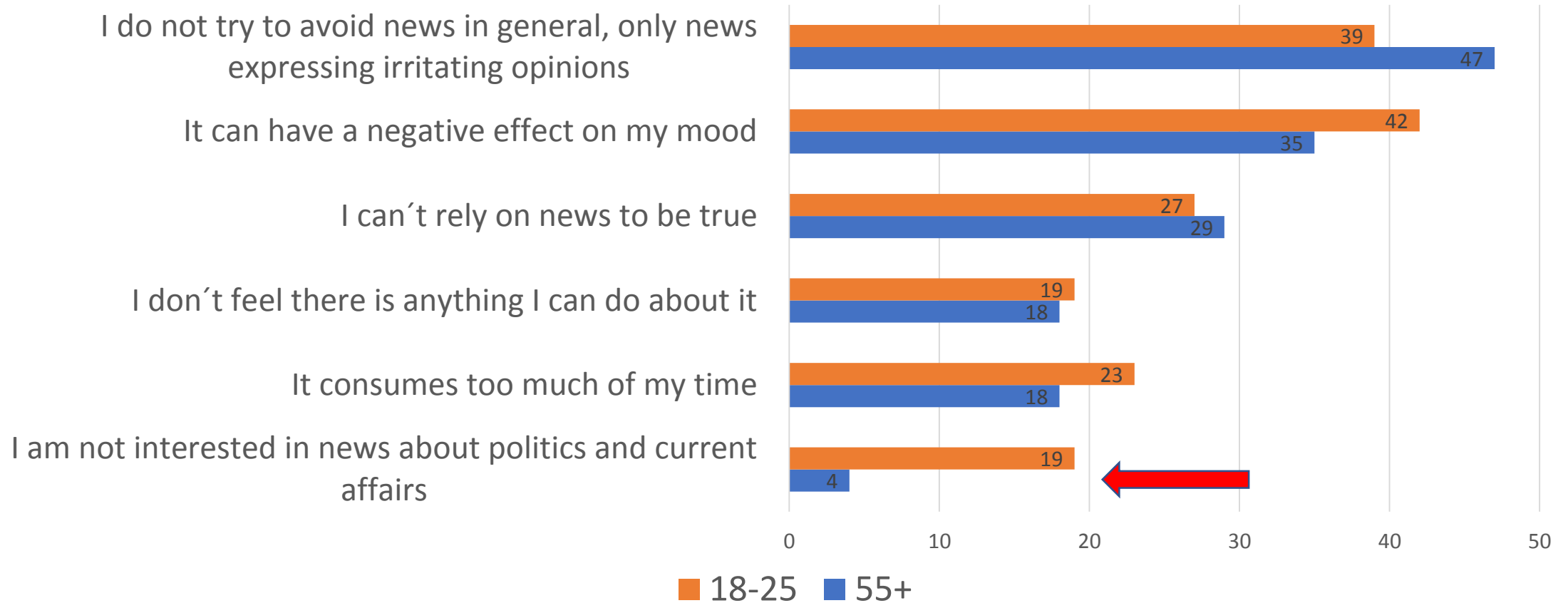
- Quantitative study: a survey
 - A representative sample of the Polish population (18+)
 - Two sub-samples: 18-25 years old (n=207) and 55+ (n=294)
 - Conducted by DYNATA for the Network of Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS) in winter 2019/2020.
- Qualitative study: focus groups
 - The youngest adults (18-25 years old, n=6) and the eldest cohort (55+, n=7) of the media users.
 - Conducted under the framework of the project „THREATPIE: *The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment activities*”.

Frequency of news avoidance across two age groups (%) [NEPOCS, 2019]



Reasons for news avoidance across two age groups (%)

[NEPOCS, 2019]



Focus groups: Reasons for news avoidance (1)

- Participants of the eldest group of the media users (55+) agreed that it is almost impossible to avoid news on a regular basis:

I do not know if it is possible to avoid information every single day.

***Information cannot be avoided.** Most households have a TV playing in the background. (PLC04, 55+)*

Focus groups: Reasons for news avoidance (2)

- Media content negatively affects the media users' mood by covering mostly negative events, such as conflicts, problems, and political tensions (pandemic made it even worse):

*Everyone has some problems. Most of the information relates to conflicts or problems. Information, in order to be shocking, must concern negative stuff. **This combined with our problems can negatively affect our psyche.***

(PLC10, 18-25 years old)

*Due to my political views, values, and gender, it is hard to get any good information in Poland. The pandemic also influences our behavior. **We were locked up in our homes, and information about deaths did not positively affect our psyche.*** (PLC13, 18-25 years old)

Focus groups: Reasons for news avoidance (3)

- Young people (18-25 years old) feel powerless & helpless: they had a sense that they have no impact on most of the political decisions and events.
- Eldest media users (55+): Avoidance of news generated by the state/public media due to their political bias.

I believe it is impossible to watch state television without having an allergic reaction. The quality of information is poor, the degree of manipulation is high, even disgusting. I try to read the information offered by national sources, however, after a while, I gave up. (PLC01, 55+)

Focus groups: Possible consequences of news avoidance

- A decrease of a level of political participation:

I had always been interested in politics, I had participated in recent protests, but since last year I started avoiding negative news. I felt it was too much for me. (PLC12, 18-25 years old)

- A low level of interest in politics, especially among young people:

In my opinion, young people are not interested in politics. When I was in high school, some fundamental political changes were happening in Poland. Nowadays, young people have a right not to be interested in politics. (PLC07, 55+)

- A psychological (harmful) effects on young people.

Focus groups: Expectations and suggestions

- More good news from the media:

During the election silence, I was watching television. It had been a long time since I had seen such nice and enthusiastic news. There was no news about politics. It showed that television can present something that is not necessarily just effing and blinding. Television can show something that can give us a surge of happiness. (PLC12, 18-25 years old)

- Education system should help in developing both knowledge and skills on how to use the media.

Conclusions

- Eldest media users do not avoid news as much as the youngest ones do: 31% of the eldest cohort declares that they never avoid news, while 20% of the youngest adult seems to never avoid news.
- Reasons for news avoiding:
 - Negative emotional effects & irritation.
 - Similarities: lack of trust in political news, sense of being powerless.
 - Differences: lack of interest in politics, time spent on news consumption.
 - Youngest cohort: emotions & opinions.
 - Eldest cohort: political bias & opinions.