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The relationship between the most consumed digital media in Portugal and audience participation mechanisms

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Introduction: Digital journalism is well established in Portugal. However, the Portuguese public tend to opt for traditional media websites over those of a digital native nature. This research will confirm whether the reason for the national success of the former type of media is that their websites offer more participation mechanisms for the publics.

Methods: Based on a qualitative methodology, an ad hoc methodological instrument was designed that allows for the evaluation of the ways in which audiences can interact with brands and content.

Results and discussion: The results are highly surprising, since it is not possible to verify any type of relationship between preferred media and the number of audience participation mechanisms. Experts on a Delphi panel attribute media selection to the audiences' interest in the stories covered and to the trust placed in the media.

KEYWORDS

digital media, audience, public, participation, interaction, brand

1 Introduction

A quarter century of research into digital journalism has confirmed that it is an established yet still developing discipline within the modern-day information ecosystem (Salaverría, 2019). The most important changes in the digital field have been taking place for just over a decade, once the distinction between analog and digital was finally completed, especially with the incorporation of new architectures, highlighting hypertext as one of the most significant (Canavilhas, 2014). Today, all media can be found online, regardless of the medium (press, radio or television), and the only possible distinction is between legacy digital media and digital native media. The foundation of the former is a traditional medium that also has a presence online (Cebrián-Herreros, 2009), whereas the latter were born on and for the Internet. The importance of digital media has been demonstrated, for example, in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, since it has been proven that they gained significant momentum around the world (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021). It was within this type of media where more news was published (Lázaro-Rodríguez and Herrera-Viedma, 2020), while traditional media are going through a crisis of loss of trust, disconnection from the public, and decreased income (Fei, 2021).

"Digital environments play a central role in the news making process. Seeking new ways to interact with people previously seen as the audience is a big challenge for media and journalists today, especially in local contexts, where journalists are more embedded in the community, physically and digitally, through social media and from mobile devices" (Jerónimo et al., 2020, p. 1). Digital media provides the social audience (Quintas-Froufe and González-Neira, 2014) with a space to satisfy their desire for dispersed and fragmented consumption (Benassini, 2014; Rauchfleisch et al., 2020), in such a way that this search for informative-selective experiences and diverse content has also contributed to the growth of digital media (Sánchez-García and Amoedo-Casais, 2021).

The first two decades of online journalism in Portugal can be divided into three major phases: implementation (1995–1998), expansion (1999–2000) and depression, followed by relative stagnation (2001–2014). Since the end of the first decade of this 21st century, the conditions for investment in cyber-journalism have become even more difficult (Bastos, 2023), which implied a prevalence of digital versions of traditional media over native digital media. One previous investigation (Bastos, 2016) diagnosed the structural difficulty of journalism in adapting to digitization, while another pointed out that the digitization of the Portuguese media meant the establishment of a new, more hyperlocal proximity network (López-García et al., 2016) in which the commitment to self-produced work is a determining factor in digital native media's quest to secure credibility (Rivas-de-Roca, 2022).

If digital journalism is the consequence of both the new ecological conditions for the circulation of news content in contemporary society, and the collapse of the pyramidal news model that prevailed since the beginning of industrial journalism (Waisbord, 2019), Portuguese digital media have demonstrated a particular emphasis on promoting public participation (Toural et al., 2015). Indeed, there have also been indications of co-creation that transcend citizen participation. However, these have not involved the audiences in the creation, development and use marketing of journalistic products, but co-creation models are limited to text corrections, sending of UGC or audience questions on Instagram. There are spaces for co-creation, but collective knowledge, innovation and the platform economy are not utilized as effectively as in other sectors, despite the fact that opportunities for sharing value creation (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022).

The development of web analytics (Coddington et al., 2021) and the inclusion of social networks in journalistic practice (Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022) provide unprecedented access to the user profile in detail, allowing for the generation of content that matches their preferences and interests (Corzo-Archila and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2019). Digital news media are influenced like never before by their audiences, though this does not imply that they renounce their editorial principles. Rather, the representation of the audiences is based on participation and on the content that they disseminate (Negredo and Kaufmann-Argueta, 2021). It is in digital native media where the search for new narrative formulas and interaction with the audience reflects a significant degree of experimentation because they are not so conditioned by the most rigid models of the traditional industry (Vázquez-Herrero, 2021). Nonetheless, it could also be said that this implies the need to reinvent journalistic education and the work of media professionals (Goggin, 2020).

A study on Spain and Portugal concluded that digital media assign great importance to audience participation in information production, though it also exposed the lack of curation of content (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022). All of this is part of a context of uncertainty characterized by the redefinition of the traditional business model of journalism. New formulas for the integration of newsrooms, commercial strategies (such as the coexistence of free and paid access or subscriptions) and multimedia products are all being created (Casero-Ripollés, 2016). In addition, it has been discovered that Portuguese digital media publish content that is valid for more than 1 day, which reduces time and economic costs (Méndez and Nogueira, 2018). This decrease in production costs has also made room for the emergence of entrepreneurial initiatives or small information companies that are generating high-quality journalism (O'Brien and Wellbrock, 2021).

With an understanding of the current state of the digital communication ecosystem, this study first identifies the most consumed digital media in Portugal, according to the Newman et al. (2022). Then, in order to find a possible explanation for why these media outlets are preferred by the Portuguese audience, the mechanisms that these media offer for participation and interaction with the public are explored. The results are presented according to a series of questions based on a methodological instrument designed *ad hoc*, the validation of which is verified by following parameters similar to those used by the authors to evaluate co-creation in digital media (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022). However, descriptive results are validated following the Delphi method. This investigation seeks to identify, therefore, the possible relationship between consumption rates and participation options offered.

The need for this research is justified by the general scarcity of scientific papers that analyze the mechanisms of interaction in digital media and, in particular, by the fact that there is no to be found that evaluates the situation in Portugal at the present time. Already in 2008, Zamith warned of the need to extend the audience's ability to monitor digital media (Zamith, 2008). The relevance of the research is grounded in the fact that the scientific community advocates a more radical audience turn that pushes journalism studies forward beyond normative and industry concerns, and starts from the perspective of audiences themselves, in which they are understood as active agents (Swart et al., 2022). This trend began a few years ago in digital journalism studies and has often been dominated by perspectives from the social sciences. It seeks to reinforce the connections between empirical investigations and the conceptual discussions that prevail within the journalistic field (Steensen et al., 2019), so the main objective of this study is to determine whether there is a relationship between the most consumed Portuguese media and alternative media outlets.

2 Participation, audiences, and digital media

It has been said that journalism is an "structure of public communication that is enacted through the practices of various actors at sites that go beyond the newsroom" (Ahva, 2016, p. 1). For just over a decade, virtual public spaces have increasingly improved their participation mechanisms (Harlow and Harp, 2012; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013). As a result, the participation opportunities for public engagement have become a factor that influences the decision to choose one medium over another. The evolution of interactivity and two-way communication processes in digital media has made it

possible to integrate content receivers as an essential part of communication strategies (Barredo and Díaz, 2017). As such, paying attention to audiences is now an essential part of professional journalism (Costera, 2020). Today, the concept of participation holds significant weight in providing insight into the state of our democracy and the role of the media in its construction and scrutiny (Budarick, 2023).

There exists a line of thought that associates the concept of participation with its potential for political activism, as well as the role of the media (Carpentier, 2011) and their interaction with the audiences. "Identifying the different domains that citizens become part of when they participate in journalism, helped to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of participation in empirical terms" (Ahva and Wiard, 2018, p. 74). While some more purist scholars link the concept of participation to the quest for a balance of power (Pateman, 1970) that goes beyond the idea of access or interaction, others view participation as a social and cultural practice. This duality can be somewhat reduced to a minimalist versus maximalist view of the term (Carpentier, 2011; Theocharis et al., 2023). Nonetheless, the concept of participation remains far from being settled in academic discourse, with ongoing proposals to renew its meaning (Bergillos, 2019; Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022).

The theories of audience studies involve various dimensions of participation, specifically within and through the media (Wasko and Mosco, 1992). This encompasses participation within the production process, content creation and engaging with media outlets and other audiences. Media outlets provide audiences with platforms to express their voices, exchange ideas with other stakeholders, and reproduce and share news, perhaps even more prominently in digital media, especially through social networks (Lázaro-Rodríguez, 2020).

Jenkins (2011) presents a perspective that interprets participation as a social and cultural process deeply embedded in everyday life, with implications for media convergence and a vision of audiences as spaces for community building. Torres da Silva et al. (2017) "portray a moment of change that results from the emergence of new everyday practices and spaces of media consumption associated with the progressive generalization of mobile technologies, convergence, personalization and reconfiguration of user paper" (p. 194).

The most positively received media participation formats are geared towards low-intensity interaction, such as commenting on news pieces, while other forms of participation often go unnoticed (Suau et al., 2019). Today, audience participation can be specified in four fundamental mechanisms (ordered from lowest to highest degree of involvement):

a) Interaction: spaces focused on the user and their relationship possibilities with the platform.
b) Participation: process of public involvement in decision-making through ICT.
c) Engagement: level of commitment of the audience with the medium.
d) Co-creation: a form of collaborative innovation that ranges from ideation to marketing. Users and media work together to define the objectives of the project and the needs of the community. Media should continue to invest in participatory formulas that truly involve the public in all processes —development, production and marketing— (Malmelin and Mikko, 2015) because co-creating should allow audiences to

co-construct their own experience in their own context (Aitamurto, 2013; Cuenca-Amigo and Zabala-Inchaurraga, 2018; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

For example, in local French-speaking media, the search for strengthening the link with audiences has been investigated (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo, 2023). It can be argued that the media outlet's ability to attract audiences directly correlates with its capacity to attract advertising investments (Perlado-Lamo-de-Espinosa et al., 2019). Therefore, within the attention economy, audiences can be considered commodities (Garcia, 2021), enabling media organizations to generate funds for their production expenses.

This can be considered a form of indirect or passive audience participation, as it attributes value to media outlets. The act of sharing informative or news content can be seen as a slightly more active form of participation, as it can signify recognition of the news value and also serves as a means of social recognition within the reader/listener/viewer's network. In fact, some audiences go beyond mere consumption and actively produce informative content themselves (Kouki-Block and Wellbrock, 2022).

Traditionally, journalistic studies have focused primarily on the news production process, paying less attention to how audiences consume and perceive news. However, Swart and his team (2022) propose a shift in perspective, regarding audiences as active participants in the process. This perspective entails an important reorientation from solely considering what qualifies as news to understanding how information is perceived and experienced. The authors go so far as to present three thought-provoking truths: (1) they argue that news produced by journalists may not always be inherently interesting or relevant; (2) that the use of news or information may not necessarily align with journalistic intent; and (3) that the act of consuming news is not always beneficial for audiences because "while more news use might benefit news producers, this might not always be in the interest of news audiences or society" (p.11).

The inclusion of audience participation is frequent in European media (Hermida, 2011). Beyond the opportunities for participation that a media outlet offers, the publics' choice can be determined by the interest that the medium holds for the audiences (Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García, 2022), the trust placed in journalists (Assmann, 2022) or by trust in the medium and information brands (Tan, 2023). In Portugal, 61% of people claim to have trust in news in general (Newman et al., 2022). Despite previous studies indicating that trust in the media has plummeted to almost historic lows (Wilner et al., 2022), possibly due to the differences in expectations between journalists and audiences (Abdenour et al., 2021), media trust continues to provide additional credibility and remains a significant factor in the choosing of one news outlet over another (Morales-Vargas et al., 2022). The level of trust increases when the information is participatory (Esser and Pfetsch, 2020), prompting the need to assess how opportunities for participation influence the selection of digital media by audiences to fulfill their informational needs.

Knowing these gaps, the RQ that motivates this research is:

RQ: Is there a relationship between the most consumed digital media and those that offer greater possibilities for audience participation?

3 Sample and methodology

The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022) identifies the following Portuguese online media outlets as "top brands" based on their weekly usage percentage, indicating that they are visited by a significant number of readers more than three times per week (listed in descending order):

1 *Sic* News Online/*Sic* Notícias.
2 Notícias ao Minuto.
3 Correio da Manhã online.
4 Sapo.
5 Jornal de Notícias Online.
6 Correio da Manhã TV Online.
7 Observador.
8 TVI News online.
9 CNN Portugal Online (TVI24).
10 Expresso Online.
11 Público Online.
12 RFM Online.
13 MSN News.
14 Diário de Notícias Online.
15 RTP News Online.
16 Rádio Comercial Online.

Therefore, these media are representative of the most relevant media in Portugal. It is important to note that this list does not only include online newspapers, but also newspaper websites (Notícias ao Minuto; Correio da Manhã online; Sapo; Jornal de Notícias Online; Observador; Expresso Online; Público Online; and Diário de Notícias Online), radio (RFM Online; RTP News Online; and Rádio Comercial Online), television (*Sic* News Online/*Sic* Notícias; Correio da Manhã TV Online; TVI News online; CNN Portugal Online/TVI24 and RTP News Online) and even a news aggregator (MSN News). Therefore, the results of this investigation will refer to the state of digital journalism in Portugal regardless of the specific origins of the brand, since, in reality, all apart from Sapo and Observador (both of which are digital native media) were previously established media brands that have existed since before the advent of the internet, that also now have a website.

Based on the review of the scientific literature and the previous experience of the authors in this field of specialization and the validated methodological instruments (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022), we have aimed to answer the RQ by creating and implementing *ad hoc* patterns of the different interaction mechanisms between media-audiences that currently exist (see Table 1).

Mechanisms were divided between passive and active, so that the former, though facilitating interaction, are based on the fact that the interaction arises from the media outlet: the user essentially receives it, even though the media outlet permits a fully active interaction (distribute, co-create, participate in person). The different mechanisms were ordered from the lowest to the highest degree of participation and each variable was assigned a score, in such a way that the higher the degree of interaction, the higher the score. Web comments were not taken into account as they are a fully consolidated mechanism in the web architecture of all digital media, and therefore, they do not constitute a differentiating factor.

TABLE 1 Pattern analysis of the potential for participation in a modern digital media outlet.

		Score	
Passive mechanisms	SMS	1	
	Email marketing	2	
	Newsletter	3	
	WhatsApp	4	
Active mechanisms	Social networks	5	+1 for each active social media. An additional +1 for combining traditional networks with innovative platforms like TikTok or Twitch. An additional +1 for corporate presence on LinkedIn.
	Face-to-face meetings with the public	6	
	Basic co-creation (correction of texts, sending suggestions, etc.)	7	
	Full co-creation (creation + development + marketing journalistic products)	8	

Source: own elaboration.

In the specific case of social networks, having a single active, interactive and appropriate social network for the target audience is valued at 5 points, while the score can be increased based on three particular cases: (1) an additional point for each additional social network after the first, as long as it is of similar characteristics; (2) an additional point for participating in each highly innovative network like TikTok or Twitch; (3) one point for considering networks with an eye on business or corporate communication such as LinkedIn.

Computing the interaction mechanisms offered by each medium means that we can verify if the media preferred by the audiences are those in which they can participate the most and with whom they can interact the most. The study adopts an interpretivist approach and is based on the qualitative method (Maxwell, 2013). We opted to become public consumers of these media for 6 months (from November 2022 to April 2023) and record the results. First-hand information was collected on ways to interact with these media and ways that these media contacted us through newsletter or emails. Furthermore, an exploratory web scan of both the corporate websites and the social networks in which the Portuguese media have a presence was carried out. This was done to evaluate their activity and detect any

participation mechanism that could go unnoticed by a participant observer, but not for a researcher.

The data collected was analyzed according to the criteria established in the pattern (Guest et al., 2011), though some items included in the analysis instrument were not located in the Portuguese media. In terms of sampling, the selection was intentional (Emmel, 2013). It was compromised of a specific group of participating media, with uniform and relevant characteristics in terms of consumption levels and percentage of weekly visits.

The findings from participant observation were corroborated using the Delphi method (2 rounds), a predictive system that strategically leverages expert opinions (see Table 2) to derive solutions to a problem (Strasser, 2019). We extended invitations to Portuguese academics to participate in the Delphi panel, though only those listed below agreed participate. Although not all of them are exclusively focused on digital media, all are renowned specialists with studies in the field of media on communication, media or journalism. In the case of the 'top brands', despite having requested on several occasions the participation of all the media, only one person accepted the invitation. We were also conscious of gender equality in our approach, resulting in participation from four men and four women.

The Delphi panel was developed between October and November 2023. Questionnaires were designed as semi-structured interviews. Open questions and Likert scales were used to evaluate the previous descriptive results.

4 Results

The Portuguese digital media preferred by the public implement six mechanisms that facilitate audience participation (see Figure 1):

a) Passive mechanisms: SMS, email marketing, newsletter and WhatsApp (interaction and participation).
b) Active mechanisms: social media and basic co-creation (engagement and co-creation).

In Portugal, there was no evidence of the use of other instant messaging applications such as Telegram, innovative networks like Twitch, or other highly interactive options such as cafes with audiences or buses for face-to-face meetings.

TABLE 2 Expert panel.

Expert	Institution/media
Expert 1	Miguel Torga Institute of Higher Education (Coimbra)
Expert 2	University of Minho (Braga)
Expert 3	University Fernando Pessoa (Porto)
Expert 4	University of Minho (Braga)
Expert 5	Catholic University of Portugal (Lisbon)
Expert 6	ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon (Lisbon)
Expert 7	University Fernando Pessoa (Porto)
Expert 8	Bauer Media Audio Portugal (Rádio Comercial Online)

4.1 Can I receive an SMS?

Media outlets can leverage SMS to disseminate breaking news notifications, important alerts, subscription updates or special promotions. This is exemplified by Sapo, the only Portuguese media outlet that employs SMS, perhaps due to its association with the MEO group, a company that provides Public Telecommunications Network in Portugal. Sapo offers MEO customers the opportunity to receive exclusive alerts, free of charge, via SMS.

Despite Sapo being the only media outlet to utilize SMS, the adoption of this mechanism could also be extended to allow readers to send SMS to newspapers, enabling them to share comments or reports through the platform. SMS messages are typically private and do not facilitate reader-to-reader interaction or provide visibility into other public opinions. This characteristic restricts the usage of SMS, apart from in the case of Sapo, a media organization integrated within a telecommunications group.

4.2 Can I receive an email? What if I prefer a newsletter?

Observador, Público Online, and MSN News employ email marketing as a means to engage directly with their readership and promote their publications. Media segment their contact lists based on interests, geographic location, or other criteria to enhance message relevance and improve open rates and engagement. These media outlets employ email marketing to send newsletters, news digests, and breaking news alerts, but also to promote their publications or events, offer special subscription promotions, or solicit reader feedback.

Portuguese media outlets seem to understand that email marketing can be perceived as invasive or unwanted by readers if used excessively or inappropriately. Consequently, none of the media outlets within the top 5 preferred by the public actively make use of email marketing as a strategy.

Noticias ao Minuto, Sapo, Jornal de Notícias Online, and Público Online all embrace a more advanced model of email marketing known as newsletters. These media outlets employ newsletters as a means to provide their readers with an overview of the most important news of the day or week, encompassing breaking news, in-depth analysis, exclusive interviews, and opinion columns. Their information architecture is designed to drive traffic to the newspaper's website or to promote other publications or services. The frequency of these newsletters, whether weekly or monthly, is carefully chosen to ensure they remain relevant and avoid being overlooked or ignored.

4.3 Can I participate in instant messaging applications?

Observador employs WhatsApp to distribute newsletters via messages, while MSN Noticias and Portal Sapo perform news sharing through the same platform. Additionally, WhatsApp is also utilized for reader interaction, allowing the consumer to send questions, comments, and feedback to the media outlet, thereby aiding in a better understanding of user needs and interests.
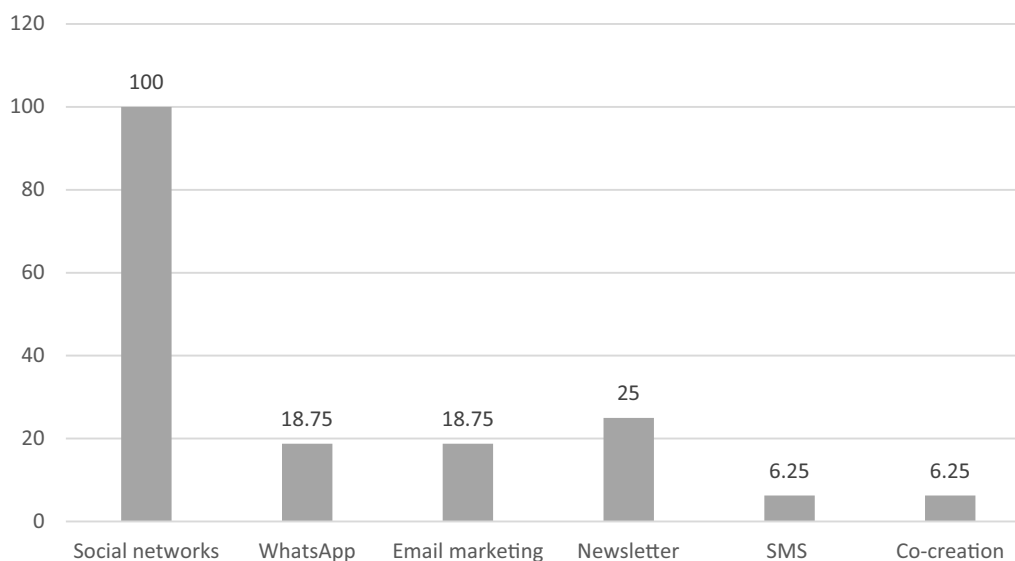
FIGURE 1
Mechanisms (in %) for audience participation in Portuguese online media. Source: own elaboration.

Media outlets must obtain users' permission before adding them to groups or distribution lists, and they must ensure that users have the ability to leave these groups or lists at any time. Based on publicly available information on corporate websites, it has been verified that Portuguese media outlets using this application respect user privacy and adhere to data privacy laws.

Portuguese digital newspapers avail of WhatsApp to foster and enhance audience engagement. Sometimes they employ WhatsApp to conduct surveys and polls, allowing readers to vote and express their opinions on certain topics. This helps facilitate a more open and engaging dialogue between the newspaper and its readers, while also providing valuable insights into audience preferences and opinions.

As a result of the observation as participants, it is evident these media outlets monitor audience participation on WhatsApp and ensure that comments and opinions expressed by readers are respectful and constructive. All media organizations have clear policies in place to address inappropriate behavior such as harassment or hate speech, and to ensure that all users can participate in the community safely and inclusively.

From a viral perspective, audiences themselves act as advertising agents for journalistic brands. Strategies adopted include the incorporation of sharing buttons, as seen in MSN News and Sapo, and the distribution of newsletters through the application, as done by Observador. Although WhatsApp also offers the option to create discussion groups for readers with shared interests and engage with the audience through chats, Portuguese media outlets have yet to fully utilize these features.

Hence, these three digital media outlets (Observador, MSN News, and Sapo) are utilizing WhatsApp as a medium to reach and engage with their readership. Interestingly, none of the top three most consumed digital media outlets in Portugal employ WhatsApp, nor do any of the preferred Portuguese media outlets avail of other instant messaging applications such as Telegram.

4.4 Can I interact on social networks?

All of the most consumed Portuguese digital media outlets have some social media presence (see Table 3). This is not surprising given that newspapers are increasingly using social media as a means to reach and engage with their audience, thereby enabling newspapers to expand their readership, foster interactivity, and establish a stronger online presence (Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022).

Though there is a general spread across social networks, some platforms are particularly prevalent (see Figure 2). Facebook and Twitter continue to be the preferred networks for disseminating news, as previous studies such as (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022) have found. On the other hand, more visual networks such as Instagram or YouTube continue to be utilized to a lesser extent. Furthermore, there is even less commitment to participation on corporate networks such as LinkedIn, or in more innovative formats such as TikTok.

However, why does this occur? Within the realm of Facebook, media outlets create pages dedicated to disseminating news, photos, and videos, while also engaging with their readers through comments and private messages. On Twitter, media organizations utilize the platform not only for real-time news dissemination but also to engage with their readers and other news sources. As for Instagram, digital media outlets share captivating visuals in the form of photos and videos, accompanied by compelling stories and highlights.

Moreover, digital platforms also leverage other social media networks such as LinkedIn and YouTube to disseminate news and establish an online presence. LinkedIn is primarily utilized to share business-related news and engage with other professionals, whereas YouTube is employed to share videos and documentaries produced by the media outlets.

More recently, TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms among young Portuguese people. TVI News online, Diário de Notícias Online, and Rádio Comercial Online have been utilizing TikTok to create more relaxed and entertaining content

TABLE 3 Social media presence of Portugal's most consumed digital media.

|	Instagram	Facebook	Twitter	TikTok	YouTube	LinkedIn	Flickr
Sic News Online/Sic Notícias	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Notícias ao Minuto	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Correio da Manhã online	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sapo	☑	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Jornal de Notícias Online	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Correio da Manhã TV Online	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Observador	☑	☑	☑	☐	☑	☑	☑
TVI News online	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☐	☐
CNN Portugal Online (TVI24)	☑	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Expresso Online	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐	☐
Público Online	☑	☑	☑	☐	☑	☑	☐
RFM Online	☑	☑	☑	☐	☑	☑	☐
MSN News	☐	☑	☑	☐	☐	☑	☐
Diário de Notícias Online	☑	☑	☑	☑	☐	☐	☐
RTP News Online	☑	☑	☑	☐	☑	☐	☑
Rádio Comercial Online	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☐

Source: own elaboration.
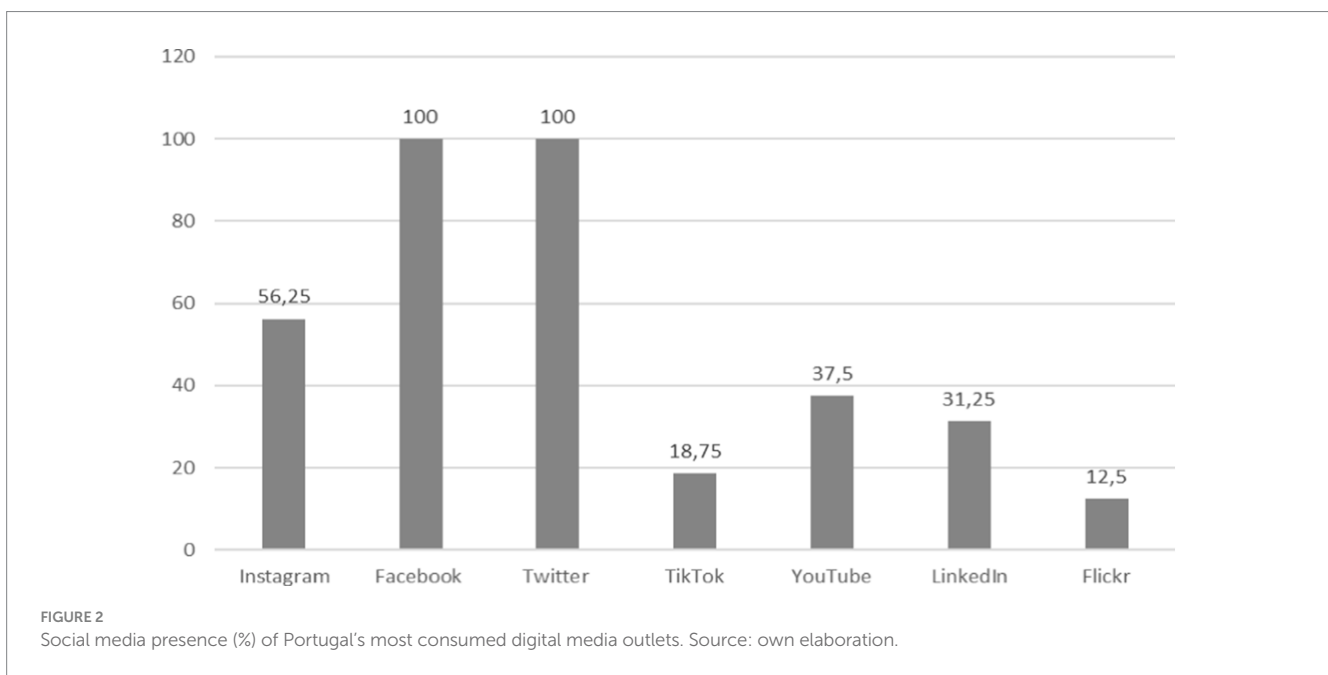
FIGURE 2
Social media presence (%) of Portugal's most consumed digital media outlets. Source: own elaboration.

that is tailored to TikTok's target audience. They produce short videos covering current news, internet trends, trivia, and intriguing facts, which are shared on the platform. These videos are generally of a lighter tone and more informal compared to the content published on other social media platforms.

Engaging with the audience appears to be the primary advantage that social media offers to digital media outlets. Through social media, these outlets connect with their audiences by listening to their opinions, addressing their queries, and receiving feedback on their articles and stories. This audience interaction enables media outlets to gain a better understanding of their readership and adapt to evolving behavioral patterns and preferences.

It has been established that audience interaction is also key in the building of trust between media outlets and the public. Readers feel heard and valued by the media. This is often the case on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, though not necessarily on other social networks. As a result, media outlets with a strong social media presence are not necessarily the most consumed ones (see Table 1). Audiences are more likely to share and recommend content from media outlets they identify with and value their opinions.

4.5 Can I co-create?

Despite several previous studies (Ostrom et al., 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) confirmed that products are more valuable if the audiences participate in their development, adprosumers could not co-create if the digital media did not establish spaces designed for this kind of participation. Only Observador offers what can be considered basic co-creation options, providing journalists' email so that audiences can connect and propose corrections within texts, if they wish. However, given that only the journalist's email is provided,

this practice is far from being considered a full co-creation mechanism that involves audiences in the creation, development and marketing of journalistic products.

In addition, to be a basic co-creator (by voting, commenting or participating in the social community), registration via email or social networks is required. Contributions undergo an automatic scoring system and are then evaluated by the newspaper's moderation team. On the other hand, the editorial policy warns that the content generated by users implies a transfer of copyright, so content is the exclusive property of the media and, therefore, is protected by the intellectual property rights stipulated by Portuguese and European legislation. All in all, the mechanisms implemented by this media outlet are seen as basic co-creation. Of all the Portuguese media analyzed, it is the one that most involves the public in the creation and configuration of the news.

5 Discussion and conclusions

With respect to the RQ that motivated this research, we cannot establish any strong correlation between more participation mechanisms for audiences and greater consumer preference. None of the digital media sources that obtained the highest scores for participation mechanisms appear in the top 3 digital media preferred by the Portuguese, while in the top 5, only one is found (Sapo), which is in second position in terms of score (see Table 4). Again, it bears repeating that this is a digital native media outlet.

The outlet that most involves the public is Observador. It is a digital native news source that ranks just 7th in terms of consumption by the Portuguese public. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify differences based on types of outlets. Television websites are the ones that offer the least participation mechanisms to the public, coming just above radio stations' websites. Newpapers' websites (not only of the digital natives, but also of the legacy media) are the ones that most involve the audiences. We agree with Salaverría (2019) that digital journalism is a fully consolidated reality in Portugal. However, as the work of Bastos (2016) has pointed out, it is still the case that the digital media preferred by the Portuguese tend to be the digital versions of traditional legacy media, rather than digital native media. Only 2 (Sapo and Observador) of the 16 online media most consumed by the Portuguese are outlets born in and for the internet, that thus constitute digital native media.

Even though these two media are the ones that offer the most participation mechanisms to the audiences (see Table 4), they are not among the digital options most consumed by the Portuguese public. This finding allows us to ratify two ideas pointed out in previous studies. Firstly, it is confirmed once again that over the past decade, social audiences have found in digital media a space to satisfy their desire for dispersed and fragmented consumption (Benassini, 2014; Quintas-Froufe and González-Neira, 2014; Rauchfleisch et al., 2020). Secondly, and as Vázquez-Herrero (2021) had discovered, it is still the case that digital native media is the space that promotes seeking new formulas for interaction with the audience, and where there is evidence of experimentation. Now, 2 years after that investigation, digital native media have achieved some level of consolidation. Indeed, Observador is the only Portuguese digital media that allows co-creation, even if in an incipient and embryonic way without actually involving audiences in the creation, development and

marketing of journalistic pieces (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022).

This research once again highlights extent to which social networks have become integrated into journalistic practice (Humayun and Ferrucci, 2022), especially Facebook and Twitter. They serve as platforms to seek interaction with audiences (Coddington et al., 2021; Corzo-Archila and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2019). All Portuguese online media use at least two social networks (see Tables 1, 3), which allows information content to be transferred from corporate websites (where they have to be searched for) to the platforms accessed daily by the audiences (where the contents look for the users). Of additional benefit is that here, the public can share and viralize information according to their tastes and interests (Negredo and Kaufmann-Argueta, 2021).

Despite the fact that a previous study concluded that digital media attach great importance to audience participation in news production (Sixto-García et al., 2020; Sixto-García et al., 2021; Sixto-García et al., 2022), the truth is that by now using participant observation and exploratory web crawling, it can be concluded that the media's intentions and the reality of the situation are two different things. Although all Portuguese digital media use social networks as a space for interaction with audiences, only three use networks of an innovative nature such as TikTok, and only five use the networks for corporate communication on LinkedIn. The use of instant messaging applications is still limited since only three media utilize WhatsApp, as is the case with loyalty strategies, as only four media send a newsletter by email to their readers (see Table 3).

If it is not possible to establish a direct correlation between public preference and tools for audience participation, what are the reasons behind the popularity of these digital media? The consulted experts (see Table 2) agree that those media offering extensive participation options are not the most consumed because this call for participation often remains invisible, with no appeal to motivation, and challenging to exercise. Immediate and sensationalistic consumption is preferred over reflective engagement. Additionally, audiences feel discouraged by journalists' rarely utilizing their contributions, leading to media outlets favoring token participation.

The experts also believe that well-informed citizens often do not feel the need to share their opinions, nor do they consider the information provided by fellow citizens as trustworthy or relevant. So, what determines one media's higher consumption over another?

On Likert scales (where 0 is the lowest and 5 is the highest), the experts prioritize the interest of the news to the audience as the most crucial factor when choosing a particular media (4.63), followed by trust in the media (4.38), trust in the brand (4.25), trust in the journalists (4.13), while placing mechanisms for audience participation at the bottom (2.38).

We can assert, according to the experts, that media credibility, longevity, content quality, consumption habits, and editorial stance are decisive for selection. The fact that traditional media continues to be more consumed than digital native media, despite the latter offering more participation options, confirms that historical presence in the media landscape is a determining factor in conferring credibility and shaping consumption habits. The topics discussed in the news are also determining factors in the choice of one medium or another.

Our findings align with Tan (2023) since Portuguese citizens choose their news sources based on the trust they have towards these brands. This decision is grounded in social knowledge of the brand, its history, tradition, and ideological or informational alignment. This

TABLE 4 Score achieved by each digital media outlet based on public participation mechanisms offered.

Digital media	SMS	Email	Newsletter	Whats	Presence + n° of networks	TikTok	LinkedIn	Co-creation	Total
Sic News Online/*Sic* Notícias					5 + 1 = 6				6
Notícias ao Minuto			3		5 + 1 = 6				9
Correio da Manhã online					5 + 1 = 6				6
Sapo	1		3	4	5 + 2 = 7				15
Jornal de Notícias Online			3		5 + 1 = 6				9
Correio da Manhã TV Online					5 + 1 = 6				6
Observador		2		4	5 + 5 = 10		+1	7	24
TVI News online					5 + 4 = 9	+1			10
CNN Portugal Online (TVI24)					5 + 2 = 7				7
Expresso Online					5 + 1 = 6				6
Público Online		2	3		5 + 4 = 9		+1		15
RFM Online					5 + 4 = 9		+1		10
MSN News		2		4	5 + 2 = 7		+1		14
Diário de Notícias Online					5 + 3 = 8	+1			9
RTP News Online					5 + 4 = 9				9
Rádio Comercial Online					5 + 5 = 10	+1	+1		12

Source: own elaboration.

also explains why none of the other news companies that produce high-quality journalism (O'Brien and Wellbrock, 2021) appear on the list of the most consumed media.

As the most consumed media have already secured their ability to attract advertising investment (Garcia, 2021), they are neglecting other approaches that could improve their relationships with audiences by considering them as active and engaged participants. This observation seems to support an argument presented by Swart et al. (2022). Commitment to self-produced content is crucial for the credibility of digital media (Rivas-de-Roca, 2022), though in this case all of the most consumed media outlets produce their own content. Promoting the visualization of these spaces and improving transparency policies is necessary to audiences become aware of the value of their contributions. The media outlets, for

their part, must improve the recognition of authorship of citizen participation.

In conclusion, although the main limitation of this study is based on the fact that the sample is restricted to Portugal, the research could prove very useful were it to be used as part of a comparative analysis with other countries. On the other hand, the time limitation of the study (6 months) must also be considered. In addition, the investigation presents a situation that both academics and information companies must know in order to understand how to guide relationships with audiences. This process must be considered not only from a consumption standpoint, but should also integrate a more socially responsible vision centered in the journalism of the third millennium, enabling an analysis of this same phenomenon throughout Europe and

throughout the world in the near future, that might prove crucial to their own survival.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because Delphi participants showed their informed consent with the participation. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

JS-G: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AD-M: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – original draft. JA: Data curation, Software, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft.

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