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competition commission
south africa

**MEDIA AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS MARKET INQUIRY:
CONSUMER FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND
SURVEY**

Focus Group Observations

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1. Introduction

This document provides the key observations stemming from the Consumer Focus Group Discussions conducted as part of the evidence-gathering process for the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (“the Inquiry”) for the Competition Commission South Africa (“CCSA”) (“the Project”).

The following table provides an outline of the sections contained in this document.

Table 1-1: Document Outline

Section	Contents	Description
1	Introduction	This section introduces the document.
2	Focus Group Discussions	This section provides further detail regarding the Focus Group discussions and provides an overview of participants per Focus Group discussion.
3	Key Observations	This section provides key insights from the focus groups conducted with stakeholders.

2. Focus Group Discussions

The table below provides a breakdown of the Focus Group Discussions conducted as part of the Project. Overall, 4 face to face and 6 virtual Focus Group Discussions were conducted with a total of 123 participants of varying demographics.

Table 2-1: Breakdown of Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Type	Focus Group No.	Location/Platform	Area Classification	Number of Participants
In-Person	1	Viljoenskroon, Free State	Rural	12
	2	Isipingo, KwaZulu Natal	Peri-Urban	13
	3	Queensburgh, KwaZulu Natal	Peri-Urban	15
	4	Sandton, Johannesburg	Urban	11
Virtual	5	MS Teams	N/A	8
	6	MS Teams	N/A	11
	7	MS Teams	N/A	17
	8	MS Teams	N/A	17
	9	MS Teams	N/A	15
	10	MS Teams	N/A	4
Total Participants				123

3. Key Observations

The table below highlights key insights from the Focus Group discussions conducted for the study. Key insights are provided per key theme explored across the various Focus Groups.

Table 3-1: Key Focus Group Observations

#	Theme	Observations
1.	Definition of News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants defined news as any new information that provides knowledge, creates awareness about various subjects or conveys a message. This includes information provided through both traditional news sources and content shared on social media, provided it is informative and relevant. Participants highlighted that news encompasses a wide array of topics including current issues, politics, economics, sports, international affairs, weather, technological advancements, cultural events, community happenings and even historical information. News is seen as everything happening around us that impacts our lives. News is seen as a critical factor in shaping opinions and making decisions, whether related to voting, financial investments, or day-to-day activities like commuting or planning for weather changes. There was a consensus that news involves current and up-to-date information. This includes real-time updates on events like elections, market trends, natural disasters, and significant global incidents such as wars or economic shifts. Some participants noted that in their opinion they viewed information regarding current affairs as more formal “news” whilst they saw celebrity news as “gossip” rather than news Discussion around newsworthy events on social media are widely considered to be news. However, there is a strong emphasis on the credibility of news sources, with certain participants noting that discussions around newsworthy events are only considered news if the points being raised are factual. Participants expressed a need to verify the information they receive, especially from social media, where false news and rumours can spread easily. Trusted sources like established news channels and verified social media accounts are preferred. Social media is recognised as a significant source of news, particularly for instant updates and trending stories. However, there is a concern about the accuracy and authenticity of information shared on these platforms. Users often cross-check information from social media with more reliable sources. There are various platforms considered to be news media. In addition to traditional news platforms, social media platforms including YouTube videos, Facebook and X posts, TikTok short videos/reels, as well as podcasts are all considered news media.
2.	User Behaviour (how people engage with news media)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants access news through both traditional outlets such as TV, radio and newspapers, as well as through digital platforms like Google News, Microsoft Edge, YouTube, WhatsApp and WhatsApp Channels (particularly prevalent amongst younger demographics), Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. A few respondents also use voice assistants like Google Assistant or Amazon Alexa to get the news updates, while smart TVs and other connected devices are also used for streaming news content. The

#	Theme	Observations
		<p>choice of platform often depends on convenience, trust in the source, and the type of content being sought.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the uptake of digital platforms appears to be growing amongst the older generations (aged 50 and above), particularly in rural to peri-urban areas, individuals still seem to prefer traditional news sources. For the younger generations (aged 18 to 49), however, there appears to be a preference for digital platforms as primary sources of news. • Access to news on digital platforms is mainly through cell phones (Android and iOS) while some participants also access news through their laptops and desktops. The ability to read news on the go is crucial for users with busy schedules, making digital platforms and the ability to access news on one’s cell phone highly preferred. Participants praised the convenience of news on digital platforms and social media, noting that it allows them to consume news when they have the time. • In rural communities, users preferred to access news on their phones because it is more faster and cheaper than traditional methods like buying a newspaper. Furthermore, Facebook’s ability to allow users to choose specific news content and its data-free mode make it a popular platform. • Preferences vary between watching news clips for quick updates and reading full articles for detailed information. Some users prefer video content, while others favour written articles or audio news. This indicates diversity in content format preferences. Convenience appears to play a significant role. Short video clips on platforms like Instagram and YouTube are favoured for their brevity and ability to quickly convey essential information. Users often prefer watching these clips over reading lengthy articles, especially when time is limited. Users who prefer to listen to news indicate that this is because listening to news allows them to multitask, and able to complete other tasks while also consuming the news. Those who prefer to read primarily include generations aged 50 and above, with individuals indicating that they are able to grasp information better when they read it. • Users expressed a preference for different types of content, including videos, articles, and social media updates. YouTube was frequently mentioned as a primary source for news, with users appreciating its recommendations for videos and the ability to watch news. Social media platforms are also valued for their ability to provide tailored content. Furthermore, TikTok and Facebook are appreciated for their immediacy and variety. • It was noted that Google and dedicated news apps are typically used for deeper dives into specific stories or for verifying information. Users often turn to these platforms to validate and further confirm the headlines and snippets they encounter on social media. Google was also noted as a platform used by respondents to access breaking news. • Many respondents consume news online as part of their daily routines, during the day. Common times for news consumption are in the mornings, evenings, and during free moments throughout the day. Some individuals access news multiple times a day, often checking news updates repeatedly. • Consumption patterns for more traditional platforms seem to be more fixed, whilst consumption on online platforms appears to be more flexible, as and when people have time. In terms of more traditional platforms, people noted that the listen to the radio in the morning on the way to work or watch the news on TV in the evening. In peri-urban communities, radio is commonly

#	Theme	Observations
		<p>listened to during commutes, providing news updates while driving. Users then visit digital platforms at the end of the commute to seek additional information on the news stories heard on radio.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite the popularity of online platforms, traditional media like radio and TV remain important for many, especially for verified and in-depth news coverage. There is a strong preference for verifying news from trusted sources. While social media is convenient for quick updates, users often cross-check information on more established news websites or through traditional media like TV and radio. • Many users expressed scepticism about the reliability of news on social media, citing concerns about misinformation and the need for verification from credible sources like eNCA, IOL, and community newspapers. Reliable sources like Reuters, eNCA, and IOL are favoured for their perceived accuracy and credibility. Consequently, many respondents cross-verify news found on social media with trusted news channels or websites to ensure its accuracy. • A minority of participants actively share news stories. They tend to share news articles selectively, often based on the perceived importance or relevance to their social circle or themselves. Major news or life-changing events are shared more, while other topics are generally read and passed over. • For community-related news, especially in rural and peri-urban communities, respondents often turn to local newspapers, Facebook groups, and WhatsApp groups. Word of mouth and community chats were also mentioned as sources for local news, although they require verification. Participants noted that the news provided via WhatsApp is often less reliable and may be perceived more as “gossip” rather than news.
3.	The User Journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some users intentionally seek out news by visiting specific news websites or apps. Others come across news incidentally while browsing social media or using their devices for other purposes, and then clicking on articles that catch their eye. Several respondents noted that they rely on algorithms to recommend news based on their interests and previous searches. Many users further receive push notifications from news apps or social media platforms, which they then click on, allowing them to stay updated with breaking news. • Amongst younger individuals (ages 18 to 34) a more passive approach to news consumption was noted, whereby individuals consume news incidentally when browsing social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. • It was noted that some respondents spend more time than intended on social media as they get caught up in reading comments and exploring content related to their interests. Catchy headlines and pop-up notifications play a crucial role in grabbing users' attention in this regard. If a headline is compelling, users are more likely to click and read further or watch related videos. Furthermore, if a topic is of interest to the particular individual, will have a personal impact on said individual, resonates with the individual or is related to a trending topic than individuals are more likely to click through to the article and engage more with the story. • Users' engagement with news headlines also depends on the source's credibility. The decision to click on a headline link is influenced by the trustworthiness of the source and the person sharing it. They are cautious

#	Theme	Observations
		<p>about clicking on random links due to the risk of scams, but trust links with descriptions, previews, or those shared by trusted contacts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some users actively engage with news by commenting on articles, participating in discussions, or sharing news within their networks. Others prefer passive consumption, where they read or watch news without interacting or engaging in discussions. It was further noted that at times, when users see certain stories or trending topics on social media, they will search for more detailed news or more information on other platforms to verify what is being discussed.
4.	Value of News Media to Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The incorporation of news media into digital platforms, such as social media and search engines, was perceived as having a positive impact on these platforms with users noting that it appears to increase the number of users, increase user engagement, boost advertising revenue, and enhance user experience. Individuals noted that tailoring content to individual user interests appears to be highly advantageous for digital platforms. Users spend more time on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube when news feeds and other information are personalised based on their interests and interactions. Personalised news continually shows content that is relevant to the interests of the user, which aids in user retention and increased engagement. Platforms benefit from this increased engagement as it contributes to keeping existing users engaged while also attracting new ones, creating a larger and more active user base. The views regarding whether or not individuals would continue to use online platforms if news was no longer available appear to differ, with some individuals citing that they wouldn't engage with the platforms as much whilst others indicated it would not have an impact as they mostly use the platforms for entertainment. If digital platforms did not offer news, some users indicated they would revert to traditional media like newspapers, radio, or direct visits to news websites. It was noted that the presence of news helps build trust and credibility, making the platform a more comprehensive and valuable tool for users. This, in turn, benefits the platform by increasing user loyalty and engagement. Users appeared to value the versatility of social media platforms, which combine social interaction with news and entertainment. This multifunctionality drives user engagement and enhances the overall value of the platform.
5.	The Impact of Sensationalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users noted that the use of "sensationalism" in headlines baits one into engaging with a story Users expressed a preference for news that is straight to the point and factual. Individuals noted that "sensationalised" news lacks credibility and creates room for people to share their opinions rather than facts. Users noted that sensationalised headlines can manipulate readers' interest and emotions, leading to a desire for more factual reporting and a preference for established news sources over sensational clickbait. Exaggerated headlines were perceived by some users as misleading and untrustworthy, leading some to avoid engaging with such content altogether.

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users appear to react negatively to clickbait headlines, with most participants noting that the content generally does not correspond to the expectations generated by the headline. This leads to a reluctance to engage with sensationalised content. • While some users prefer factual news, others admitted to being attracted to “sensationalised” news stories on occasion, as it adds a bit of excitement and entertainment value. Users noted that they like to read more “sensationalised” news when they are looking to engage with stories they consider to be more “fun”.
6.	Diversity and Plurality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users acknowledge that digital platforms offer diverse perspectives through other individual’s comments offered on stories, opinions, and by users being able to access or subscribe to different news platforms (e.g. different YouTube channels) and engage with their different approaches to reporting. This diversity allows them to understand various viewpoints on a story and make informed decisions about which perspectives resonate with them. • Users are aware of confirmation bias and the importance of seeking news from multiple sources to get a balanced perspective, especially on complex issues like international conflicts. Users noted that engagement with multiple sources is important in order to ensure diversity. • It was noted that English appears to dominate online news content, with vernacular languages being less represented on online platforms. Users indicated that if they want to engage with news in vernacular languages they typically have to use more traditional methods such as TV and radio. Although platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp also offer this option. Amongst the youth it was noted that news is typically consumed in English. • Users expressed a desire for more representation of vernacular languages on digital platforms, noting that they appreciate news in their native languages and find it easier to understand.
7.	Echo chambers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users are aware that algorithms prioritise content based on their past interactions, creating echo chambers. This results in them frequently encountering news that aligns with their interests and pre-existing beliefs. • It was noted that most users appear to enjoy consuming news that is of interest to them and that aligns to their “likes”. • However, the tendency to engage with content that aligns with personal interests and the convenience of receiving tailored news updates means that users might not naturally encounter diverse or opposing viewpoints unless they actively look for them. • The algorithmic curation of news on platforms like YouTube was noted, with users mentioning the need to go beyond their feed to access diverse perspectives and avoid being limited to content that aligns with their preferences. As such, while personalised news feeds are convenient, some respondents express a desire for a diverse range of viewpoints to avoid biased or narrow perspectives. It was noted that algorithms may polarise individuals as they will only see content that supports their own views or beliefs.
8.	Mis- and Disinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users noted that they find it challenging to identify fake news due to the ease of sharing, sophisticated AI-generated content, and the use of company logos and formatting that mimic reputable sources. They rely on clues like stories

#	Theme	Observations
		<p>that lack sense, grammatical errors, and inconsistencies to identify fake news. Users also noted that when following a specific page or individual, the more followers said page has, the more reputable they believe the source to be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users noted that they further believe something to be reliable and valid if it is reported across multiple platforms. • Online platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp and other social media platforms were noted as those that typically contain more “fake news”. • Users emphasised the importance of verifying news sources and credibility and noted that they often verify news by engaging with multiple sources to validate stories seen. As an example, individuals noted that if they read something on Twitter then they use Google to confirm whether the story is true or not. Google was noted as a key validation method. • Users employ other verification methods such as fact-checking websites, AI tools like Meta AI, comparing news across multiple platforms, and checking with official sources or trusted news channels to confirm the authenticity of news. • The presence of fake news has led to reduced trust in platforms like Facebook, particularly when fake news is widespread for many users. The users avoid engaging with content they suspect to be fake and rely more on established news sources for accurate information. • Users expect platforms to implement stricter verification processes and to take action against fake news spreaders. They also emphasise the importance of educating users on how to spot fake news and encouraging responsible sharing. • Individuals indicated that they believe the sharing of fake news should be regulated but noted that doing this may prove difficult. • Users indicated that the presence and sharing of fake news has the potential to result in community unrest.
9.	Generative Artificial Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users are generally aware of generative AI platforms but vary in their level of usage. Users noted using platforms such as Meta AI, ChatGPT, Metaverse and Gemini. It was noted, however, that the use of AI platforms, seems to be bigger amongst younger individuals. • Where individuals make use of AI platforms, the primary purposes for using these include seeking information, clarifying information, research and assignments, or creating content. Users appreciate the convenience and user-friendly nature of AI for tasks like summarising articles, answering questions, generating content in simpler terms or making information easier to understand. • The majority of users noted that the platforms do not provide sources or references to original information generated. It was noted that sources are provided if the prompt is worded in a specific way or if a follow up is sent requesting the sources • A range of opinions were provided regarding the impact of AI, with some expressing concerns about job displacement, overreliance on AI for tasks like writing, and potential biases or misinformation spread through AI-generated content. • Users highlighted the need for regulation and careful integration of AI technology to address potential issues such as deepfakes, bias in algorithms, and the impact on human development, particularly in education settings.

#	Theme	Observations
		<p>Users noted that it is important to verify the information being provided through the AI platform.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While some users find AI useful for quick answers or assistance with tasks, all participants noted that they had not yet actively used the AI platforms for accessing news. The participants highlighted factors such as scepticism about the reliability and trustworthiness of AI-generated content as contributing to them not using it for information such as news. It was noted as well that at times the AI platform, such as ChatGPT, may be using outdated information, limiting its potential to provide details regarding current affairs or news.