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MEDIA INFLUENCE AND USER BEHAVIOUR IN THE NEWS ENVIRONMENT: TRADITIONAL VERSUS SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: *This study investigates behavioural patterns in identifying disinformation within news environments, where algorithmically curated information flows shape human-technology interaction. Using data from the 2025 Eurobarometer survey (n=26,114), the research employs statistical analysis to compare users' attitudes towards news in traditional and social media. Findings indicate a significant disparity: while 65.9 % of respondents express high confidence in recognising fake news, 34.1% remain unconfident. Notably, high engagement with social media correlates with a greater exposure to disinformation. Women tend to have slightly higher self-reported exposure to disinformation (23.8%) than men (21.1%). Results demonstrate that demographic factors, particularly age and years of education, significantly shape information-checking behaviours. By adopting a human-oriented perspective, the study highlights how digitally mediated environments structure users' interaction with information and condition their capacity to critically assess its reliability.*

Keywords: *digitalisation, disinformation, Eurobarometer 2025, social media, traditional media, algorithmic news, fake news recognition.*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's information environment, increasingly driven by algorithmic content selection mechanisms, the way users interact with news is undergoing profound transformations. The shift from the traditional linear model of information consumption and the rapid development of social media have increasingly mediated news access through recommendation systems. Under such conditions, users not only consume information but also become active participants in its dissemination, thereby increasing the risk of disinformation circulating in the digital space (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Schaetz et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2018).

The growing role of social media as a primary source of news and the simultaneous strengthening of disinformation's impact on digital platforms make research on behavioural features in the media space particularly relevant. Empirical studies show that the social media environment not only increases the likelihood of accidental exposure to news but also alters the cognitive mechanisms for evaluating it, particularly through information overload and selective exposure (Guo & Chen, 2022; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). At the same time, the problem is complicated by the fact that users' subjective confidence in their ability to recognize fake news often does not align with their actual critical analysis skills, which can lead to a decline in the quality of information judgments (Lyons, 2023; Motta & Stecula, 2023).

An additional challenge is the ambiguous influence of different media types on user behaviour. While traditional media are historically associated with higher levels of trust and editorial control, digital platforms are characterized by the speed of information dissemination, fragmentation of attention, and high levels of interactivity (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2018). In this context, it is particularly important to understand how different patterns of media consumption (active or passive) influence perceptions of disinformation and fact-checking practices.

Despite the substantial research on disinformation, the relationship among types of media consumption, users' subjective beliefs, and their actual fact-checking behaviour, particularly with respect to socio-demographic characteristics, remains poorly understood. This limits the possibilities for developing effective policies in the field of media literacy and information security.

Given the above, our study ***aims*** to identify peculiarities of user behavioural patterns in the perception of information from traditional and social media, considering the growing impact of algorithmically curated information flows shaping human-technology interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional model in which we consciously and more or less linearly select the information that interests us is gradually becoming obsolete. Today, we live in a "platform world," where our choices are subtly shaped by the invisible architecture of algorithms. It is no longer editors in publishing houses, but advanced recommendation systems that determine what appears on our screens, making us increasingly dependent on technology that mediates nearly every contact we have with reality (Schaetz et al., 2025; Helberger et al., 2022).

This transformation of the foundations of communication profoundly reshapes our everyday habits. Faced with the digital flood of information that inundates us every second, we

begin to intuitively seek relief through avoidance strategies. More frequently than in traditional media contexts, users of social media exhibit tendencies toward news avoidance or selective exposure to informational content, which is associated with both information overload and the personalisation of the platform environment (Guo & Chen, 2022; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). We cease to be "readers" in the traditional sense of the term; instead of regular news consumption, we engage with brief, fragmented information, often encountering it incidentally during routine online browsing (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2021).

A key dimension of these transformations is the profound redefinition of trust placed in information sources. The crisis of credibility is no longer confined to social media; it now affects the entire information ecosystem, casting a shadow over traditional institutional media as well (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). It is worth noting, however, that the relationship between social media and disinformation resists simplistic interpretations. The mechanisms through which we assess content credibility operate in nuanced ways in digital environments, making them resistant to reduction into binary distinctions between truth and falsehood (Altay et al., 2023). This has led to efforts to increase responsible content sharing on social media, particularly for business purposes (Alsyoof et al., 2025).

At the psychological level, susceptibility to manipulation rarely stems solely from a lack of knowledge. Rather, it is a function of how our beliefs filter incoming information and the extent to which we can engage in reflective thinking (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Unfortunately, the contemporary digital environment is characterised by speed, often forcing us to process messages rapidly and automatically, frequently at the expense of the careful and in-depth analysis that complex information requires.

The concept of false information is increasingly a key analytical category for examining the contemporary information ecosystem, where the quality and integrity of data in digital systems play a crucial role. Information may be understood here as an element of a dynamic communication system, in which its final quality is shaped by technical limitations, informational noise, and the multi-stage processes of transmission and interpretation (Stefanova et al., 2025). Contemporary literature indicates that false information does not constitute a homogeneous category but encompasses diverse mechanisms of content distortion, such as fabrication, manipulation, misinterpretation, and selective or incomplete presentation (Tsang, 2026).

In this sense, fake news should be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing both intentional and unintentional forms of information distortion, resulting from the interaction between information structure, context, and distribution mechanisms in the digital environment (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). At the same time, disinformation and fake news cannot be equated with fiction, as, unlike fictional content, they are not signalled as products of imagination but operate under a claim to truth, which constitutes their fundamental epistemic characteristic (Wimmer, 2025). Disinformation functions as a systemic phenomenon, whose effectiveness derives not only from the properties of the content itself but also from distribution mechanisms in digital environments and the ways users interact with platforms (Recuero, 2025).

Informational activity can be defined as a set of actions involving the searching, selection, processing, and use of information in response to an individual's cognitive needs (Given et al., 2023). Contemporary approaches, however, emphasize that information behaviour is strongly embedded in digital platform environments, where algorithmic content curation mechanisms

and platform architectures play a significant role in shaping the availability, visibility, and retention of information (Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

Information seeking is not solely intentional but often occurs through incidental exposure, which is characteristic of social media environments and significantly influences users' informational attitudes (Coutinho et al., 2023; Fletcher et al., 2020). As a result, users operate under conditions of limited informational autonomy, subject to a form of algorithmic paternalism in which contact with content is mediated and co-determined by platform logic and the activity of other network actors.

The informational activity of non-professional users remains to a considerable extent dependent on the actions of professional actors, who influence the scope of audience interest and the intensity of engagement through the selection and amplification of specific topics (Chadwick, 2017). At the same time, contemporary research indicates that users are not limited to passive consumption of information but also participate in its dissemination, including the spread of false or misleading content (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Kim et al., 2024).

This process is uneven and may lead to the reproduction of competency asymmetries within public discourse. Users characterized by higher subjective confidence in their ability to evaluate information exhibit different patterns of communicative engagement, particularly in assessing credibility and sharing content, which may influence their role in shaping information flows in digital environments (Usman et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Activities related to informational behaviour involve a diverse set of operations aimed at achieving specific cognitive goals, including: (1) information seeking, (2) content filtering, (3) evaluation and selection of information, (4) sharing, and (5) interactive communication (Li et al., 2016, p. 106). This set of activities highlights the multi-stage and complex nature of communication processes, which cannot be reduced to isolated informational acts but should be analyzed as sequential and interrelated actions within a broader communication ecosystem.

Contemporary theories suggest that informational activity in digital media environments is strongly conditioned by platform contexts and technological mechanisms organizing access to content. In this regard, algorithms and platform architecture play a crucial role in co-shaping the processes of information selection and distribution (Klinger & Svensson, 2018) as well as the responsibility of content creators in presenting information (Jędrzejewski, 2024) and the digital literacy of users in terms of the ability for critical evaluation of content (Bacik et al., 2025; Mishchuk et al., 2025). This became especially challenging due to the steep development and use of AI in media (Schinello, 2025).

In this context, the Uses and Gratifications model is particularly important. In its more recent formulations, it takes into account not only individual user needs but also environmental and technological conditions of digital media consumption. Contemporary reinterpretations of this theory indicate that user motivations also include the ability to navigate across platforms and utilize their functionalities in an integrated manner, which influences patterns of content consumption and distribution (Falgoust et al., 2022).

From this perspective, users engage in informational activities in ways that align with their needs, aiming to maximize the gratification derived from consuming information. At the same time, the contemporary digital environment fosters fragmentation of attention and multi-channel content consumption, thereby reinforcing the importance of platform context in shaping informational behaviours. Although classical formulations of the Uses and Gratifications theory emerged in the context of traditional media, their assumptions remain

useful as a reference point for analysing user behaviour in social media environments, provided they are updated to incorporate technological and platform dimensions.

Information exchange on social media is a key mechanism underpinning digital environments, where user interaction takes the form of dynamic, multi-directional communication. The interactivity of these environments arises from continuous feedback loops between users and platforms, which structure the visibility and distribution of content (Helberger et al., 2022).

Informational activity encompasses both the acquisition and distribution of information, and its course depends on platform environments and individual media usage patterns. Selective exposure remains a key mechanism shaping user behaviour in social media contexts.

Users are not merely recipients but actively participate in disseminating information, including unverified content, thereby co-creating information flows in digital environments (Shao et al., 2018). As a result, these interactions are networked and decentralized, with users shaping their communication environments by selecting sources and channels. Informational activity can thus be understood as a cyclical process involving the searching, selection, and sharing of information, strongly conditioned by the architecture of digital platforms.

An increasingly clear relationship is emerging between subjective confidence in evaluating information and actual ability to detect disinformation. A particularly important phenomenon is overconfidence, which leads to systematic overestimation of one's cognitive competencies and a reduction in the quality of informational judgments. Lyons (2023) demonstrated that individuals with the highest self-assessed ability to evaluate news are most likely to incorrectly identify fake news as true and exhibit a greater tendency to share such content. Similar conclusions are presented by other studies. The illusion of knowledge limits the process of source verification and promotes uncritical information processing, while Motta and Stecula (2023) show that excessive confidence in one's knowledge can lead to resistance to informational corrections even in scientifically well-established domains.

In contrast, research on intellectual humility and lower self-confidence often associates these traits with more reflective information processing. Studies on conspiracy thinking highlight the role of intuitive processing and limited reflectiveness, aligning with findings that greater intellectual humility fosters more critical evaluation of evidence and reduced reliance on heuristics (Bowes et al., 2023). Additionally, intellectual humility increases the likelihood of engaging in verification behaviours, such as fact-checking and seeking additional sources of information (Koetke et al., 2025). Greater cognitive reflection is associated with lower susceptibility to disinformation, primarily by reducing the influence of emotional responses.

The media environment also plays a significant role in shaping these processes. Altay et al. (2024) demonstrate that exposure to a high frequency of false information on social media may paradoxically increase subjective confidence in detecting it, while simultaneously weakening trust in traditional information sources. More broadly, Ecker et al. (2022) indicate that trust in media sources is a key moderating factor in susceptibility to disinformation. Skepticism toward social media can lead both to increased caution and to excessive rejection of reliable information.

Differences in confidence levels are also reflected in informational behaviours. Subjective confidence strongly influences susceptibility to fake news and its subsequent retention in memory and communication. In the case of visual disinformation, such as deepfakes, both high confidence and low cognitive reflectiveness increase the risk of misidentifying content.

Overall, research points to a complex interaction among self-assessed competence, information-processing styles, and characteristics of the media environment as key determinants of susceptibility to disinformation.

Research on incidental news exposure and patterns of content consumption on social media indicates an ambiguous impact of incidental exposure to information on susceptibility to disinformation and the quality of beliefs. Some studies suggest that even passive exposure to reliable content can improve the accuracy of informational judgments and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. Altay et al. (2025) demonstrate that exposure to news in environments such as Instagram or WhatsApp increases belief accuracy and overall credibility assessments, while Nanz and Matthes (2025) indicate that incidental exposure may reduce confirmation bias and weaken belief in fake news by exposing users to diverse content. Mere exposure to news increases awareness of disinformation without necessarily increasing its acceptance.

Studies comparing active and passive content consumption highlight differences in cognitive and social outcomes. Passive browsing is more often associated with negative emotional effects, whereas active participation may foster social support. Increasing attention is being paid to the growing dominance of passive news consumption and the migration of users to closed communication channels, both of which limit public debate. Research on the political implications of incidental exposure emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between exposure and political engagement (Kartal & Tyran, 2022).

Research on information verification shows that actual user behaviour often diverges from declared source-checking practices. In digital platform environments, there is a growing tendency to replace independent verification with reliance on algorithmic recommendations, which, when combined with high confidence, may reduce the likelihood of leaving the platform to verify information (Guo et al., 2022). At the same time, even fact-checking tools and "verified" labels do not guarantee improved judgment accuracy for all users, particularly those with lower media literacy, who are more likely to rely on intuition rather than factual analysis (Hameleers, 2022).

In the case of visual content and comment sections as forms of "social verification," a similar mechanism emerges in which formal analysis is replaced by contextual evaluation. Difficulties in recognizing image manipulation, such as deepfakes, are particularly evident among individuals with high confidence, highlighting limitations in their critical analysis abilities. Comment sections often function as informal indicators of credibility - users frequently treat them as more tangible markers of truth than official fact-checking labels or editorial sources (Waddell, 2018).

Another dimension concerns the lack of any reaction to potentially false content. Low confidence or difficulty in evaluating information may lead not only to greater caution but also to avoidance of news altogether, which is associated with information overload and news fatigue (Tunney et al., 2021). On the other hand, even simple instructions regarding information verification can modify user behaviour and increase the likelihood of critical engagement, at least in the short term.

The analysis of traditional and social media in terms of user behaviour should not be limited to positioning platforms within the communication system structure but must also account for the relational nature of communication processes occurring between different categories of users and content. Of key importance is the relationship between professional and

non-professional users, as well as the mechanisms of their interactions, which co-shape the dynamics of information circulation in digital environments (Chadwick, 2017; Johansson & Nożewski, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2018). Within the hybrid media system, professional actors continue to play a significant role in initiating and framing public discourse, while non-professional users participate in its diffusion, reinterpretation, and further amplification.

Peculiarities of users' behaviour and media influence in the changing media ecosystem lead to the need for analysing the current peculiarities of media influence. Based on the theoretical background and according to the aim of this study, the following research hypotheses are put forward that encompass key behavioural patterns in information perception:

RH1: There are statistically significant differences in the perception of fake news and confidence in recognising disinformation shared by traditional and social media.

RH2: Subjective perception of being personally exposed to disinformation and fake news by different types of users and types of content has a strong relationship with demographic features (gender; age; years of education).

RH3: Behavioural patterns in checking the reliability of information have strong links with demographic features (gender; age; years of education).

METHODS

This study is based on secondary data from the Flash Eurobarometer FL014EP: *Social Media Survey 2025* (European Parliament, 2026). Data collection took place between 11 and 18 June 2025 and covered all 27 European Union Member States. The target population included EU citizens and other residents aged 15 and above. The total sample comprised 26,114 respondents. Fieldwork was carried out by Ipsos European Public Affairs (Brussels).

The research employs a secondary data analysis within a cross-sectional design. The original data were collected through an online survey using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) method, which involves self-administered questionnaires completed via a web interface. The unit of analysis is the individual respondent. The primary study used quota sampling to ensure the sample reflected key socio-demographic characteristics of the population, including gender, age, and region. In the present study, the existing sample is used without any modification to the sampling procedure.

The variables were selected in accordance with the research hypotheses and grouped into four categories: dependent variables, behavioural variables, independent variables, and control variables.

Dependent Variables

Confidence in identifying disinformation captures respondents' self-assessed ability to recognise false or misleading content. The original four-point scale ("very confident" to "not at all confident") was recoded into a binary format:

1 – confident ("very confident" and "fairly confident");

0 – not confident ("not very confident" and "not at all confident").

"Don't know" responses were treated as missing values.

Perceived exposure to disinformation reflects the self-reported frequency of encountering disinformation over the past seven days. This variable was grouped into three levels: high

exposure (“very often”, “often”), medium (“sometimes”), and low (“rarely”, “never”). “Don’t know” responses were excluded.

Behavioural Variables

Information verification strategies were operationalised using a multiple-response question, in which each option was treated as a separate binary variable (1 – selected, 0 – not selected). The analysis includes the following key strategies: checking the source of information; cross-checking with alternative sources; verifying the timeliness of information; identifying spelling and grammatical errors; using fact-checking services; verifying images or videos; reading comments from other users; consulting trusted individuals; and refraining from any verification.

Independent Variables

Media consumption was operationalised through the frequency of use of traditional media (offline or digital services of TV stations, newspapers, radio, etc.) and digital media (such as social media, video or streaming platforms, blogs, online news portals, etc.). Both variables were recoded into a three-category format:

2 – high frequency (daily use);

1 – low frequency;

0 – non-use.

Active and passive information consumption were captured through two variables: intentional information seeking and incidental (passive) exposure. Both were measured as ordinal variables using a four-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to “strongly agree”, 2 to “somewhat agree”, 3 to “somewhat disagree”, and 4 to “strongly disagree”. Lower values indicate a higher level of agreement and, consequently, a stronger tendency toward the respective type of information consumption.

Control Variables

The analysis includes key demographic characteristics: gender, age, and level of education. These variables are used to test hypotheses RH2 and RH3 regarding the influence of socio-demographic factors on perceptions of disinformation and verification behaviour.

Education is operationalised using the variable “age at completion of full-time education”, which is commonly used in Eurobarometer studies as a proxy for educational attainment. Higher values indicate a longer educational trajectory and, by implication, a higher level of education.

At the same time, this operationalisation has limitations, as it does not account for institutional differences in education systems across countries and does not allow for precise identification of formal qualifications (e.g., Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees). Therefore, the results should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted in several stages, reflecting the nature of the variables and the research hypotheses. First, descriptive analysis was performed to examine the distribution of key variables, including frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and medians and interquartile ranges for ordinal variables.

Second, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test hypothesis RH1, as the dependent variables are ordinal and do not meet the assumption of normality. Effect size was assessed using eta-squared (η^2), calculated as $\eta^2 = H / (N - 1)$.

Third, hypotheses RH2 and RH3 were tested using Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) test in contingency tables, given the categorical nature of the independent variables (gender, age group, education) and the binary or ordinal nature of the dependent variables.

The strength of associations was evaluated using Cramer's V, while ordinal associations were additionally assessed using the Gamma coefficient (γ). Given the large sample size, interpretation of results is based not only on statistical significance but also on effect size measures. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics.

RESULTS

Before the main analysis, preliminary data processing was conducted. Variables in survey questions (Q) Q17 and Q18 were coded in accordance with the principles described in the Methodology section. Responses in the category "don't know" were excluded from the analysis and treated as missing values.

The total analytical sample consists of 26,114 respondents from 27 EU Member States. A detailed distribution of socio-demographic characteristics is provided in Annex A (Table A.1).

The sample is balanced by gender: 51.8% of respondents are women and 48.0% are men. The age structure shows a notable representation of older cohorts, with the largest group being respondents aged 65 and above (23.7%), while the youngest cohort (15–24 years) accounts for only 12.3% of the sample. In terms of education, the majority of respondents completed full-time education at age 20 or older (48.9%). In contrast, those with the lowest level of education (completion at age 15 or earlier) constitute the smallest group (3.6%).

Regarding the dependent variables, most respondents report confidence in their ability to identify disinformation: 65.9% are classified as "confident" and 34.1% as "not confident"; 4.6% of responses were excluded as missing values. The distribution of perceived exposure to disinformation is more balanced: low exposure is reported by 41.4% of respondents, medium by 36.2%, and high by 22.5%. The proportion of missing values for this variable is 8.7% (see Table A.2 for details).

The analysis of media consumption indicates a high level of engagement with both traditional and digital media. Daily use of traditional media accounts for 69% of the sample (combining the categories "more than 10 times a day", "2–10 times a day", and "once a day"). In comparison, the corresponding figure for digital media is slightly lower at 67.5%. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who never follow socio-political content via digital media (9.5%) is noticeably higher than for traditional media (7.2%), which may reflect differences in audience composition across media types. The full frequency distribution is presented in Table A.3.

To examine the relationship between perceived exposure to disinformation and confidence in the ability to identify it, Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) test was applied. The results indicate a statistically significant association between the variables ($\chi^2(2) = 425.66$; $p < 0.001$). Cramer's V ($V = 0.135$) suggests a weak but statistically significant relationship. Additionally, the Gamma coefficient ($\gamma = 0.179$; $p < 0.001$) indicates a positive direction of association.

As the level of exposure to disinformation increases, so does respondents' confidence in their ability to identify it (Table 1). Specifically, among respondents with low exposure, the proportion confident is 46.4%, whereas among those with high exposure, it is 21.0%.

Overall, the results point to a positive association between experience of exposure to disinformation and self-assessed ability to recognise it.

Table 1. Relationship between exposure to disinformation and confidence in identifying it

Exposure level	Not confident, n (%)	Confident, n (%)	Total, n (%)
High	1715 (22.8%)	3303 (21.0%)	5018 (21.6%)
Medium	3334 (44.4%)	5130 (32.6%)	8464 (36.4%)
Low	2463 (32.8%)	7299 (46.4%)	9762 (42.0%)
Total	7512 (100%)	15732 (100%)	23244 (100%)

Note: $\chi^2(2) = 425.661$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.135; Gamma = 0.179 ($p < 0.001$).

To test for differences in perceptions of disinformation by type of media consumption, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were used (Table 2). In particular, the analysis allowed us to assess whether there are statistically significant differences in the level of subjective interaction with disinformation and confidence in the ability to recognise it between groups of respondents with different intensities of traditional and digital media use.

Table 2. Differences in the perception of disinformation depending on the intensity of traditional and digital media consumption

Grouping variable	Dependent variable	H	df	p	η^2	MR		
						Never	Low use	High use
Digital media	Disinformation exposure	702.97	2	< 0.001	0.032	8148.84	10279.08	11734.55
Digital media	Confidence in recognition	186.95	2	< 0.001	0.008	10655.18	10995.25	11944.13
Traditional media	Disinformation exposure	28.51	2	< 0.001	0.001	10701.70	10759.55	11212.24
Traditional media	Confidence in recognition	23.28	2	< 0.001	0.001	11422.24	11277.55	11680.48

Note: H - H-statistics; df – degrees of freedom; $\eta^2 = H / (N-1)$ – effect size; MR - average rank across media consumption groups.

The results show that the intensity of digital media use is significantly associated with both dependent variables. For perceived exposure to disinformation, the Kruskal–Wallis test indicates substantial differences among groups ($H(2) = 702.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$). Mean ranks display a clear monotonic increase, from 8,148.84 in the "never" group to 10,279.08 in the "low use" group and 11,734.55 in the "high use" group. This pattern suggests that more frequent users of digital media are more likely to report encountering disinformation.

A similar, though less obvious, pattern emerges for confidence in identifying disinformation ($H(2) = 186.95$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.008$). Mean ranks increase from 10,655.18 among non-users to 11,944.13 among high-frequency users, indicating higher levels of self-reported confidence among those more engaged with digital platforms.

By contrast, the effects observed for traditional media are statistically significant but substantively negligible. For perceived exposure, $H(2) = 28.51$ ($p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$), and for confidence in identifying disinformation, $H(2) = 23.28$ ($p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$). Given the large sample size ($N > 22,000$), statistical significance is not unexpected; however, the effect sizes remain minimal. Mean ranks for perceived exposure vary within a narrow range (10,701.70 to 11,212.24), providing little evidence of a meaningful association between traditional media use and perceptions of disinformation.

Taken together, these findings offer partial support for hypothesis RH1. While statistically significant differences are observed across both media types, only digital media use is associated with substantive effects ($\eta^2 = 0.032$ and 0.008, respectively). In contrast, the effects of traditional media remain trivial in practical terms ($\eta^2 = 0.001$). This suggests that the digital media environment constitutes a more salient force for shaping perceptions of disinformation than traditional media.

To further examine hypothesis RH1, we analyse the relationship between modes of socio-political content consumption on social media (active versus passive) and the dependent variables. Group differences are assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test, with results reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in perceptions of disinformation by active and passive social media use

Grouping variable	Dependent variable	H	df	p	η^2	MR			
						Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree
Active consumption	Disinformation exposure	221.67	3	<0.001	0.017	7468.63	6723.31	6190.73	6182.58
Active consumption	Confidence in recognition	222.89	3	<0.001	0.016	7590.17	6973.69	6435.77	6541.61
Passive consumption	Disinformation exposure	891.29	3	<0.001	0.038	13163.43	11494.03	10213.62	8469.45
Passive consumption	Confidence in recognition	183.02	3	<0.001	0.008	12832.36	12024.07	11233.08	11544.14

Note: H-statistics; df – degrees of freedom; $\eta^2 = H / (N-1)$ – effect size; MR - average rank across consumption mode groups.

Regarding active information consumption, statistically significant differences were observed across groups for both dependent variables, although effect sizes remain low. Mean ranks for perceived exposure to disinformation decrease consistently from 7,468.63 in the "strongly agree" group to 6,182.80 in the "strongly disagree" group ($H(3) = 221.67$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.017$), indicating a tendency toward higher levels of self-reported exposure among respondents more strongly engaged in active information seeking. A similar pattern is observed for confidence in identifying disinformation: mean ranks decline from 7,590.17 ("strongly agree") to 6,435.77 ("tend to disagree"), with a slight increase in the "strongly disagree" group (6,541.61) ($H(3) = 222.89$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.016$).

Passive consumption demonstrates a substantially stronger association with perceived exposure to disinformation. Mean ranks decrease monotonically from 13,163.43 ("strongly agree") to 8,469.45 ("strongly disagree") ($H(3) = 891.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.038$). For confidence in identifying disinformation, the pattern is less pronounced: mean ranks decline from 12,832.36 to 11,233.08, with a slight increase in the "strongly disagree" group (11,544.14) ($H(3) = 183.02$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.008$), suggesting a potentially non-linear relationship.

Comparing the two modes of consumption reveals an important pattern: passive exposure to content shows a stronger association with perceived interaction with disinformation ($\eta^2 = 0.038$) than active information seeking ($\eta^2 = 0.017$). Despite statistical significance in both cases, the effect sizes remain small, indicating limited practical significance and suggesting that additional factors should be considered when explaining perceptions of disinformation.

To test hypothesis RH2, which concerns the relationship between perceived exposure to disinformation and respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, Pearson's chi-square test

was applied. Table 4 presents the distribution of exposure levels across socio-demographic groups.

Table 4. Levels of perceived exposure to disinformation by socio-demographic characteristics

Feature	Population group	Exposure level		
		High	Medium	Low
Gender	Male (%)	21.01	34.6	44.3
	Female (%)	23.08	37.7	38.5
		$\chi^2(4) = 84.93$, $p < 0.001$; $V = 0.042$		
Age	15–24	18.0	34.6	47.4
	25–34	17.08	34.7	47.6
	35–44	21.01	35.6	43.3
	45–54	22.01	36.9	41.0
	55–64	25.07	37.8	36.5
	65+	27.04	36.8	35.8
		$\chi^2(10) = 278.49$, $p < 0.001$; $V = 0.076$		
Education level (age at completion of full-time education)	≤15	27.01	32.8	40.1
	16–19	24.02	36.6	39.1
	20+	21.03	36.7	41.9
	Still in full-time education	17.07	34.5	47.8
	Never been in full-time education	26.0	34.9	39.1
		$\chi^2(12) = 97.35$, $p < 0.001$; $V = 0.045$		

The analysis reveals a statistically significant association between gender and perceived exposure to disinformation ($\chi^2(4) = 84.93$, $p < 0.001$); however, Cramér's V ($V = 0.042$) indicates a very weak relationship. The distribution shows only minor differences: women report slightly higher exposure (23.8%) than men (21.1%), while men are more frequently represented in the low-exposure category (44.3% vs 38.5%). Thus, despite statistical significance, gender differences are substantively minimal.

Age-related differences are also statistically significant ($\chi^2(10) = 278.49$, $p < 0.001$), with Cramér's V ($V = 0.076$) indicating a weak association. The distribution reveals a consistent trend: the share of respondents reporting high levels of exposure increases with age, from 18.0% in the 15–24 group to 27.4% among those aged 65 and over. At the same time, the proportion of respondents reporting low exposure decreases from 47.4% to 35.8%, suggesting a gradual increase in perceived exposure with age.

A similar pattern is observed for education level. Pearson's chi-square test indicates a statistically significant association between education (operationalised as age at completion of full-time education) and perceived exposure to disinformation ($\chi^2(12) = 97.35$, $p < 0.001$). However, the strength of the relationship is very weak ($V = 0.045$). Differences between educational groups remain limited. Notably, respondents who are still in education report lower exposure (17.7%) and are more likely to be in the low-exposure category (47.8%). Other groups show only minor variation, suggesting a limited substantive effect of education on perceived exposure.

Overall, the results support hypothesis RH2: statistically significant relationships exist between socio-demographic characteristics and perceived exposure to disinformation. However, low Cramér's V values ($V < 0.1$) indicate limited practical significance, suggesting that demographic factors play a relatively minor role compared to other determinants.

To test hypothesis RH3, concerning the relationship between information verification behaviours and socio-demographic characteristics, contingency table analysis was conducted for each verification strategy. Table 5 presents the distribution of responses by gender, age, and

education level, along with chi-square test results. The strength of associations is assessed using Cramér's V.

Table 5. Socio-demographic differences in information verification strategies

		Verification strategies								
Feature	**Population group**	**Check the source**	**Numerous sources checking**	**Accuracy checking**	**Grammar checking**	**Factchecking**	**Photo/video**	**Comments reading**	**Advices use**	**No actions**
Gender	Male	42.7	50.4	34.5	25.2	18.4	27.5	30.9	17	8.5
	Female	42.7	46.5	34.9	23.9	16	24.5	34.5	21.2	9.9
	χ^2	1.27	40.87	0.51	9.07	29.01	42.22	38.78	76.21	14.67
	P	0.53	<0.001	0.774	0.011	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.001
	V	0.007	0.04	0.004	0.019	0.033	0.04	0.039	0.054	0.024
Age	15–24	46	47.5	35.1	22.1	20.6	35.2	42	23.7	3.7
	25–34	47	47.5	37.5	24.1	21.8	33.5	37.5	22.1	5.1
	35–44	41.8	48.5	35.9	24.7	19.3	27.3	34.6	19.3	6.9
	45–54	41.1	50.5	36	25.3	16.7	24.5	32.2	17.4	9.6
	55–64	40.3	50.3	32.5	23.3	14.6	21.9	28.1	16.6	12.8
	65+	41.5	46.6	32.4	26.4	13	19.3	27.4	17.9	13.7
	χ^2	63.8	24.66	43.42	27.11	195.85	443.93	295.3	97.92	435.66
	P	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
	V	0.049	0.031	0.041	0.032	0.087	0.13	0.106	0.061	0.129
Educational level (age at completion of full-time education)	Less than 15	30.7	33.6	29	20.6	13.1	21.6	27.4	19.2	13.1
	16–19	38	43.4	32.2	23	15.2	22.8	30.6	18.7	11.9
	20+	46.7	54.3	37.4	26.6	18.5	27	33.7	18.7	7.9
	Still in full-time education	48.8	49.8	36.3	24.6	21.1	35.9	43	24.6	4.2
	Never been in full-time education	34.7	32.8	30.8	22.5	15.8	25.1	28.1	19.9	9.2
	χ^2	292.95	475.21	121.74	71.87	85.08	184.36	172.28	52.21	197.85
	P	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
	V	0.106	0.135	0.068	0.052	0.057	0.084	0.081	0.045	0.087

The findings allow for an assessment of both the prevalence of specific verification strategies across socio-demographic groups and the extent to which these practices are associated with respondent characteristics.

The analysis indicates statistically significant associations between verification behaviours and key socio-demographic characteristics, providing partial support for hypothesis RH3. However, the strength of these associations varies and generally remains weak to moderate.

Gender differences in verification behaviours are relatively minor. No statistically significant differences are observed for checking the source of information ($\chi^2 = 1.27$, $p = 0.53$, $V = 0.007$) or assessing the timeliness of information ($\chi^2 = 0.51$, $p = 0.774$, $V = 0.004$), indicating similar prevalence across men and women. At the same time, several other strategies show statistically significant, albeit weak, differences. Men are more likely to cross-check information with other sources (50.4% vs 46.5%), use fact-checking tools (18.4% vs 16.0%), and verify visual content (27.5% vs 24.5%). Women, in contrast, are more likely to rely on socially mediated strategies, such as reading comments (34.5% vs 30.9%) and consulting others (21.2% vs 17.0%), and are slightly more likely to report not verifying information at all (9.9% vs 8.5%). Overall, these differences remain substantively limited.

Age emerges as a more consistent and structurally significant factor shaping verification behaviours. Statistically significant associations are found across all strategies ($p < 0.001$), with effect sizes ranging from weak to moderate ($V = 0.031–0.130$). Younger respondents (15–24) are more likely to use active and multimodal strategies, including verifying visual content (35.2%), reading comments (42.0%), and consulting others (23.7%). The use of these practices declines with age. At the same time, passive behaviour becomes more common among older groups: the share of respondents who do not verify information increases from 3.7% (15–24) to 13.7% (65+). The use of fact-checking tools also declines with age (from 20.6% to 13.0%), suggesting generational differences in digital competencies. Thus, age represents a key factor structuring verification practices.

Education level also shows a clear and systematic relationship with verification behaviour, supporting the corresponding hypothesis. All strategies are significantly associated with education ($p < 0.001$), with effect sizes ranging from weak to moderate ($V = 0.045–0.135$). Higher education is associated with more active and diverse verification practices. Respondents who completed their education at age 20 or later, as well as those still studying, are more likely to verify sources (46.7% and 48.8%, respectively), cross-check information (54.3% and 49.8%), and use fact-checking tools (18.5% and 21.1%). They are also more likely to verify visual content (27.0% and 35.9%) and engage with user comments (33.7% and 43.0%). In contrast, respondents with lower levels of education demonstrate less active verification patterns and higher levels of passivity. The strongest association is observed for cross-checking information across sources ($\chi^2 = 475.21$; $V = 0.135$), highlighting the role of education in fostering critical thinking and media literacy.

In summary, the findings confirm that verification behaviours are associated with socio-demographic characteristics, although the strength of these relationships varies. Gender differences are limited, while age and, in particular, education play a more substantial role.

The analysis of behavioural responses depending on confidence in identifying disinformation reveals statistically significant differences across all strategies (Table 6).

Table 6. Behavioural responses to potential disinformation by confidence level

Behaviour	Not confident (%)	Confident (%)	χ^2	p	V
Verification of who has published	34.0	49.0	513.22	< 0.001	0.144
Verification through other sources	40.1	54.7	475.02	< 0.001	0.138
Verify the accuracy of the news	28.9	39.1	254.51	< 0.001	0.101
Church for a language mistake	21.0	27.5	126.38	< 0.001	0.071
Factchecking	12.8	20.2	212.12	< 0.001	0.092
Photo/video verification	19.0	30.8	398.40	< 0.001	0.126
Comments reading	32.3	34.3	9.37	0.002	0.019
Advices use	21.0	18.7	20.03	< 0.001	0.028
No actions	13.0	6.2	327.89	< 0.001	0.115
Difficult to answer	3.4	1.8	59.90	< 0.001	0.049

Note: χ^2 - Pirson's criterion; V - Cramér's coefficient.

Pearson's chi-square tests indicate significant differences in user behaviour across levels of confidence. More confident users are considerably more likely to engage in active verification strategies. For example, they check the source of information more frequently (49.0% vs 34.0%) and cross-check information with other sources (54.7% vs 40.1%). Similar patterns are observed for verifying visual content (30.8% vs 19.0%) and using fact-checking tools (20.2% vs 12.8%).

By contrast, less confident users are more likely to adopt passive strategies, including reporting that they do not verify information at all (13.0% vs 6.2%).

DISCUSSION

The empirical results obtained allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the functioning of the information society in the conditions of the mass spread of disinformation. The revealed patterns indicate a transformation in media consumption, in which digital platforms structure the experience of interacting with fake news. Our findings align with recent research (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023; Scherman et al., 2025; Schäfer, 2023), indicating that passive or incidental exposure to socio-political content on social media is more strongly associated with higher susceptibility to misinformation than active information seeking, which tends to promote critical evaluation and verification behaviours.

The relationship between users' confidence and their actions is also important. The data confirm that threat awareness and confidence in one's own digital competences act as catalysts for critical thinking: the higher the self-assessment of one's ability to recognise manipulation, the more proactive the verification practices. Analysis of socio-demographic factors revealed a pronounced digital divide in information-verification skills. The decrease in the use of fact-checking tools among older age groups highlights generational differences. At the same time, the close relationship between education level and information verification strategies emphasises the special role of formal education in the development of media literacy.

When interpreting these results, certain methodological limitations must be taken into account. Since the study is based on secondary data analysis with a cross-sectional design, it only reveals statistical associations, making it impossible to establish strict cause-and-effect relationships. Furthermore, operationalising educational attainment through the age of completion is flawed because it does not account for institutional differences in education systems across countries. The subjective nature of respondents' self-assessment of self-confidence also carries the risk of social desirability bias. Given this, future research should combine traditional survey methods with real-world behavioural data (digital trace data) to provide a more objective assessment of audiences' ability to identify and counter disinformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed several patterns in user behaviour. In particular, the hypothesis regarding the influence of media consumption on the perception of disinformation was partially confirmed. It was found that the digital media environment is more relevant to the formation of perceptions of disinformation than the traditional media environment. More active consumers of digital content are more likely to report encountering disinformation and have a higher level of confidence in recognising it. In contrast, passive content exposure is more strongly associated with subjective engagement with fakes than with purposeful information search.

In addition, the hypothesis that socio-demographic characteristics are associated with the level of interaction with disinformation was confirmed. However, these connections were statistically significant but weak in magnitude. Gender and educational differences are minimal, but the most pronounced age trend was that, as age increased, the proportion of people reporting a high level of interaction with fakes increased.

The hypothesis that demographic determinants influence verification practices was also confirmed. Age and education level play a significant role in shaping patterns of information verification. Higher education levels are associated with more active and diverse verification practices, and younger respondents are more likely to resort to multimodal strategies, such as analysing visual content or reading comments. In contrast, the proportion of passive behaviour is highest among older age groups. Finally, the results showed a positive relationship between experience with disinformation and self-esteem: more confident users are significantly more likely to use active verification strategies, such as checking with other sources or searching for primary sources, while less confident users are more likely to be passive or completely ignore verification.

In sum, several important conclusions can be made. People's behavioural patterns regarding misinformation and their propensity to check news are, to some extent, inert. Users with higher educational levels are more active and responsible in verifying information, and their strategies for checking news are more advanced. The current tendency to use social media as a primary source of news is linked to the increasing spread of fake news and more complex procedures for its verification. Given this, social media must develop strategies for responsibility in the media environment as modern news providers and encourage purposeful, rather than random, news seeking. At the same time, there is a strong need to increase users' media literacy so they do not passively use social media.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLICATION AND POLICY

The findings highlight the need to improve European Union policies to counter disinformation, taking into account users' behavioral characteristics in the digital environment. In particular, regulatory initiatives should combine requirements for algorithmic transparency and platform accountability with support for educational programs that develop critical-thinking and information-verification skills.

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Annex A

Table A.1. Socio-demographic features of respondents

Feature	Population group	n	%
Gender	Male	12 529	48
	Female	13 527	51,8
	Other / not indicated	58	0,2
Age	15-24	3 223	12,3
	25-34	3 894	14,9
	35-44	4 289	16,4
	45-54	4 350	16,7
	55-64	4 168	16
	65 and above	6 190	23,7
Educational level (age at completion of full-time education)	Less than 15	938	3,6
	16-19	8 340	31,9
	20 and more	12 769	48,9
	Still in full-time education	2 253	8,6
	Never been in full-time education	533	2
	Total sample	26 114	100

Note: group "Other / not indicated" is excluded from analysis, as well as responses "I don't know" and "Refusal" (concerning the answers for education level).

Table A.2. Distribution of dependent variables: confidence in recognising disinformation and level of subjective engagement

Variable	Value	n (valid)[3]	% (valid)
Confidence in disinformation recognition [1]	Not confident	8 491	34,1
	Confident	16 421	65,9
Level of engagement with disinformation [2]	High (very often / often)	5 363	22,5
	Medium (sometimes)	8 623	36,2
	Low (random / never)	9 861	41,4

Note: [1]: 0 – "not very confident" + "not confident at all"; 1 – "somewhat confident" + "very confident", [2:] 1 – high engagement, 2 - medium, 3 - low engagement. "Difficult to answer" responses were excluded as system missing values.[3]: valid - 24 912, missed -1 202.

Table A.3. Frequency of use of traditional and digital media for consumption of socio-political content

Media type	Frequency of use	n[1]	%	Cumulative %
Traditional	Newer	1 751	7,2	7,2
	Low use	5 745	23,8	31
	High use	16 683	69	100
Digital	Newer	2 308	9,5	9,5
	Low use	5 564	22,9	32,5
	High use	16 385	67,5	100

Note: [1]: number of valid responses (for digital media n=24257; for traditional media n=24179); % are calculated for the valid sample.

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