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Children and young people's views on disinformation: a qualitative study from Portugal

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the perspectives of children and young people about disinformation and news consumption. Based on the inputs of participants and their own perceptions on the matter, the terms news and information are adopted to investigate how younger generation relates to online environments. We explore how this phenomenon is present in their daily lives, the different ways they experience and perceive its potential impact on society, as well as strategies adopted to tackle it. The analysis is based on data obtained from 38 focus groups held with 257 children and young people aged between 11 and 20, attending 6th, 9th and 12th grades in public schools in mainland Portugal. Results indicated that they have access to news regularly however, it is not pursued to fulfil a particular purpose. Televised news constitutes the main source of news consumption. News broadcasted on TV are perceived as the most reliable source in relation to online information and social networks, that are considered more susceptible to fake news. Disinformation is a relatively familiar issue for a portion of the participants but is seen as neither a problem nor a concern. There is a weak awareness about the impacts and consequences of this phenomenon, although there are differences according to age.

Keywords

Information, news, disinformation, children, young people, Media Literacy

Introduction

The year 2016 is considered a turning point on the spread of fake news in the virtual landscape. The presidential elections held in the United States, and the national Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom has posed a noteworthy impact on the discussions regarding the consequences of disinformation propagated widely and at an unprecedented speed.

It is important to highlight that fake news, misinformation and disinformation, among others, are not consensual terms and its meaning may differ considerably. The definition adopted for the theoretical framework of the study presented in this article is based on the conceptual deconstruction defined as information disorder (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) where “mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant. Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm. Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (2017:5). The problematization regarding conceptual definition is relevant, since based on what is understood as information disorder, will influence strategies to address it.

Disinformation has acquired significant public attention and has developed into a crucial academic topic in the context of post-truth despite the fact it is not a new phenomenon. However, sharing of false, distorted and/or manipulated information currently presents distinctive features such as volume, amplitude and speed of transmission (Kapantai *et al* 2021). Frequently equated with fake news, disinformation is a bigger issue that “includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (High Level Group, 2018, p. 3). Differences between disinformation and fake news refers not only to its scope, but also format. Disinformation is intentionally deceitful and can be spread through different formats. Fake news, on the other hand, mimics the news but manipulates its content (Tandoc Jr. *et al* 2020).

The content of fake news or false news reveal differences depending on the country/region in which they are produced. The study conducted by Humprecht (2019) on the spread of disinformation in four Western countries revealed that results are much influenced by specificities of national information environments and communication cultures. The author states that the misuse of social networks as sources of false news poses risks to democracies especially when disinformation creates narratives that aim to respond to specific objectives, often of a political nature or inciting hatred and intolerance. Online misinformation imposes other challenges, tracing authorship, focus on headlines instead of delving into the content and reliability of the source of information used to support the data. As well as challenges in the individual and collective spheres, affecting our perception of the world and the democratic functioning of societies (Monsees, 2023). Having the necessary training and tools to identify manipulation of information can be seen as *sine qua non* to discredit it, aligned with recognizing (and reporting) false information (Jones-Jang *et al*, 2021; Hameleers *et al*, 2022).

In-depth and multi-dimensional studies have been conducted internationally to comprehend how these phenomena affects and is present in the lives of children and young people (Chu & Wong, 2023; Taeyoung Lee, 2021; Herrero-Diz *et al.*, 2021; Howard *et al.*, 2021). This is the case with the research project “bYou - Study of the Experiences and Expressions of Children and Young People about the Media”. The project is an ongoing investigation at the University of Minho (Portugal) with funding from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. In this paper we looked at disinformation from the perspective of young people's information habits.

Young generations and disinformation

For the post-Millennial generation, children and young people born after 1997, the use of media is a widespread habit, but they differ from Millennials due to their preferential use of visual and messaging platforms (Nee, 2019). According to Tandoc Jr. *et al* (2020) and Furnival e Santos (2019) *Whats App* groups are one of the main sources of diffusion of information among social network users. Social media platforms imply a specific challenge in the production and dissemination of false information as they occur, in many circumstances, at the individual level. The degree of influence given by the transmitter of this information in relation to the recipient, such as friends and family members, reduces distrust regarding the veracity of the facts (Jones-Jang *et al*, 2021; Allcott *et al*, 2019).

Motivations for using social networks are varied. According to Tandoc Jr. *et al* (2020) there are five reasons that stand out: information, surveillance, romance, social belonging and entertainment. The form of self-exposure and self-representation on social networks is linked to the desire for the establishment of relationships, positive comments and recognition. Given these motivations, comments that can generate controversy, a negative image and/or criticism tend to weigh heavily on the choice of not questioning misinformation since “response to fake news can go both ways: correcting misinformation can help enhance one’s self-esteem; however, doing so might also compromise one’s relationship with the person who posted the fake news article (Corbu *et al* 2020). In a survey conducted in Singapore (Tandoc Jr. *et al*, 2020) with 2501 students indicated another reason for reduced actions against misinformation or false statements, they felt as if their opinion would not make a difference. The same result was highlighted by Ponte (2019) in a comparative study between Italy and Portugal where more than half of the Italian children that came across hate messages on the internet did not respond or criticize its content. “As noted, the rates among the younger age group are particularly high, suggesting they do not feel able to have an intervention” (Ponte, 2019:175).

In Portugal, indicators based on a survey from 2018 has shown a higher percentage (from 10% to 23%) of negative online experiences including cyberbullying and hate messages. Girls are 27% more vulnerable to online negative experiences in relation to boys, 18%. Regarding age groups, the percentage is similar among children with 9-10 years old and 15-17 years old, 25%. While children with 11-12 years the percentage is 17% and 23% for adolescents between 13-14 years old (Ponte, 2019). “These competing needs – self-presentation and social relationship – have to be balanced on social media” (Tandoc Jr. *et al*, 2020:393).

Another equally troublesome dimension related to the consumption of information available online concerns privacy (Livingstone, 2006). With the increasing datafication of users, younger generation are particularly vulnerable to the use of their personal information for political and economic objectives without consent or knowledge to identify possible attempts to manipulate information or to influence their choices (Livingstone *et al* 2020; Stoilova *et al*, 2020). Furthermore, children and young people tend to consider that social media environments in which they participate in are spheres of personal expression, and that possible invasions of privacy would occur as a result of parental interventions, unaware of how algorithm systems and personal data collection work (Stoilova *et al*, 2020). The invasion of privacy through datafication interferes in the child’s and youth agency to determine how, and to what purpose their information may be used (Stoilova *et al*, 2021).

Therefore, challenges related to media literacy involve not only training and development of skills for verifying information, but also the identification of mechanisms and tools that respond to the demands/profile of younger audiences. As defined by Notley and Dezuanni (2019) there is an urgent need to establish a pedagogy rethought for the digital age. Cultural and socioeconomic specificities also play an important role when thinking about ways to address disinformation, as well as a multi-disciplinary approach (George *et al* 2021). Also, appreciation of multiple expressions of youth based on ethnic, racial and cultural diversity can serve as inspiration for creative and inclusive solutions.

The analysis of mechanisms involved in the reception, dissemination and reproduction of information/misinformation are related to multilayered phenomena, including approach, content and context. “Definitions of concepts vary across approaches and jurisdictions but cluster around media languages and narrative concepts, media representations and social or ideological influences, audience and reception theory, institutional and industry practices, and the role of technologies in production, distribution and access” (Notley and Dezuanni, 2019:693).

Faced with a set of phenomena that influence and are influenced by interactions between individuals and technology, we will present data from a survey carried out with adolescents from (and living) in Portugal. Listening to children and youth is critical to understand their own perceptions about the subject and to draw strategies and methodologies aligned to their demands.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project called "bYou - Study of the Experiences and Expressions of Children and Young People about the Media". Among its objectives, this project aims to, 1) Listen to children and young people about the presence, role and importance of the media in their lives; 2) Learn and analyse their media practices and experiences, and 3) Promote their expression and participation in and through the media. The main objective of this article is to understand how children and young people in the Portuguese context use media in their daily lives, and what mechanisms are adopted to receive large amounts of information amid misinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news. We sought to discuss with them the phenomenon of disinformation, what they know about it, how it is present in their daily lives, how they deal with it and what strategies they use to tackle it.

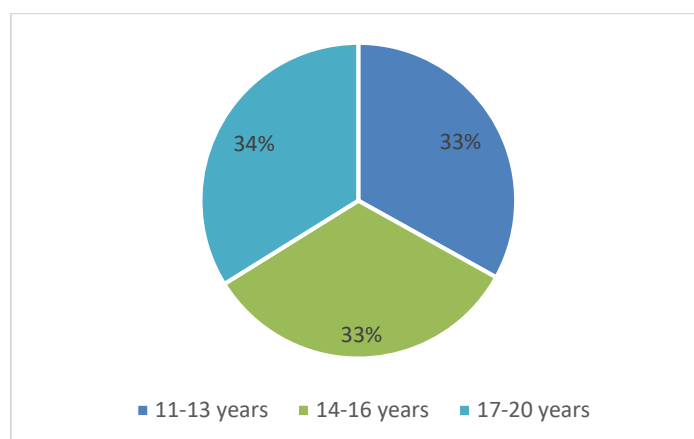
The analysis is based on data gathered from 38 focus groups conducted with a sample of 257 children and young people living in Portugal, aged between 11 and 20, attending eight national and public basic and secondary schools. The schools were selected based on Territorial Units II of mainland Portugal, which are made up of 5 TUs. Following a criterion of convenience and availability of school groupings, one grouping was selected for each TU. This ensured the participation of schools nationwide (considering mainland Portugal).

It should be noted that the names of the participants are fictitious, in order to guarantee their anonymity and respect their privacy.

Figure 1 shows that the age groups of the participants are balanced in terms of age, 33% are between 11 and 13 years old, 33% are between 14 and 16 years old and 34% are between 17 and 20 years old.

Figure 1

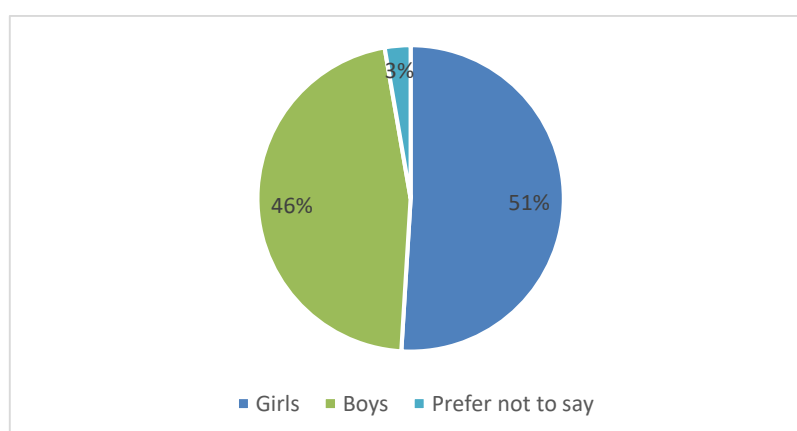
Age groups



In relation to gender 51% are girls, 46% are boys and 3% preferred not to self-identify (Figure 2).

Figure 2

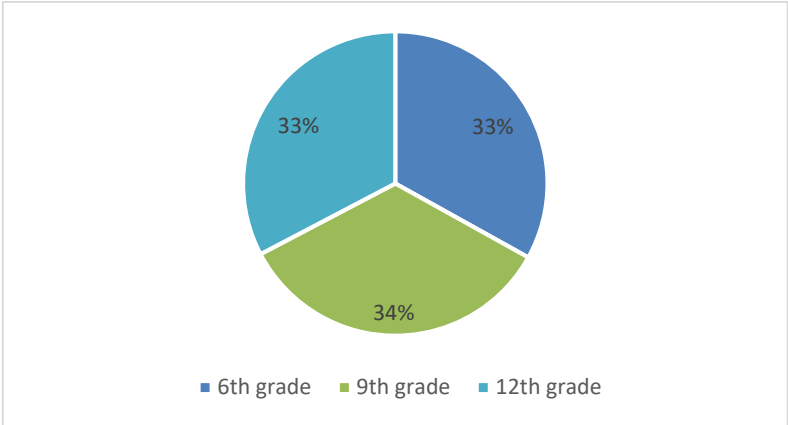
Gender



The bYou research project focused on 3 years of schooling, 6th, 9th and 12th grades. Each of these grades represents the last year of each school cycle. Figure 3 shows the number of participants per year of schooling.

Figure 3

School grades



The main topic analysed in this paper - Information and disinformation - was one of the five themes discussed during the focus groups. The data obtained was organised through Maxqda software using thematic categories. The creation of the categories was subject to inter-pair coding and 10 categories were created, as shown in Table 1. This study follows a qualitative methodology, based on interpretative analysis.

Table 1

Focus groups' categories of analysis

Categories of analysis
1. News consumption
2. Sources of information
3. Themes of major and minor interest in the news
4. Talk and comments on the news
5. The importance of being informed
6. Ways of identifying the veracity of news
7. Sharing of news and information
8. Reasons for the production and dissemination of disinformation
9. The problem of fake news/fake information
10. Trust/distrust in the media and networks

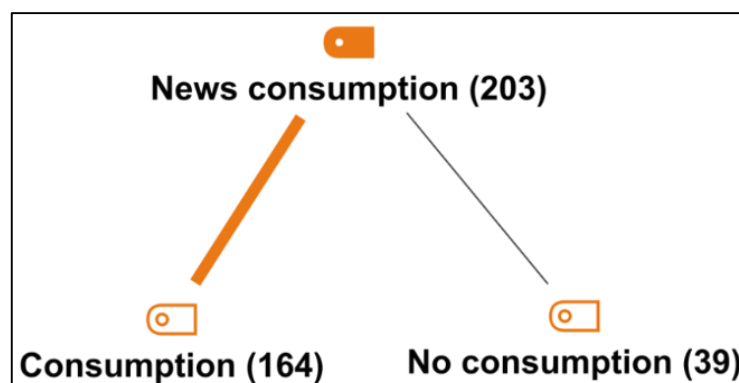
Results

News consumption and the importance of being informed

According to data, for most participants, news consumption is part of their daily lives for all three years of schooling ($n=203$), and they have access to news regularly. The opposite, not consuming news, is mentioned in a significantly smaller number of responses (19%) as demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 5

News consumption



Students from the 6th, 9th and 12th grades used the following expressions to indicate the frequency of news consumption: “every day”, “almost every day”, “constantly”, “frequently” and “I usually watch the news”. They also applied the terms

“sometimes”, “during the weekend” and “when something special happens”, but in smaller percentage. Less frequent consumption, as well as non-consumption of news, is very much associated with the fact that the news does not respond to any personal interest:

I'm completely oblivious to the world around me... Because it doesn't make any difference to me, it doesn't interest me much (Francisca, 15, 9th grade).

Some news are “dry”, uninteresting (Tiago, 15, 9th grade).

The repetitive and negative nature of the news, similar to the findings in a study conducted in the Netherlands (Tamboer *et al*, 2022), justifies some of the responses that reveals their lack of interest:

I don't feel like watching the news anymore. It's just tragedies! Nowadays, in two hours of news coverage less than a minute is actually helpful... now it is all about the war, but before it was Covid, then it must be someone who killed someone (Bernardo, 14, 9th grade).

Daily news consumption, as indicated by a significant number of responses, is due above all to the importance attributed to staying informed. The main motivation for all three years of schooling is understand what is happening around them and in the world, and to be up to date with current affairs. News about climate change, war and diseases are also considered important because it helps them to know how to act, avoid mistakes or improve individual behavior and society in general. It is also a prerequisite for being able to express themselves, speak up and have an opinion on current affairs and/or other topics,

(...) Being informed is important so as not to fall into ignorance and be able to speak up and defend our ideas” (Diana, 14, 9th grade).

Answers among 9th and 12th graders indicated that information is essential to be able to have an opinion, to establish a dialogue and interact with others. Ignorance is perceived as to being trapped in a bubble, a sign of disconnection with the world and even involving a risk of being marginalized and excluded,

[Without news] we would be completely disconnected from the world, we would just live in our little bubble” (Carolina, 14, 9th grade).

If we don't know anything, what will we talk about? (Miguel (17, 12th grade).

Especially for 12th graders, who are reaching the age of majority, some of the responses expressed a clear awareness that access to information is decisive to determine their vote, for example. However, despite acknowledging the relevance of being informed, perceived by some as a duty, they do not always have the habit of seeking out news and information.

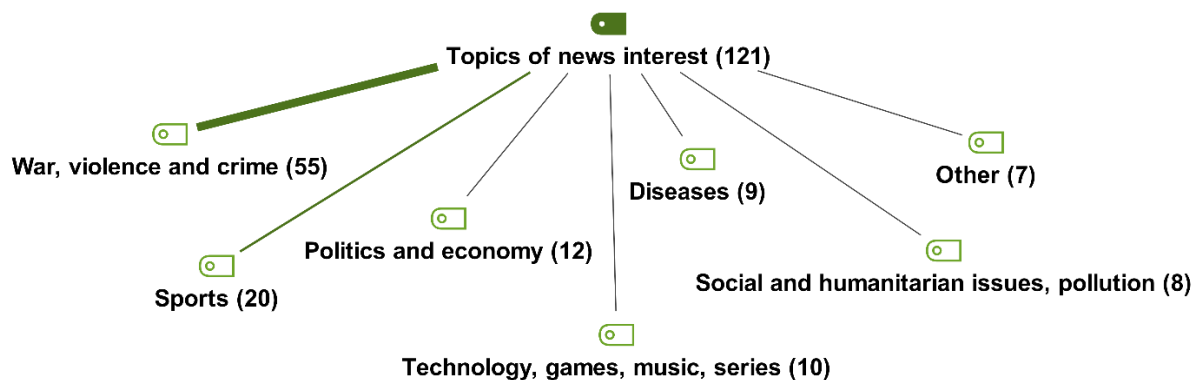
Themes of major and minor interest in the news

Concerning this topic, participants' responses were distributed into 7 categories. The response with a higher number of answers is “War, Violence and Crime”, however, considering that the focus groups took place close to the start of the war in Ukraine, the theme is aligned with the international context of the time. The COVID-19 pandemic, despite still posing greater risks during field work, appeared in a reduced number of responses. In second place, "Sports" appeared followed by a low percentage that emphasize interest in politics and economy. Given the recognition of the relevance of news, it was expected that politics would be of major interest for young people, at least for the older ones, but data revealed different results. The topic “war, violence and crime” was the most declared interest (which seems understandable given that focus groups were held during the start of the war in Ukraine), as seen in the figure below.

The category “Technology, games, music, series”, with a comparative low number of responses, emphasizes that it is a topic of low interest in the news, but not in their daily lives, as they make recurrent use of technological devices.

Figure 6

Major topics of interest



Main sources of news and trust in the media

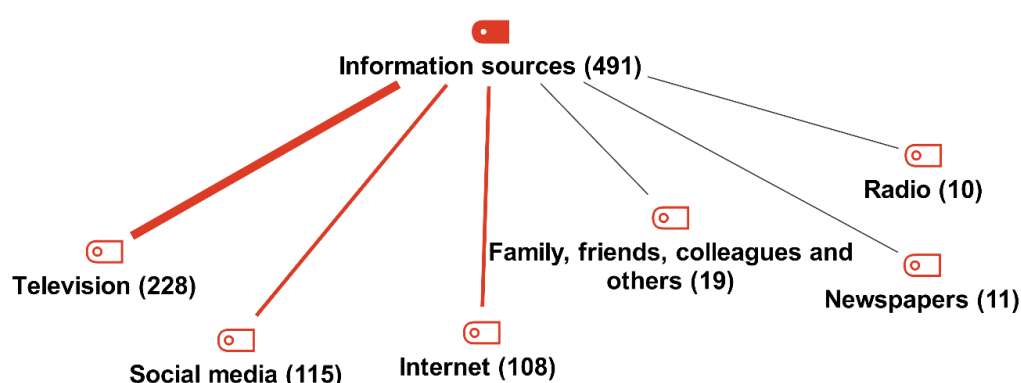
Focus groups also explored how young people get information and through what means they consume news. Similar to a survey on media practices of young Australians aged 8 to 16 years old (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019), the bYou study also demonstrated that among Portuguese children and youth, television continues to be the main source of accessing the news. According to (r=55) responses from 6th graders television is the means through which they follow the news. For the 9th (r=44) and 12th (r=43) grades the number of responses drops around 11%, but television continues to dominate as a means of accessing the news. The second major means of accessing the news were social networks for all three grades, with a lower difference for 6th graders in relation to 9th and 12th graders. References to Instagram and Twitter are the most common responses, the latter especially for the 12th grade. Responses of 6th graders indicated as their second news

source the means grouped under the heading of Internet and mobile phone, which also included Google, news sites and other websites.

Family members, friends and colleagues are also mentioned as means through which young people seek information, although in a considerably smaller number, as can be seen in the figure below. Newspapers (printed and online) and radio are the least cited means of information. For students from the 6th and 9th grades it is almost not mentioned. For 12th graders there is a slight increase in the use of these media, more radio than newspapers, given the consumption of news via radio when young people travel.

Figure 7

Main sources of information



The fact that television appears as the news medium most used by the participants, is consistent with the fact that news consumption is significantly influenced by family context, particularly at mealtimes. In fact, this is a characteristic also highlighted by Notley and Dezuanni regarding news consumption by young Australians: “It is typically social, starting in the family home” (2019:701). In most responses, family context seems to be perceived as a natural and opportune situation to respond to the desire to keep up to date with the news. However, some responses also revealed that news consumption is due more to a family routine than to genuine interest:

I watch the news at dinner time because my parents are interested, but I confess that if it weren't for them I wouldn't watch it (Beatriz, 18, 12th grade).

Particularly in the 9th grade, this routine feels like an imposition:

At dinner I want to watch something other than the news, but someone wants to watch the news so everyone has to watch the news (Rebeca, 15, 9th grade).

Television is the means of information in which young people have the greatest confidence regarding the veracity of information, as opposed to the tendency to distrust social networks and other internet platforms. But this relationship of greater trust or distrust in relation to different media is neither linear nor, in almost all responses,

supported by knowledge about the difference between classic media and new media. There are practically no references to the mediation work of journalists and the editorial board as well as ethical responsibility to which they are obliged to follow, namely checking sources and impartiality to justify the trust attributed to television as a news source. Most of the responses, including those from 12th grade students, limited themselves to stating that they have more confidence in the information broadcasted by TV news services because they are based on reliable sources, although they don't substantiate this claim:

When the news is on television we should trust it because I think it is a reliable source (Alice, 18, 12th grade).

Only a few isolated responses presented relatively informed arguments to explain the greater trust attributed to classical communication media and formats:

It is forbidden for a journalist to lie, but a person can post anything on the Internet without suffering consequences (Timoteo, 11, 6th grade).

On Twitter, information is misleading and anyone can publish it and they don't have to say where it comes from (Santiago, 18, 12th grade).

It is as if the central place that television has occupied for decades in almost all homes and in the daily lives of a large part of the population ensures an aura of credibility, as can be inferred from statements such as,

On television we tend to associate news with truth because, as almost all Portuguese people see it, they have to inform the truth to supply with good information" (Laura, 11, 6th grade).

As we are used to watching the news since we were little, what is shown on television is true and we believe everything the news says. It may not even be. But on the news we have more of that feeling of being told the truth compared to a sly article on the internet (Mafalda, 18, 12th grade).

Trust attributed to television and news programs does not mean, however, that all students consider that television news is always true. Some responses highlighted the influence of ideological perspectives, especially when the subject is politics.

On television news about political parties, if we pay attention, we can notice that there is bias sometimes (Matilde, 17, 12th grade).

Other responses indicated the exaggeration and sensationalism that characterizes news programs or channels, as well as the fact that news is often released at the actual moment it happens, when there was still no time to check the facts.

Disinformation and fake news

In general, we found that fake news and misinformation are a phenomenon known to participants, regardless of the grade. In fact, they know how to point out reasons for producing disinformation. In all responses that mentioned these reasons ($n=61$), the first was profit and self-interest that fake news can bring to those who produce or disseminate it. Fake news generates likes and followers, which turns them into a lucrative business or a visibility factor that may lead to prominence and fame.

[What is at stake] is fame and money, because by circulating fake news it can generate controversy, which is what people like. And they will check the news. They can make money because they can get a lot of views that will make money for the company or the person who made it. It is for financial reasons (Ezequiel, 14, 9th grade).

Other reasons highlighted for creating and spreading fake news is the search for specific audiences since if they identify with the content and opinions disseminated there is a tendency to believe it is true information. As well as the intention to deceive or harm, manipulate for political purposes, or just for a distorted form of entertainment/fun.

Regarding problems related to fake news and disinformation, responses indicated the negative effects they can cause: induce wrong ideas, distort opinions, confusion and ignorance, false expectations, discredit and lack of trust in the news media and even in science; lead to bad decisions and actions, as seen in cases of refusal of the Covid vaccine; generate conflicts, divisions and extremism; irremediably destroy someone's image and professional career through defamation - which happens most often with celebrities - or affect them psychologically and/or their well-being.

False news and information can be a problem for people or society because we believe in something that is not happening, it is precisely the opposite and that can mislead us. If we buy a product and believe that it does something that it doesn't, we didn't buy it for that reason and that's why we were deceived... Misinformation in general among the population is a bad thing; we support the wrong causes, the wrong ideologies (David, 14, 9th grade).

These negative impacts are considered more problematic when is uncritically shared as true information, which happens particularly when people identify with the content and opinions conveyed (Jones-Jang *et al* 2021).

Ways of identifying the veracity of news

Given the awareness that young participants revealed about misinformation and fake news, we asked: what leads them to doubt the veracity of a piece of news? And what strategies do they adopt for verification?

Exaggeration and sensationalism, as already mentioned, along with strangeness in relation to details or the lack of verisimilitude of content are the factors that lead most students to doubt the veracity of a piece of news. As television media is, above all, associated with trust and truth, the hypothesis of falsehood arises essentially in relation to news disseminated through social networks, Google, news sites and others.

When it occurs, the verification strategy mentioned most frequently ($n=136$) is research, regardless of the school year. But most of the answers that indicate research

explain that it refers to looking for the same news in different media sources: social networks, news sites and other references suggested by Google. The same information that appears repeatedly is perceived as a sign of veracity. Using television to find out whether the news on a social network or website is true is also a recommended verification strategy. If doubt arises regarding television news, the strategy is to compare with different channels.

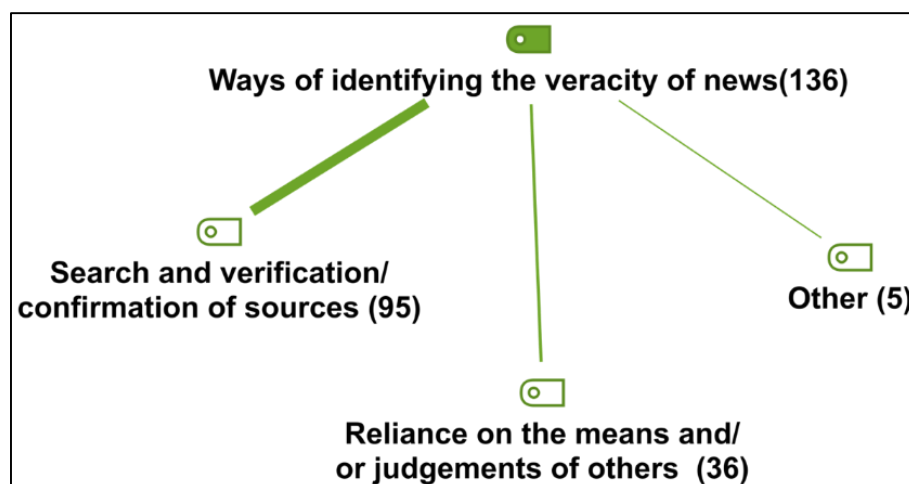
Another common strategy is to check the credibility of the news source. If the site is reliable – as perceived in relation to television channels – then the news will also be considered authentic. Hence, a number of responses seems to overlap source and means of information. In other words, if a source is considered reliable, the information will consequently also be reliable, without consulting the information producing source such as the institution, author, document and etc. It is also noted that credibility is sometimes confused with good reputation and fame.

When a piece of new appears I usually search on Google and if there is a more renowned website talking about, it is probably true. Otherwise, it's because it's a lie (Margarida, 17, 12th grade).

The figure below confirms the predominance of the two strategies mentioned.

Figure 8

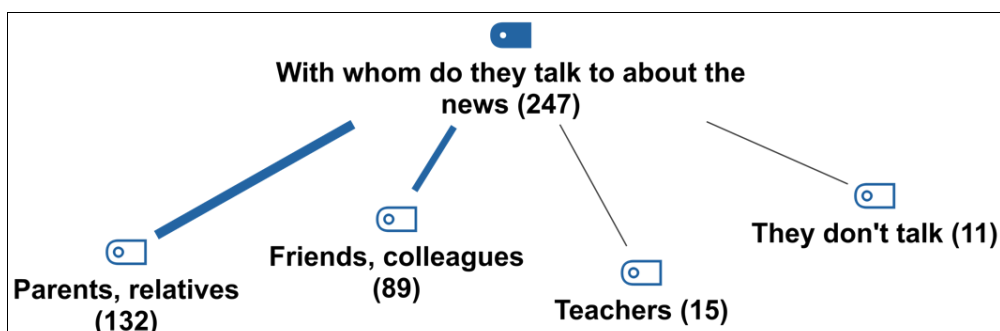
Ways of identifying the veracity of news



Asking their parents (6th grade), parents and friends (9th grade), or just friends (12th grade) about questionable news is another process used by young people to verify its validity. Although this mechanism is only referred by a small number of participants, when asked whether they talk about the news and with whom (r=247) they mentioned in first place, parents/family members; secondly with friends/colleagues; lastly, and to a much lesser extent, with teachers (see Figure 9). Conversations with parents are more important for 6th graders than 9th and 12th graders. For the latter, friends become the prevailing interlocutors.

Figure 9

With whom do they talk to about the news



Still in relation to the means of validating news, although little mentioned, reading comments and opinions on the assumption that if a piece of news has many favorable remarks or if its author has many followers, then, it must be true. It should be noted that references to the author, accuracy and date of the news are practically absent from responses. Different models of critical analysis establish essential criteria for checking the veracity of information such as authority, rigor, timeline and its purpose/aim. It should be added that another key issue for critical analysis of news and information in general is the distinction between facts and opinions, not mentioned in any of the responses. It is also worth clarifying that sensationalism of a piece of news does not correspond to what we call fake news, which is why some of the answers given by participants in the focus groups lead to confusion between disinformation and bad information (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Based on responses we conclude that despite being familiar with the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation, students do not master the techniques for critical analysis of information and news. The analytical strategies they use are somewhat limited to more superficial and obvious aspects– exaggeration, sensationalism, lack of verisimilitude – which are understood through common sense. Furthermore, more than critically analysing news, media or sources, what they do is compare them. Searching and comparing the same news in different media is the form of validation most indicated by responses.

The fragility at the level of critical analysis is what eventually explains the degree of certainty with which they respond to the question of how they can be assured of the truth or falsity of a piece of news:

I know how to distinguish between true news and false information.”
(Fábio, 11, 6th grade).

I know that news is fake if it is sensationalist news (Diogo, 14, 9th grade).

I find out if a piece of news is true or false by looking at the source
(Gustavo, 14, 9th grade).

I can find out if a piece of news is fake or true based on the type of website (Mariana, 19, 12th grade).

In general, there seems to be a significant amount of self-confidence regarding the ability to understand whether or not news is true and, if it appears to be doubtful, to verify it. In light of what we have demonstrated, this self-confidence reveals more of a subjective belief than of effective skills in critical analysis of news and sources.

Online comments and share of news

The question regarding the practice of commenting on news ($n=45$) indicated that a considerable number of participants do not do so, regardless of the grade. while only ($n=3$) asserted to post comments online. On the other hand, data about sharing news and information online ($n=61$) reveals that according to ($n=41$) participants answered to sharing information and news although not commenting on its content.

A significant number of responses mentioned some prior care before sharing information not to disseminate false content. This resistance to sharing information without being sure that it is true indicated an awareness that misinformation can have negative consequences.

Figure 10

Comments on online news

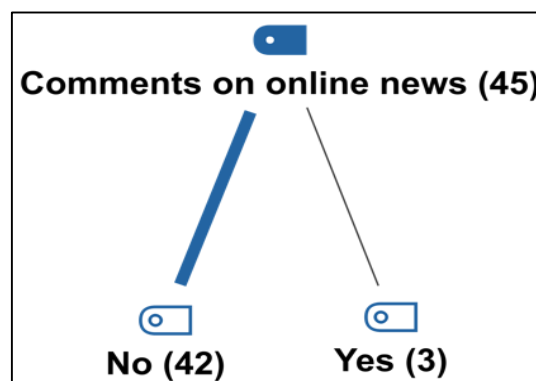
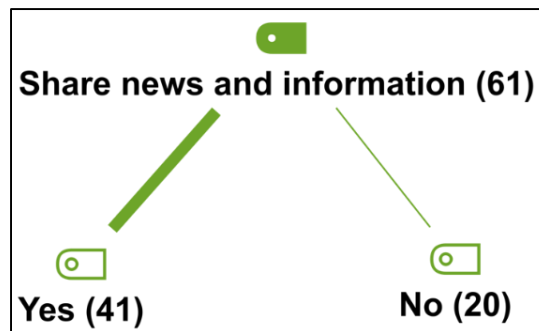


Figure 11

Share news and information



Discussion and Conclusions

The premise of this article was that the study of disinformation from the perspective of children and young people should be understood and studied from the point of view of how they inform themselves about the world and what their news practices are. Based on the inputs of participants and their own perceptions on the matter, the terms news and information at times are overlapped in responses. In any case, participants referred to news mainly as current affairs, while information was seen as something broader, not necessarily related to journalistic events.

From observing the Portuguese public sphere and media discourses on disinformation (Pereira and Margarida, 2021), we realise that the topic is usually addressed in an isolated way, disconnected from media contexts and young people's news practices (Frei *et al*, 2022). Furthermore, it is dealt without analysing the impact and consequences of disinformation on their lives.

The study showed that the contact with news is regular, however, the consumption is not always intentional. Accessing the news appears most commonly as a background family environment, especially at mealtimes, while television comprises the main source of accessing the news, followed by social networks and then the Internet in general. It is not always to the liking of children and youth, but they respect the wishes and habits of their parents. Some of the responses indicated that they would rather be watching a different TV show. It is interesting to observe how television, which young people are generally considered to no longer watch, is the main means of information and the one they trust the most. This confidence is sometimes a little exaggerated, showing a lack of knowledge and criticism of the way reality is socially constructed by the media.

However, the use of television does not exclude other sources of information, whether social networks, the internet, family and friends. Social networks, followed by the Internet, are the means cited in second and third place, respectively, for news consumption, but it is not for this purpose that children and youth browse these environments on a daily basis. The purpose of using social networks is much more socialization with peers and entertainment than information (Tandoc Jr. *et al*, 2020).

A portion of participants declared that they do not intentionally look for news but scroll through the content that appears while browsing, particularly the ones that Google promotes and suggests. Some of the respondents are aware that news on the internet is created by algorithms, nonetheless, we observed a more critical attitude in relation to the television news agenda. Variations depending on the users' profile and the possibility to make personal selection, eventually creates the illusion that Google's feed among other platforms will share more independent news. Worthy of note is the fact that newspapers and radio are very rarely mentioned by the sample.

When asked which news topics they were most interested in, answers from all three grades mentioned in first place "War, Violence and Crime" and in second place, "Sports". Considering that the war in Ukraine broke out during the time when focus groups took place it reflects the international context of the time. Although politics appeared in the responses, a higher number referred to politics as the subject they have the least interest in, especially among 17 and 18 years old, which raises some concern, considering that they are reaching the age at which they can vote and assume other civic duties.

Disinformation is not unknown to children and young people in the sample, they have some notion of the phenomenon. The main aspects that lead them to identify fake information/news are, lack of realism; strangeness; exaggeration; and sensationalism. They confused bad information with disinformation, especially when they identified sensationalist practices of media outlets as disinformation practices. Even though sensationalism can spread disinformation it is, above all, misinformation.

Although some of the participants mentioned strategies to verify information, there are many who neither know how to validate the information they consume nor have this practice as a habit. Moreover, most of them only adopt strategies for checking and comparing sources. Although this should not be underestimated, it does not reflect necessarily the capacity for critical analysis of the news, information and the media in general. There is a reduced understanding of the importance of distinguishing facts from opinions and its impact on reducing the risks of manipulation. A national survey carried out in Australia (Notley and Dezuanni, 2019) has indicated that a significant number of young people do not cross check or reference the source of the news, following a similar trend in the Netherlands (Tamboer *et al* 2019) and Portugal.

When asked about the reasons for producing disinformation, it is mostly older students who mention creation of distorted perceptions, mistrust and inciting conflict. Personal interests and benefits were also highlighted, as well as deception, harm and amusement on the part of those who create disinformation. In a smaller number, answers related to the problems it can cause to psychological wellbeing and professional careers. Answers indicated a lack of a broad understanding of the problems associated with disinformation and none have mentioned, for example, the impact it can have on democratic systems, in generating intolerance, racism and negationist movements. They tend to consider that disinformation is disseminated because there is no verification of the veracity of information and news. Most young people do not consider themselves as possible agents of disinformation (when sharing news, for example).

Young people's disbelief in speaking out against false information since they question their agency in promoting change, alongside terminological and format disconnection with young audiences, are important topics yet to be explored. Cultural and socioeconomic specificities also play an important role when thinking about ways to address disinformation as well as inclusion of multiple expressions of childhood and youth based on ethnic, racial and cultural diversity. Amidst the ongoing debate about the relevance of repositioning decision-making processes by questioning adult centered spaces and the importance of hearing the voice of children and youth, how can we respect their agency and privacy in a diffuse and decentralized online environment?

The habit of informing oneself about the news at early stages in life revealed that the probability of maintaining that practice while older is greater (Tamboer *et al*, 2022). As well as the practice of identifying whether the information made available online reveals data based on reality or has been misrepresented or designed to manipulate the reader. Knowledge, skills and critical thinking are relevant components to support media literacy, but it won't respond alone to its challenges.

Media literacy is one of the tools to face the challenge posed by information disorder, including roughly three steps: access to information made available online, the ability to validate the information that is being consumed, and the effective use of data (Nee, 2019). Fact checking websites also can be effective to detect misinformation (Kapantai *et al* 2021; Chu and Wong, 2023). Parallel to identification younger generation can benefit from specific training to stimulate critical analysis and encourage judicious positioning in relation to content available online. Notley *et al* (2019) remarks, based on the readings of Sonia Livingstone, that media literacy refers not only to the media itself, but requires a shift in understanding the ways people engage with society through the media.

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Ethics Statement

The research project was analysed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research in Social and Human Sciences (CEICSH 041/2022). All the children and young people taking part in the study, as well as their guardians, gave their written informed consent to take part in the study and for the results to be disseminated and published. The principles of anonymity, privacy and data protection of all participants were respected and ensured.

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