Analysis of the perceptions of Generations X, Y, and Z towards media disinformation in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This study aimed to contribute to the current literature on the awareness of and the methods against disinformation. It has tried to do so by conducting a quantitative research analysis on the perceptions of three generations, X, Y, and Z, towards the issue of intentional false information spreading within the Bulgarian media. A questionnaire in both English and Bulgarian languages has been distributed to a sample of the Bulgarian population and has reached a total number of 238 completed surveys. The paper provides a detailed analysis on the results for each separate age group through easy-to-read graphs and charts showing precise statistics from the questionnaire results. Thus, through a thorough comparison of the findings, the research draws some relevant conclusions which should hopefully prove to be beneficial and bridge the current gap in the literature.

**Keywords:** media, disinformation, ethical shortcomings, Bulgaria, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z

**Research Dissertation**
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Introduction

The constantly developing world we live in today, striving for an easier life for humanity, might in fact also be running hand in hand with hidden negative outcomes creating complex issues unnoticeably. If we take the rapid evolution of the online environment for instance, we see that with the evident benefits like the connection of and communication with people, comes the growth of disinformation. Whether this is because of the extensive use of unreliable sources like Facebook (Vladimirov, Georgiev, and Stefanov 2021) for informational purposes, political parallelism, foreign ownership and dependency, or lack of accountable media outlets or all of these combined, societies need to understand that without the implementation of policies and general sense of responsibility, disinformation could bring devasting outcomes hindering the proper functioning of communities.

This paper aimed at expanding the research and discussions around this major media ethical shortcoming through an analysis of the perceptions of three Bulgarian generations towards it. The academic relevance and importance of this chosen topic can be noticed because of the study’s greater goal to bridge the current gap in the literature. There are a number of pivotal researchers who have contributed to the awareness of disinformation through various academic discussions. Starting off with the well-known and recognised book by Hallin and Mancini (2004) “Comparing Media Systems”, focused on Western countries’ standards, whose findings have been further improved and stretched to Eastern European countries by Castro Herrero et al. (2017). In this developed study they mention the necessity to recognise the difference between “the east” and “the west” and to tailor the media systems based on a country’s political and economic history but also on its development status. In the case of Bulgaria, we have seen a rather different trajectory of media censorship stretching even long before the communist dictatorship, that has inevitably led to strong political interference in media alongside foreign
ownerships and press freedom limitations, all resulting in growing levels of disinformation (Castro Herrero et al. 2017; Garcia-Marin 2020). Further related research has been done by Slavtcheva-Petkova (2018) addressing the outcomes of the shortcoming, namely media illiteracy, distrust and subjectivity, as negative factors for the wellbeing of the Bulgarian community. Even more academic work, related to disinformation, has been done around its strengthening sources and mainly social media (Reuters Digital News Report 2020; Boncheva and Pershan 2021), however there is a lack of literature around the awareness of the issue and whether any measures have been taken by the different age groups. Given that they have lived in relatively different times and taking into account the vast and rapid digitalisation, there is a need to understand whether different generations need different approaches to fight disinformation and media illiteracy.

Literature review

Why disinformation?

The phenomenon of sharing and spreading false and inaccurate information is considered to be as old as humanity itself (Kapanti et al. 2021). This statement automatically leads to the question of whether misinformation and disinformation will then keep developing with human race, respectively. Unfortunately, the answer to this question might not be very promising as we have seen this issue to develop even further due to the digitalisation, socialisation and fast communication that shape the world we live in today (Niklewicz 2017; Kapanti et al. 2021). Inevitably, the wider reach of audiences through digital platforms enables wider opportunities for disinformation and this paper will try to find out whether age groups have different views of the phenomenon. This study is focused on the case of Bulgaria due to the country’s ongoing struggles with media disinformation, literacy, and freedom of speech.
Before delving into the core of the issues faced by Bulgarian media, it is crucial to understand the meaning behind disinformation and why this research paper has chosen to study this term specifically. It is often mistaken that misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and even malinformation refer to the exact same thing. Many scholars highlight the main difference between mis- and dis-information to be the intention of the writer and/or the spreader of the information. For instance, Wardle and Derekhshan (2017) define misinformation as the unintentional reporting of incorrect information whereas disinformation, considered to be a “more extreme subset of misinformation” (Hameleers et al. 2021, 2), is defined as the intentional publication of decontextualised, false data for misuse, manipulation and often for profit (Wardle 2017; HLEG 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018).

Then we have malinformation where true and accurate information is actually shared to cause harm most commonly seen within blackmail and publication of private and personal data (Hameleers et al. 2021). Last but not least comes the term ‘fake news’ which has gained tremendous popularity over the last few years. Some even consider the US 2016 Presidential elections to be the start of the extensive use of the term, reinforced by Brexit and other political changes at the time. It can be defined as false data shared for reasons ranging from low-impact ones like the aim for satire content or due to high-impact ones such as fabrication and abuse (Kapantai et al. 2021). Here it is also interesting to mention that a growing number of academic articles avoid the use of the term “fake news” as it is believed to be inadequate, overloaded, and confusing especially when arguing about the complexity of the problem (Wardle and Derekshnan 2017; Slavtcheva-Petkova 2018; Kapantai et al. 2021).

Bulgaria’s media state: an overview

After clarifying the most commonly used terms regarding informational falsehoods, it is important to note that this research has taken them all into account, however the focus has been
shifted solely to the disinformation aspect as it has proven to be a major problem that the Bulgarian media has been facing for years. In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders, Bulgaria has lost one more space moving down in the ranking and classifying 112th out of 179 countries (RSF 2021). The index also argues that the media state of the country is worrying because less and less journalists are willing to investigate politics and oligarchs within the corrupted system.

Interestingly however, Freedom House (2021) changed the global freedom status for Bulgaria from “partly free” from 2004 to “free” nowadays with a score of 78 out of 100. This status has been based on political rights factors and on civil liberties factors in the country, with the ‘freedom of expression and belief’ and ‘rule of law’ being the factors with the lowest score. The report highlights that the media sector is still pluralistic and ownership concentration is an ongoing issue alongside political corruption and organised crime in the country, however improvement has been noticeable as well (Freedom House 2021). Such critical information shows that one of the sides of disinformation is actually the dependence of and pressure over media outlets in Bulgaria coming from the government, political parties, oligarchs or even trade organisations. Castro Herrero et al. (2017) broadly discuss and challenge the pivotal work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), Comparing Media Systems, due to lack of acknowledgement of the differences between the media state of Eastern Europe versus Western countries. And here they have specifically visualised Bulgaria as a former Communist state with a heavily controlled media right until the fall of communism which has not left such a long time for the country to fully recuperate. Of course, there are other contributing elements to the issue of disinformation as well, but it is pivotal to know which ones lay the basis for the worrying matter.
Nevertheless, it is evident that the publication and spreading of false information is an issue that cannot be denied. It is argued that media illiteracy, subjectivity and loss of trust are causing great issues to the wellbeing of the Bulgarian community and all because of the politicians’ and private institutions’ intentional usage of mass media as a tool to control and confuse the public thinking (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2018). This argument is especially concerning if we take into account the most recent events that have happened in the county: the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass anti-government protests in 2020 followed by the General Parliamentary Elections in April 2021 for National Assembly members which are to be redone in July 2021. Both of these ongoing events have been at the epicentre of misinformational and disinformational content and many media industry professionals and scholars have been arguing on their lasting effects on the country’s stability once they come to an end.

Euroactive (2020) for instance has been reporting on a number of cases in which the biggest media outlets in the country, namely BTV Media Group and NOVA Broadcasting Group, have been publishing news articles with misleading or untrue information regarding pandemic restrictions and updates when they have not been officially confirmed by the government. What is more, The Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) have published some alarming findings from their study on Disinformation Messages in the 2021 National Assembly Elections. The results show that social media and particularly Facebook have been the main platforms where online communities have been able to discuss and share information on the elections, parties, and political leaders. That being said, the main finding are the four disinformation narratives which were identified during the research of the election campaigns: “1) conspirations connected to COVID-19; 2) support of the big Russian energy projects; 3) opposition to the European Green Pact; and 4) exposing the “EU Hypocrisy”” (CSD, Vladimirov, Georgiev, and Stefanov 2021).
Other studies as well have expressed their concerns on the potential devastating outcomes of disinformation to democracy (Humprecht et al. 2020), in great part due to the strategic manipulation we are seeing from political parties and corrupted groups heavily pressuring journalists and influencing the information flow. Arguably, it almost seems like Bulgarian media has been divided into two halves: one for the big front line, dependent mass media groups and then another one for the smaller, hidden in the shadows, independent media outlets. Hence, it becomes even more difficult for the public to escape the vicious cycle of disinformation, especially when it is coming from the most watched, read, and used platforms in the current hyper-dynamic era.

As a result, with the vast digitalisation nowadays, especially social media, incorrect information can be produced and shared within seconds (Benkler et al. 2018). An example to back this statement up are the reports by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (cited in Kapantai et al. 2020) and others by Boncheva and Pershan (2021) on disinformation and conspiracy theories creation around 5G technology and COVID-19 vaccination. One of them has studied 12 Bulgarian Facebook groups, throughout January and February 2021, which were solely dedicated to the pandemic and vaccine-related topics indicating strong conspiracy and anti-vaccine narratives (Boncheva and Pershan 2021). According to the study, the three most popular Facebook groups are named “Against the 5G network in Bulgaria” (15,808 members), “The hoax COVID-19” (4,429 members), and “Bulgarians against the vaccine” (2,726 members). Interestingly, the content of these groups not only has been false and inaccurate but also completely violating Facebook’s policies due to the Cyrillic script being unidentifiable by their automated engines. The fact that so many people are part of such disinformative groups, in a way confirms the arguments of some authors who claim that the constant consumption and diffusion of disinformation is a result of phenomenons such as “confirmation bias” and “motivated reasoning”, which strongly influence the public to believe that the consumed
information supports their understanding of the world’s issues (Nickerson 1998; Robison and Mullinix 2015; Shin et al. 2017; Humprecht et al. 2020). From a psychological point of view, it is said that people in general have a tendency to accept that their own perception of reality is the only accurate one, a phenomenon also known as “naive realism” (Humprecht et al. 2020). Hence, all these media diets, subjectivity, manipulation, lack of trust and authority, deriving from disinformation in all its forms, become an extremely serious problem for communities and democracies globally.

Disinformation as an ethical shortcoming

Global journalism has been facing a growing number of threats and challenges over the last couple of years. Whether this is because of the development of the online and digital world or due to a lack of monitoring and better structured policies, all media professionals alongside media consumers need to adopt a more responsible approach towards how they handle information. Bennet and Pfetsch (2018) believe that this new era of dynamic information circulation is now requiring a whole new research approach which should definitely consider social media and digital networks. In support of this, Humprecht et al. (2020) has also argued that if we want to better understand the reasons behind a person’s willingness to believe in and share disinformation, we first need to analyse the individual perceptions and behaviours towards low quality information. Taking this into account, a valuable contribution to media studies would also be to try and research the characteristics of specific age groups in terms of their perceptions towards media shortcomings.

Funding dependency, ‘ASAP’ journalism, polarised media systems, governmental vulnerabilities and disinformation are at the very reasons for ethical media suffocation in today’s world (Sambrook 2017; Moreno-Gil et al. 2021). Without a doubt the media and the online environment play key roles in the formation of one’s opinion and views on any public
matter. Not only they inform readers, but also set the moral principles and ethical limits known to the communities worldwide. This is why the media industry has always relied on normative theories around the moral principles and responsibilities of journalism to be able to “provide truthful, complete, and accurate information to help citizens understand public affairs and, having been informed, to participate in the community” (Moreno-Gil et al. 2021, 251). For instance, The Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media (2004) is outlining five main principles to guide responsible journalism: 1) Supplying the public with reliable information, 2) Collection and presentation of information, 3) Editorial Independence, 4) Relations between and within media, and 5) The public interest. Although we see those principles to be consistent with other code of ethics like the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists and the Ethics of Journalism from the Council of Europe, there is still room for improvement by adding a principle to guide privacy and publication of personal information, for example. but on top of everything, Bulgaria media watch dogs to monitor whether those exact principles are followed.

A major concern here is that there are not enough needs stable, reliable, and independent media watchdogs to monitor whether those exact principles are always met by journalists or if they might fall into dependency by corrupted groups or institutions. In the case of Bulgaria, and as explained by García-Marín (2020), the high level of politization of national media results in citizens’ distrust not only towards the national media but also towards public institutions. Here, according to Reuter’s Digital News Report 2020, Bulgarians’ average trust in media is only 33% and it goes lower each year. It could also be said that as a result of the doubts in Bulgarian press freedom and accuracy, citizens have begun to avoid certain media all together or regard it as an active player in the political system, if we may say, for control and modification of information (Hameleers et al. 2021).
There is a relevant research conducted by Humprecht, Esser, and Aelst (2020) on the resilience to online disinformation, outlining some key findings which actually highly reflect onto the Bulgarian media state to some extent. The first conclusion from the study, that could be linked to Bulgarian media issues, refers to the societal polarization level as a key factor for the decrease in the resilience to disinformation. The problem of acculturation of minorities in the country, like the Romani for instance, definitely links to this finding, as separation, discrimination and stigmatization are still evident (National Strategy of The Republic of Bulgaria for integration of the Roma minority 2021). The second conclusion from the study highlights that if a country’s public service media is weak then its population will respectively be less resilient to disinformation. Considering the high dependency of the majority of Bulgarian media outlets on political parties and institutions, then we can definitely argue that this could be a reason behind the country’s disinformation flow.

The third finding from the study is particularly interesting as it revolves around the alternative media networks that the public uses to consume information. Humprecht, Esser, and Aelst (2020) argue that if the pool of information resources is large then users are less likely to be confronted with inaccurate content. However, this is not applicable to the case of research in this paper as the majority of Bulgarian media users do not tend to compare and contrast the information they consume. Thus, it has been noted that they are limiting their views on current issues mainly through the eyes of social media channels (mainly Facebook) and television programmes (Boncheva and Pershan 2021).

The last conclusion from the study states that the higher the percentage of social media users in a society, the more vulnerable it becomes to online disinformation. This finding is applicable to this research of this paper as Bulgaria’s social media users are considered to be roughly 62.1% of the total population as of January 2021 according to the Digital 2021: Bulgaria report.
So, in a summary, all of the findings discussed above represent a number of interesting factors which are thought to provoke and strengthen the disinformation flow in the country and which will be considered further in the analysis section. However, the lack of information and examination of the perceptions of the youth or the different generations within any ethical shortcomings and specifically disinformation, is definitely missing. This is why this proposed topic and research will aim to bridge this evident gap in the literature and lay a basis for further work to be done.

Research design

Research topic

According to scholarly literature and industry reports, Bulgaria is believed to be at the European epicentre of media illiteracy, political corruption, and disinformation residing not just on the internet but in the mainstream media too (Kristi 2020; RSF 2021). The discussion topic that this research aims to bring forward revolves around the continuous and currently strengthened media disinformation amongst the Bulgarian population. It is particularly relevant to understand the level of media literacy of three different age groups to try to identify not only the causes but also any possible solutions to the consumption of disinformation.

Recently, academics have even started to name this phenomenon ‘disinfodemic’ partially connecting it to the COVID-19 pandemic due to the escalating false and misleading news around the topic in Bulgaria (Todorova and Yakova 2021). Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2021) have been reporting on the issues of press freedom and disinformation for many years now, stating that the country is at the very bottom of global charts for media independence, freedom of speech and media literacy. All those issues have come as an inspiration to continue
the search for answers. Since there is an evident gap in the literature in terms of information consumption in Bulgaria by different age groups, considering the disinformation aspect, we see an academic hunger for more research to be conducted around this topic. The current paper aims to discover some of the major causes and provide some possible solutions to this problem that threatens democratic wellbeing in Bulgaria and beyond.

Problem statement and research questions

The very purpose of any research paper, including the suitability of the research method, is considered to be the provision of “an objective, unbiased collection and evaluation of data” (Wimmer and Dominick 2011, 14). This research paper is no exception. Taking into consideration the motives to conduct this study, a major one being the lack of similar research, the paper aims to pose some important questions that have been answered through empirical analysis. The four research questions below can give a brief idea of the actual depth in which the research intends to go. The first one aims to find out how far The Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media (2004) goes in the eyes of the public, as explained in more detail within the literature review. Then, the second question touches on the media literacy part where we endeavour to find out whether the generations actually compare the information they receive to other available sources and whether they know about or have heard of fact checking resources. The third question aims to identify any differences and similarities between the three age groups in terms of their views on disinformation and the overall Bulgarian media state. Last but not least, research question four looks to find out whether media coverage has improved over the years, according to the perceptions of the respondents from three generations. The questionnaire for this research is based on those four questions, which are detailed as follows:
**RQ1.** How ethical do the respondents think the Bulgarian media is and what is their awareness of the ethical shortcomings in journalism?

**RQ2.** How likely is each of the generations to fact-check the information they consume?

**RQ3.** Are there any differences in the perceptions/attitudes of the three generations towards disinformation in the Bulgarian media? If so, what are they?

**RQ4.** According to the three generations, is media reporting experiencing sensationalistic, stereotypical, and disinformation issues? If so, how?

**Methodology**

**Defining and analysing social research**

The human kind has been studying and analysing different phenomena in different ways from far longer than we can ever recall. And the proof of this is the current developed and still developing state in every possible industry and sphere in the world. We could even say that humanity has always been on the look for answers to questions using variables, samples, hypotheses, designs and all other research tools and methods to achieve results. Wimmer and Dominick (2011) talk about ‘The Method of Knowing’ and mention some very interesting approaches to find answers (also known as ‘methods of knowing’) that have been firstly introduced roughly a century ago by C.S. Pierce. Those methods are tenacity, intuition, authority, and science. Without going into detail for each one, it is a good starting point to note how objective research has developed over the years. For instance, tenacity is considered a method that represents the belief that something is in its current state because it has always been in this state. Then, we have intuition which is a method representing the total exclusion of testing and research while replacing it with an experience of what works and what does not.
Thirdly, the authority method is based on the belief in something only because the source sharing the information is trusted. Last but not least, we have the scientific method, the one which bases its conclusions on comparing and contrasting high quality objective data, and the one that this research paper has adopted.

This study has conducted a social research, which has been defined as an academic research that includes questions related to and of importance to different social fields (Bryman 2012). This kind of research is considered to be usually motivated by arising timely questions, changes, or shifts in society or if there is a gap in the literature for a specific topic (Bryman 2012; Saunders, Thornhill, and Lewis 2019). In this specific research, the ethics of Bulgarian media, the public’s ability to fact-check and the disinformation phenomenon have been studied and analysed taking into account the viewpoints of three different generations (X, Y, and Z).

Research design

This study has adopted a quantitative research method as it is believed to best fit within the main goals and research questions of the overall study. The quantitative research method is considered to be a formal, systematic and objective process that takes into account the correlation between variables, using numerical, graphical, and statistical techniques to measure and analyse the collected data (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis 2019). Hence, a comprehensive questionnaire has been designed, considering the study’s goals and research questions. The questions for the survey have been well-thought of, consolidated and designed to extract the very maximum of the respondents’ experience with the Bulgarian media and their perceptions towards disinformation. Due to the nature of this research paper, the use of sources for ideas and expertise was necessary and this is why some questions from the Reuters Digital News Report (2020) and the Disinformation and Science Survey (2020) were used.

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The first part of the survey is dedicated to crucial variables for the research which are firstly, to determine the age group (18-24; 25-40; 41-56; 57+) and secondly, to determine whether the respondents have ever lived outside of Bulgaria for longer than 5 years. Those two variables are pivotal mainly because they allow for a more detailed look into each separate generation to determine any differences or similarities. They also allow for a more critical look into how the life outside Bulgaria might have had both negative and positive influence over the respondents’ perception of the country’s media culture. Then, the following parts of the questionnaire are devoted to the level of education, the awareness of news and events in the country, the awareness of any ethical shortcomings in the media culture mainly including disinformation and the closely linked sensationalism and stereotipisation, and the methods through which data is consumed and shared.

To facilitate a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under discussion, some examples of both misleading and true news headlines have been chosen, which are directly connected to the two major events that have happened in Bulgaria in the past year: the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary elections. Arguably, those two events have contributed tremendously to the increase of disinformation in Bulgaria, as it has already been seen in many other countries around the world too. Last but not least, the questionnaire also included questions regarding the knowledge and use of fact-checking resources which could potentially give a better understanding of the level of objectivity and media literacy the different age groups as well as overall respondents have. For further transparency, the complete survey questionnaire can be consulted in the Appendices section (See Appendix 1).

Sampling and Data collection

A decision to apply the snowball sampling strategy has been made as it is a proven way to recruit hidden populations, it is cost effective, can be distributed, and completed faster and
requires less planning for data collection than usual due to the referral nature of the method (John Dudovskiy 2021). In particular, the exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling has been considered to be the best approach for this case study specifically due to the method’s flexibility in terms of the initial subject recruitment, leading to a wider sample group which is explored until the primary data is sufficient enough (John Dudovskiy 2021). Thus, the data collection was expected to be a relatively straightforward process with a growing number of responses coming from referrals with the wider spread of the questionnaire. There was also a small obstacle in terms of the language in which the survey was distributed. Since the official language of Bulgaria is Bulgarian and since the majority of Generation X has not studied the English language at school, the researcher found it necessary to translate the English version of the questionnaire so as to guarantee a wider access to it and exclude any possible limitations for the respondents.

The collection of responses has been done both through online self-completion questionnaires and through meetings with respondents, where the researcher has asked the questions and filled in the answers given by the respondent. The majority of the completed questionnaires, however, have been completed by the respondents themselves as a great amount have been collected through referrals. In addition to the collection of responses solely between the researcher and the respondent, the survey has been shared within a number of media channels like Twitter, Facebook groups, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram as well (see Appendix 2).

The overall timeframe available for data collection has been four weeks (Indicate the exact dates here). As it will be discussed further in the limitations section, future studies will need to expand this timeframe to incorporate other periods. That being said, the total number of responses collected is N=238 with a sufficient division of numbers for each generation being Gen X – 61, Gen Y – 90, and Gen Z – 77 with a total of 152 females and 86 males.
The aim within the overall analysis of this research has been to apply the positivism research philosophy that relates an observable social reality with the aim to bring forward law-like generalisations (Saunders, Thornhill and Philip 2019). The positivist goal is to produce data and evidence related to the study while maintaining both the process of data collection and analysis free of the researcher's perception or bias (Davies and Fisher 2018; Saunders, Thornhill and Philip 2019). Within the analysis and results part of this work, the researcher has made sure that the data is adequate, valid, and fully related to the explanations made within the topic overview, the research questions and any the previous discussions on the literature around media disinformation, journalism ethics, and the state of media in Bulgaria.

The platform which has hosted the questionnaire is Microsoft 365 Forms. Data has been subsequently analysed through the same software. Microsoft Excel sheets has also been used to examine numerical data, perform descriptive statistics and generate visuals that facilitate the presentation and understanding of the findings.

Ethics and principles

Every researcher needs to do his/her own risk assessment which should focus on data protection first and foremost as personal data is the main asset for almost every study. This specific research has used the General Data Protection Regulation as the leading guidelines for compliance with the European Union’s Data Protection Law in the aim to avoid data breaches and fines. Therefore, the questionnaire that has been distributed both in English and in Bulgarian has been completely anonymous and has been accompanied by a complete information sheet attached at the very top of the survey (See Appendix 1). The information sheet includes detailed guidelines on the research topic, objective, procedure, and contact details alongside an explanation of the privacy and voluntary participation terms. This document has been included in order to make sure that the researcher fully complies with the
necessary data regulations and has demonstrated a transparent, well-informed, and secure use of the respondents’ data.

Results

Gen X findings

Starting off with the eldest generation of the research, this section will discuss in detail the responses given by all participants of this study who belong to the age group 41 to 56 years of age. To begin with, they are actually the smallest group from all three with a total of 61 respondents being 37 (61%) females and 24 (39%) males (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Age and gender of the respondents who belong to Gen X*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TO WHICH AGE GROUP DO YOU BELONG?</th>
<th>TO WHICH GENDER IDENTITY DO YOU MOST IDENTIFY?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24 years of age</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-40 years of age</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-56 years of age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57 or over years of age</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>61</th>
<th>77</th>
<th>90</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration

18 of the respondents have indicated that they have lived outside of Bulgaria with the majority (n=12 out of 18; 67%) staying abroad for 5 or more years. This is raising a point of concern due to the possibility of those people not being able to give fair judgement of the Bulgarian media, given that they have spent such a significant amount of time in another country (Figure 2).
Here it is also interesting to point that the majority of Gen X respondents (n=35; 57.38%) have received a master’s or equivalent level of degree with the lowest level of education for the whole group being Secondary education (n=8;13%). This leads to the argument that they are all with good to excellent knowledge base that they should be able to compare and contrast information as well as to give objective criticism of the news and events happening in the country (Figure 3). Interestingly however, the group’s average awareness of news and events in Bulgaria, according to their own perception, seems to be roughly 3.7 out of 5 (Figure 4).
Moving further into the questionnaire results, Question 7 asked of people to rate some listed methods that they use the most when searching for information. Here, the top three most commonly used methods by Gen X are firstly, news websites, secondly, social media, and thirdly, television news bulletins and programmes. Those results might come as a contra argument to the stereotype of older generations using mainly television news bulletins as their main information source. In addition, the few responses (10) from the age group of 57+ years old have also indicated the use of news websites and social media as primary.

The 8th question of the survey sought to find out how important is independency in journalism and the results have actually turned out to be very positive with the majority thinking it is of extreme importance. However, when asked whether Bulgarian media is ethical, the results do not look promising, with 51 out of 61 (84%) replying with a ‘No’ (Figure 5).
Question 10 (‘Do you think that any of the listed below are issues that the Bulgarian media has?’), listed the main issues concerning the media state in the country gathered from previous research (Bontcheva and Pershan 2021, Digital in Bulgaria 2021, RSF 2021, Petkova 2018), those being sensationalism, stereotyping, disinformation, lack of verification, racism, irrelevance/bad choice of news stories, and GDPR concerns. Here, according to Generation X, sensationalism seems to be the most serious issue as this option has been selected 50 times, followed by disinformation, selected 41 times, and then stereotyping, selected 39 times.

*Figure 5: Importance of the independent journalism vs. consideration of Bulgarian media as ethical according to respondents who belong to Gen X*

Taking these results into account, the following questions were aimed to help better understand any trust issues that the Bulgarian population has. In terms of Gen X, we can see in Figure 6 that the results have been mixed with half of the respondents being neutral about the trust they have in media in general and in the media they personally consume. But here one can also notice that the tendency of agreement and disagreement is also almost the same, meaning that
people aged 41 to 56 years old do not trust completely even the information that has been selected by themselves based on their own criteria of objectivity and truthfulness.

*Figure 6: Trust scales of news in general vs. news consumed by the respondents who belong to Gen X*

![Bar chart showing trust in news](image)

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

After the evident lack of trust in the Bulgarian media, questions 12, 13, 14, and 15 aimed at finding out what is the level of awareness and concern of disinformation amongst the public, as central in addition to the other ethical shortcomings. It is relevant to know that people actually acknowledge the seriousness and consequences of disinformation over many aspects but mostly the public good. According to these findings, the majority of Gen X participants believe that deliberately misleading information is a problem with a status ranging from very to extremely serious which also leads to higher levels of concern regarding this same issue (Figure 7).

*Figure 7: Rating of the seriousness of disinformation as a problem vs. rating of the concern about disinformation by respondents who belong to Gen X*
Interestingly enough, the levels of concern around disinformation are significantly high within the political industry where we have seen corruption, governmental instability, political crimes, and misleading of the public all going hand in hand with Bulgarian media as the main tool. These results show that the majority of Gen X are specifically wary of the information they receive if it is coming from the government, politicians, or political parties in the country (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Concern over false or misleading information coming from the listed sources in the opinion of respondents who belong to Gen X
A question regarding the source of disinformation was posed with the idea that it might discover some new insights. The list included news websites or apps, search engines, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Messaging applications but it was clear that according to Gen X specific media outlets’ news websites and Facebook are amongst the main concerning resources (Figure 10).

*Figure 10: Concern over false or misleading information via the listed sources in the opinion of respondents who belong to Gen X*

Source: Author’s own elaboration
And then of course, based on those concerns it comes to no surprise to see that 55 (91%) representatives of Generation X avoid certain media outlets with reasons being mainly the lack of trust in them, irrelevance of news stories and bad reputation (Figure 11). However, it can also be seen from Questions 20 and 21 that both the knowledge and the usage of fact-checking resources is not at all common for this generation (Figure 12). This might be due to the improving and developing basis of fact-checking overall as a new way to compare and contrast information. That being said, we need to make sure that each group of people no matter the age, ethnicity or gender know exactly how best to consume their information.

*Figure 11: Responses on whether the respondents who belong to Gen X intentionally avoid specific media outlets*

![Pie chart showing responses on avoiding media outlets]

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

*Figure 12: Knowledge vs usage of fact-checking websites by respondents who belong to Gen X*
The survey has also included eight randomly selected headlines from news articles from different Bulgarian media outlets dedicated to two of the most important events happening in the country currently: COVID-19 pandemic and the General Parliamentary Elections for National Assembly members. The aim here was to see how likely people are to consider certain information for objective and truthful, solely based on the headline (Figure 13). The first two headlines represent some of the most common speculations and conspiracies connected to the country’s measures against the spread of the virus. As can be seen from the results, first headline with 44 respondents (72%) with “Unlikely” plus “Very unlikely” and second headline with 35 (57%), respectively, would not at first consider the headline as an objective or truthful source of information. The third headline does not generally include very strong language and is probably not considered as sensationalistic so we can therefore see that it has been accepted with higher trust levels. The fourth one however, is a news headline which can generally be considered as provocative or misleading, as it is also coming from an advertisement-centred media outlet without quality references. Here we can see that almost half of the respondents would probably trust it as well as the information it brings, which might appear as a red alarm when tackling disinformation.

Source: Author’s own elaboration
Figure 13: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the COVID-19 Pandemic, by respondents who belong to Gen X

Question: To what extent do you think these news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?

Source: Author’s own elaboration

The last four headlines are dedicated to the political events in the country which have in fact triggered a great wave of false and misleading information sharing amongst the public. The first one of those clearly uses sensationalistic language and indicates the usage of photos to
potentially ‘prove’ the scandalous news which might also be violating GDPR. The second news headline could also be considered as sensationalistic as it targets a great issue within the Bulgarian economy which is on the ‘To Do’ list of many politicians: namely pensions and pensioners care. Although headlines like these are being spread constantly, it is noteworthy to see that Gen X is resilient and would deny or question their truthfulness. The last two headlines are clearly aimed at turning the public against some political representatives or organisations as the topic of fund thefts, money laundering and unaccounted taxes has been trending since democracy came into power in Bulgaria. Those sorts of news are still aiming to turn the public against some political parties intentionally and we can see the doubt in the responses, especially in the last news headline.

*Figure 14: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the General Parliamentary Elections 2021, by respondents who belong to Gen X*

*Question: To what extent do you think these news headlines about the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?*
Gen Y findings

After exploring the results for Generation X, the analysis will continue with the responses from Generation Y, also known as Millennials. As shown in Figure 15 below, this is the age group with the highest number of respondents (a total of 90; 38%) with 56 females (62%) and 34 males (38%). Similarly, to Gen X, a relatively high number of those millennials indicated that they have lived outside Bulgaria with 20 (22%) of them for 5 or more years (Figure 16).

*Figure 15: Age and gender of the respondents who belong to Gen Y*
In terms of level of education and awareness of the news and events in the country, millennials score higher than Gen X with the majority of them holding bachelor’s and master’s degrees. The average point of awareness of the news and events according to their own perception is roughly 4 out of 5 (Figure 17).

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

*Figure 16: Respondents belonging to Gen Y who have lived abroad*

*Figure 17: Level of education vs. average awareness of news and events in Bulgaria of respondents who belong to Gen Y*
Jumping onto Question 7 (“Please, rate the methods you use to find out about current news and events in Bulgaria”) it is interesting to see that 39 respondents (43%) from Gen Y use social media as their primary source of information, then news websites have been selected as primary by 29 respondents (32%). In addition, a relatively high number of respondents (n=18; 20%) have chosen TV News bulletins as their primary source and lastly, to a surprise, 10 respondents (11%) have indicated the ‘word of mouth’ or ‘at work/school/university/public spaces’ as their primary methods. These results might prove a little disrupting, and to some also concerning, as social media and word of mouth are not considered objective and reliable methods to consume information.
In contrast however, all millennials who took part in this research think that independent journalism is very or extremely important for the proper functioning of society. However, in the same vein as Gen X, the majority do not consider Bulgarian media as ethical (Figure 18).

*Figure 18: Importance of the independent journalism vs. consideration of Bulgarian media as ethical according to respondents who belong to Gen Y*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW IMPORTANT, IF AT ALL, DO YOU THINK INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IS FOR THE PROPER FUNCTIONING OF SOCIETY?</th>
<th>DO YOU CONSIDER BULGARIAN MEDIA AS ETHICAL?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>■ I don't know ■ No ■ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration

Question 10 (“Do you think that any of the listed below are issues that the Bulgarian media has?”) is showing the same results as Gen X, with the most selected issue being sensationalism (n=77; 86%), followed by disinformation (n=73; 81%) and then stereotyping (n=48; 53%). Moreover, in terms of trust in media, with millennials we can definitely see a more confident and firm response of distrust in news information in general and a relatively good level of trust of media that is consumed by them from selected sources (Figure 19).

*Figure 19: Trust scales of news in general vs. news consumed by the respondents who belong to Gen Y*
With varying trust levels, we also see a recognition of disinformation as a serious problem amongst the majority of the Gen Y respondents, who express very high levels of concern about the issue (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Rating of the seriousness of disinformation as a problem vs. rating of the concern about disinformation by respondents who belong to Gen Y

Source: Author’s own elaboration
Questions 14 and 15 discovered almost the same trend of public concern of disinformation coming from the government and political organisations however, this time adding journalists and news organisations as well. In addition to this, the sources of concern for the spread of disinformation are news websites and Facebook, exactly like the indication of Gen X (Figure 21).

*Figure 21: Concern over false or misleading information coming from vs. via the listed sources in the opinion of respondents who belong to Gen Y*

**WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, ARE YOU MOST CONCERNED ABOUT? FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION FROM...**

- The government, politicians, or political parties in my country: 56
- Ordinary people: 8
- Journalists or news organisations: 18
- I am not concerned about any of these: 3
- Foreign governments, politicians, or political parties: 2
- Activists or activist groups: 3

**WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, ARE YOU MOST CONCERNED ABOUT? FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION VIA...**

- Search engines (e.g. Google, Bing): 3
- News websites or apps: 50
- Messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook...): 3
- I am not concerned about any of these: 10
- Facebook: 24

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*
The questions that follow also discover that a high percentage of Gen Y (87%) respondents also avoid receiving their information from specific resources, just like Gen X, with main reason being the lack of trust in the outlets but also the publication of irrelevant news. In contrast to the older generation, millennials actually have a wider knowledge of fact-checking websites and roughly 20 per cent do use them to verify their information (Figure 22).

*Figure 22: Rates on intentional avoidance of specific media outlets and knowledge vs. usage of fact-checking websites by respondents belonging to Gen Y*

Last but not least, the headlines rankings provoke some interesting thoughts regarding the actual trust level of Gen Y toward media and the way information is presented. As seen in the results below (Figure 23), there is a mixed opinion about the truthfulness and objectivity of the information that those headlines offer but it can also be seen that the tendency is to consider them as unlikely to be true, especially the first two headlines regarding the pandemic. With the second two, we see relatively the same results as in Gen X but also similarly concerning is that...
the last news headline about the pandemic has gathered a high rate of likelihood for truthfulness when in reality it comes from a low-quality media outlet with lack of references.

*Figure 23: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the COVID-19 Pandemic, by respondents who belong to Gen Y*

*Question: To what extent do you think these news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?*

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*
Then we continue with the other half of the headlines dedicated to Bulgaria’s general elections in 2021. With the first two headlines the results repeat with the ones from Gen X and tendency of distrust is still visible (Figure 24). However, with the last two headlines this tendency differs from the older generation as millennials indicate a higher truth likelihood even though the headlines use sensationalistic language and actually come from lower quality, advertisement-oriented news websites. The case here repeats with the one from above raising some concern here for the ability of Gen Y to distinguish misleading from objective information.

**Figure 24: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the General Parliamentary Elections 2021, by respondents who belong to Gen Y**

**Question:** To what extent do you think these news headlines about the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?

“HIT ON THE WEB: TATIANA DONCHEVA AND HRISTO IVANOV MEET SECRETLY PHOTOS”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I don't know</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“HIT ON THE WEB: TATIANA DONCHEVA AND HRISTO IVANOV MEET SECRETLY PHOTOS”</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“SLAVI, MAYA AND BSP BLOCK THE FINANCIAL AID OF 50 LV FOR OVER 2 MILLION PENSIONERS”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I don't know</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“SLAVI, MAYA AND BSP BLOCK THE FINANCIAL AID OF 50 LV FOR OVER 2 MILLION PENSIONERS”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gen Z findings

Last but not least comes the youngest generation, which had to be limited to respondents who have already turned 18 years of age, in order to comply with the European General Data Protection Regulation and avoid parental consent for the ones below 18 years. Despite this limitation, the number of participants in the research who belong to this age group are 77 (32%) which is relatively close to the numbers for both Generation X and Generation Y (Figure 25).

*Figure 25: Age and gender of the respondents who belong to Gen Z*
In Figure 26 however, we can see that almost half of the respondents (42%) have lived outside Bulgaria, proving to some extend the decreasing population in the country, especially of younger generations, which has been an ongoing issue for more than 20 years now (The World Bank Bulgaria Data 2021). This finding might have an impact on the overall analysis as 23 (30%) of those respondents have lived outside the country for 3 or more years and given that their current age is only 18-24 it could be concluded that the majority of their conscious life was probably spent in another country.

**Figure 26: Respondents belonging to Gen Z who have lived abroad**

This group of respondents also have a very good level of education when compared to the rest of the respondents from Gen X and Gen Y (Figure 27) even though 27 (35%) of them currently hold secondary education certification which might not have fully prepared them to compare, contrast and verify the information they consume. What is more, Gen Z have ranked their awareness of news and events in Bulgaria on average 3.5 out of 5 which is lower than both Millennials and Gen X (Figure 28).
Continuing onto Question 7 with the most commonly used methods, it is noted that Gen Z relies mostly on social media with 39 (51%) participants choosing it as a primary method, very similar to Gen Y, although the scale here is significantly higher. This is then followed by a lower number of participants choosing news websites as a primary method (n=15; 19%) and television news bulletins (n=13; 17%). It is also interesting to mention that 9 (12%) other
respondents have specified that they rely primarily on word of mouth or work/school/university methods to receive the most up-to-date news.

According to the results from Question 8, almost all of the respondents from Generation Z (90%) think that independent journalism is crucial for the well-being and good functioning of society, although when it comes to Bulgarian media being ethically appropriate, 82 per cent of Gen Z do not consider it as such (Figure 29).

*Figure 29: Importance of the independent journalism vs. consideration of Bulgarian media as ethical according to respondents who belong to Gen Z*

![Bar chart showing the importance of independent journalism](chart1.png)

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

Very similar to the results from the other two age groups, in Question 10, Gen Z has chosen sensationalism most times as an ethical shortcoming in the media industry (n=53 times; 69%), followed with little difference by stereotyping (n=39 times; 51%) and disinformation (n=40 times; 52%). The next two questions aimed at finding out the trust scale of the youngest generation comparing news in general and news consumed by themselves. The unusual thing here is that, despite Gen X and Gen Y mostly trusting the news they consume, Gen Z actually kept the tendency of distrust even for the information they choose to consume (See Figure 30).
Figure 30: Trust scales of news in general vs. news consumed by the respondents who belong to Gen Z

Source: Author’s own elaboration

Following on, this age group also strongly believes that disinformation is a very serious issue and have indicated a high level of concern (Figure 31). This high level of concern continues to be evident in Questions 14 and 15, especially when touching upon information coming from the Bulgarian government or political industry (n=54 choices; 70%) or information that is shared or consumed via news websites (n=36 choices; 47%) and Facebook (n=16 choices; 21%) (Figure 32).

Figure 31: Rating of the seriousness of disinformation as a problem vs. rating of the concern about disinformation by respondents who belong to Gen Z
Source: Author’s own elaboration

Figure 32: Concern over false or misleading information coming from vs. via the listed sources in the opinion of respondents who belong to Gen Z
It is clear that Gen Z generally avoid certain media outlets as well when consuming information. The reasoning for this statement provided here is mainly due to lack of trust in those specific media outlets (n=43 choices; 56%) but also due to publication of irrelevant news (n=26 choices; 34%). Almost half of them are aware of at least one fact-checking resource however the usage of those resources is insufficient with only 15 participants (19%) actually using them to verify their news intake (Figure 33).

Figure 33: Rates on intentional avoidance of specific media outlets and knowledge vs. usage of fact-checking websites by respondents belonging to Gen Z
Then lastly, the news headlines section is very interesting as we can generally see better results in comparison to the other two generations. This is the only case where the last of four headlines for both the pandemic and the parliamentary election have been mostly ranked as less likely to be true which indicates that Generation Z might appear to be the most wary and cautious when consuming information (Figure 34).

Figure 34: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the COVID-19 Pandemic, by respondents who belong to Gen Z

Question: To what extent do you think these news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?
Then the last four headlines, dedicated to the country’s political state and elections, have also shown rather good results with the same generally wary acceptance of the news, and hence indicating them as less likely to contain true and objective information (Figure 35). An interesting point here is actually the fact that the option ‘I don’t know’ has been used the most throughout all headline ratings and this might be due to lack of confidence or knowledge when judging certain news information.

Source: Author’s own elaboration
Figure 35: Ratings based on truthfulness and objectivity of news headlines from Bulgarian media outlets, covering the General Parliamentary Elections 2021, by respondents who belong to Gen Z

Question: To what extent do you think these news headlines about the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information?

Source: Author’s own elaboration
Fact-checking resources and respondents’ further comments

The last two questions of the survey were open to listings of any fact-checking websites/resources that respondents have used and to add any comments in line with the topic if they would like to. The answers have not been divided into generations but will be looked at more generally due to their optional submission and in order to draw additional insights and observations. A lot of ways to check information have been listed and some of those include “Bivol.bg”, “Snopes”, “Reuters Fact Check”, “Open your eyes”, “Mediascan”, “EuVsDisinfo”, “Pubmed”, “FactStream”, “Mediapool”, “Are you lying?” (this platform is open specifically to check the statements made by politicians during the General Elections), the recently launched “Factcheck.bg”, institutional websites and general comparison between different outlets. Surprisingly though, some responses also include the mention of Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or first two pages of a Google search as a way to verify their information, all of which are considered as non-objective and unreliable, further adding to the concern and need to educate the public on proper verification. One of the respondents says the following:

“I use Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook daily (even though they censor information and are biased as well). So, I do trust them 100%.” – Gen Z respondent

There have also been some interesting and rather pessimistic comments on the Bulgarian media state and over the Bulgarian government, which provide a much better view over why some of the results from this research are the way they are:

“The level of disinformation in Bulgaria is evident in its citizens and in how much influence the media have on people's opinions. Many of the political news and important information for the citizens are not transmitted properly or even not transmitted at all.” – Gen Z respondent
“In Bulgaria it is public information which media is managed by whom. What is worse than total disinformation is the fact that no one cares that politicians own media outlets. National media outlets!” – Gen Y respondent

“Bulgarian journalism is long dead and I sincerely admire the people who think they can revive it. Unfortunately, I do not believe in miracles and the resurrection of a literate, independent and free Bulgarian journalism is impossible.” – Gen Y respondent

Main Differences and Similarities between the three generations

As a summary of the analysis that has been provided above, this part will touch upon the main differences and similarities of the three generations according to the findings from this study.

Overall, there are not as many differences between the three generations as expected, but they bring invaluable insights within the topic discussion. It has been interesting to see that not all three generations rely upon the same primary methods to collect their information. We see that Gen X (41-56 years old) relies on news websites first and then social media or news TV bulletins. On the other side Gen Y (25-40 years old) and Gen Z (18-24 years old) have indicated that they rely on social media first to consume their data, and then on news websites, news TV bulletins and even through word of mouth or at work/school/public spaces. What is more, the self-ratings of their own awareness of the news and events in Bulgaria differs slightly with Gen Y (4 out of 5) being the most aware, followed by Gen X (3.7 out of 5) and Gen Z (3.5 out of 5). Here with Generation Z we have actually seen that the majority of responses incline towards disbelief and distrust meaning that either the generation is wary and cautious or lacks enough knowledge and confidence to criticise the information they receive. This phenomena can also be noticed with Question 11, where in contrast to the oldest generation and the millennials, the majority of the respondents from the youngest generation do not trust even the information
they choose to consume. In addition, within the news headlines section too, it is noticed that Gen X and Gen Y are more likely to trust even information that contains sensationalistic language or in fact comes from a low-quality media outlet. Lastly, it has been evident that the majority of the two younger generations are aware of particular fact-checking websites. In contrast, with Gen X, only 20 respondents (33%) out of 61 know about them.

On the other hand, the similarities between these three age groups are non the less extremely significant. According to the results, all three generations strongly agree that independent journalism is of great importance for the healthy functioning of society. In addition to this, they all also agree that the Bulgarian media is far from ethical with scores of 196 in total for ‘No’ (82.35%) and only 18 for ‘Yes’ (7.56%) (Figure 36).

*Figure 36: Rates on whether Bulgarian media is ethical according to all respondents from the survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO YOU CONSIDER BULGARIAN MEDIA AS ETHICAL?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

When asked to choose which of the listed issues are some that the county’s media has, the most chosen issues by all three age groups came up to be sensationalism followed by disinformation. In addition to this, they have also all indicated that they are generally aware of disinformation as a serious problem and are all specifically concerned about information that is coming from governmental organisations and political parties or individual representatives. It was also really
interesting to find that most respondents generally avoid receiving their information from specific outlets (Figure 37) with the most common reasoning being the lack of trust in them.

*Figure 37: Rates on intentional avoidance of specific media outlets according to all respondents from the survey*

![Diagram showing rates of intentional avoidance of specific media outlets](image)

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

**Conclusion**

**Major findings and issues**

This extensive research has tried to explore one of the major issues of concern for Bulgarian media, that is disinformation, but has also tried to lay the bases on how it is perceived by different generations, given that they all consume information at the same time and are equally responsible for how it is handled. Now, it is also crucial to connect the discussions from the secondary research included into the literature review of this paper with the primary research findings included in the results analysis.

One argument that cannot be denied is the complexity and concerns that the constantly developing digitalisation and online social environment bring to global media. This is
especially concerning when tackling disinformation, as it is considered to further strengthen the phenomena (Nicklewicz 2017; Kapanti et al. 2021), but also when the primary methods used by those three Bulgarian generations are digital: social media and news websites (See Figure 38). A social research conducted by Humprecht et al. (2020) draws some of its findings to the conclusion that the higher the percentage of social media users in a society, the lower the resilience towards disinformation. And here, given that the Bulgarian social media users come to 62.1% of the total population and given that both Generation Y and Generation Z have shown a much higher engagement with social media than the eldest generation (X), we can say that this is a concern which needs urgent addressing as otherwise it might get out of control. Another statement that has been made by Boncheva and Pershan (2021) refers to the Bulgarians’ tendency to limit their views and opinions of current news solely through the eyes of social media and television programmes. However, this research has proven that one of the most popular methods to consume information is news websites which even comes before TV news bulletins for all three generations.

*Figure 38: Rating of most used methods for information finding according to all respondents in this study*
In addition, the final results also conclude that the average point of awareness of news and events in the country for all three age groups is 3.8 out of 5 (See Figure 39), with the majority of the respondents also aware of the pivotal role of independent journalism for the benefit of the society.

*Figure 39: Average awareness of news and events in Bulgaria of all respondents from this study*
Another of the main points drawn from the research is the lack of trust that all three generations express. We see a very high total number of 196 respondents (82%) who consider Bulgarian media as unethical. The awareness of the public of crucial ethical shortcomings is proving to be one of the reasons behind the lack of trust in the news and other information (See Figure 40).

*Figure 40: Rating of the consideration of Bulgarian media as ethical vs. ratings of the seriousness of disinformation as a problem vs. trust rate of overall media according to all respondents in this study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO YOU CONSIDER BULGARIAN MEDIA AS ETHICAL?</th>
<th>HOW SERIOUS A PROBLEM, IF AT ALL, DO YOU THINK DISINFORMATION IS?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't know</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I THINK I CAN TRUST MOST NEWS MOST OF THE TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s own elaboration*

As already discussed, there are a number of factors which contribute to the public distrust, but probably one of the major ones is the high politization and political ownership of national Bulgarian media (Garcia-Marin 2020) which is said to result in doubts in press freedom and
accuracy. Hence, citizens begin to avoid media outlets due to a higher chance of them actually being key players in the urge for control and manipulation of the masses (Hameleers et al. 2021) (See Figure 41). Contributing factor here, and as mentioned in the findings by Humprecht et al. ‘s (2020) social research, is also the social polarisation in Bulgaria especially with the Romani minority. The issue of acculturation and discrimination further strengthens media’s stereotypical voice, and therefore of the Bulgarian population, and as seen in the results of this study this comes as one of the greatest issues right after sensationalism and disinformation, even though they are all strongly linked to one another.

*Figure 41: Rates on the intentional avoidance of specific media outlets vs. rates of most concerning information source according to all respondents of this study*

Possible ways to tackle disinformation

So, what is currently being done to stop disinformation and what can Bulgarian media do to regain the trust of the public? This is a question with an increased difficulty as there is no
simple solution nor a single way to reach objectivity. And here we do not simply talk about the Bulgarian media state but about the media state globally. As each following generation gets more and more used to social networks, especially for information gathering, the already contaminated internet environment is threatening to become the greatest challenge in the fight against disinformation. Backing up this statement are the results of this study which show that Generation Y and specifically Generation Z rely hugely on social media for their news consumption, a method found to be a problematic source of information due to the biased and public oriented opinion (Humprecht et al. 2020) on top of complicated algorithms supporting personal interests and paid advertising. This is why Bulgarian government; media institutions and watchdogs must work together to create a more resilient and strong system with a policy to guide professional media towards a more accountable informative environment.

Another possible solution is the implementation and mass encouragement of the use of fact-checking sources to help citizens assess the information they receive more critically. Hameleers et al. (2021, p.3) claim that reduced trust levels have sometimes been connected to rather positive democratic results and even a healthy scepticism but what they also add is that “this only applies when these perceptions are used as motivation to distinguish false from real information, rather than distrusting any information, even when it is accurate”. This is a case that has been noticed with the trust rates of Generation Z, scoring the lowest from all three with a general distrust towards all of the mentioned headlines in the survey even though their use and knowledge of fact-checking sources is relatively high. The only challenge that is said to hinder the further development of fact-checking is the limited visibility, algorithms implementation, and further constraints such as time and resources (Moreno-Gil et al. 2021). Despite this, there is some light in the tunnel, especially with the newly official launch of a Bulgarian website for news verification called factcheck.bg. and the continuous ambition of younger people to contribute to a positive change for the society. Examples here are also the
Instagram profiles for detailed information on the parliamentary elections and political parties called “Project Firebird” and “Tsarski Pishtovi” alongside the website that verifies statements said by Bulgarian politicians called “Are You Lying?”.

Further to the above suggestions of course, media and critical information consumption education should be an integral part of secondary schools and universities’ programmes. Only through these combined efforts will the media state in the country finally come closer to The Ethical Code of Bulgarian Media (2004) with improvements in the collection and distribution of information, reliability, independence, professional relations between institutions and above all looking after the public interest.

Limitations and further research

As with any social research there is always a possibility of limitations and/or restrictions but is always crucial to make sure they are acknowledged in order to allow other researchers to continue the work and study further. In terms of this specific paper there are a number of limitations that have had an effect over the findings from the research. Firstly, there is a significantly high difference in the number of female versus male respondents, 152 (64%) and 86 (36%), respectively. This, however, could arguably affect the findings because the questions asked in the survey have not been dependent on nor have searched for gender differences. Secondly, there is also a difference in the number of respondents belonging to the three different age groups. For instance, Generation X respondents are the lowest number with 61 in total (26%), then Generation Y representatives are the highest number with 90 (38%), and lastly Generation Z respondents stay in the middle with a total of 77 (32%). Here it is believed that this difference should not have had a big impact on the results due to the separate analysis and average scores for each generation. Thirdly, a total of 85 participants (36%) in the research have lived outside Bulgaria with 40 of them (17%) for 5 or more years. This can inevitably
lead to some concerns and questions around how aware those people are, in reality, of the events and news in the country and thus, hindering the average scores of the findings. What is more, the greater number of respondents has received a higher form of education, 99 (42%) have a master’s degree and another 76 (32%) have a bachelor’s degree which could in fact have interfered with the overall results. Hence, it can be suspected that the results might be showing the judgements of generally well educated and critically aware citizens without the weight and representation of the other half of the Bulgarian population. Last but not least, after already conducting the research, the idea of a few more possible questions that could have been asked has arisen. Questions around how people share the information they consume and if they are generally aware of any harm it might cause if it happens to be false. Also, a question about their sense of responsibility when handling information would have helped to better understand their actual awareness of the seriousness of disinformation overall. And then finally, an open question which urges suggestions or thoughts on how to restore the credibility of journalism in Bulgaria and what needs to be done in the eyes of the public.

So, taking all this into account, some further research would be extremely useful to strengthen the arguments of this paper even more. Other aspects that future researchers might want to take into consideration are the economic, financial, and educational stability of Bulgaria and how these might affect the media state and the media literacy of the population. Furthermore, academics might dive deeper into the specific characteristics of each individual on a psychological level which affect the judgement and perception of that person towards the information they consume. Research into education specifically is also always needed because we must constantly strive for the development of knowledgeable, good, and objective societies.
Reference list


- Castro Herrero, Laia, Edda Humphrecht, Sven Engesser, Michael L. Brüggemann, & Florin Büchel. "Rethinking Hallin and Mancini Beyond the West: An Analysis of


Countries". *Communication Research*, 009365022199771.


• Todorova, Rosalina and Yakova, Liliya, 2021. За пандемичните размери на дезинформацията – какво да правим. [online] BCNL. Available at:


Appendices

Appendix 1

Research Questionnaire

Name of the research:

“Analysis of the perceptions of Generations X, Y, and Z towards media disinformation in Bulgaria”

Name of the supervisor / PI and name of the university:

Xavier Ramon - Head of Journalism Studies at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

Research project’s objective:

The objective of this research project is to analyse the disinformation aspect of Bulgarian media through the perspectives of three different generations/age groups. The aim is to understand whether the phenomenon has evolved and/or strengthened over the years as well as to evaluate the level of media literacy among the public.

Methodology and procedures in relation to participants:

Your participation will be in the form of an online or paper questionnaire which will include only questions related to the issue being researched. The questionnaire’s expected average completion time is 7 minutes.

Privacy:

In order to protect your privacy, the researcher will not be asking for your name. We will store your data in a secure place under key or digitally with safe access control mechanisms so that these can only be consulted by researchers and/or supervisors of the current project. In case of data publication, we will do it anonymously.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this project is completely free and you can withdraw or opt-out of it at any time without the need to justify your decision. You have the right to omit answers to any question.

Contact details of the project researcher:

Should you have any questions on the research project, you may contact:

Galena Todorova – MA International Studies on Media, Power and Difference at Universitat Pompeu Fabra - galena.todorova01@estudiant.upf.edu

* Required

6/9/2021

This form will record your name, please fill your name.
1. To which gender identity do you most identify? *
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary
   - Prefer not to say

2. To which age group do you belong? *
   - 18-24 years of age
   - 25-40 years of age
   - 41-56 years of age
   - 57 or over years of age

3. Have you ever lived outside of Bulgaria for more than a year? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - Prefer not to say

4. If yes, how many years have you spent outside Bulgaria?
   - 1 year
   - 2 years
   - 3 years
   - 4 years
   - 5 or more years

6/9/2021
5. What is your highest level of education? *
(If you are currently in full-time education, please put your highest qualification to date)

- I did not complete any formal education
- Early childhood education
- Primary education
- Secondary education
- Short-cycle tertiary education (vocational education and training, studying towards a non-academic degree, e.g. nursing/teaching diploma)
- Bachelor's or equivalent level degree
- Master's or equivalent level degree
- Doctoral or equivalent level degree

6. What is your awareness of the news and events happening in Bulgaria? *
On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is extremely low and 5 is extremely high)

1 2 3 4 5
7. Please, rate the methods you use to find out about current news and events in Bulgaria: *
   (where 1 is the primary/most commonly used method and 9 is the last/least used method)

   Social media (instagram, facebook, twitter, tik tok or others)

   News websites

   Television news bulletins or programmes

   Radio News Bulletins or programmes

   Magazines or newspapers

   Email subscriptions from specific news outlets

   Word of mouth

   Advertisements/Promotion

   At work/school/university/public spaces

8. How important, if at all, do you think independent journalism is for the proper functioning of society? *
   
   O Extremely important
   O Very Important
   O Somewhat important
   O Not very important
   O Not at all important
   O I don’t know
9. Do you consider Bulgarian media as ethical? *

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ I don't know

10. Do you think that any of the listed below are issues that the Bulgarian media has? *

   Please, select all that apply:

☐ Sensationalism ("the act by newspapers, television, etc. of presenting information in a way that is shocking or exciting" - Cambridge Dictionary)
☐ Stereotyping ("a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong" - Cambridge Dictionary)
☐ Disinformation ("spreading of false information" - Cambridge Dictionary)
☐ Verification ("the act of verifying something = proving or checking that it exists, or is true or correct - Cambridge Dictionary)
☐ Racism ("policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race" - Cambridge Dictionary)
☐ Bad choice or irrelevance of news stories
☐ General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues

11. Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
   I think I can trust most news most of the time |
   I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time |

6/9/2021
12. How serious a problem, if at all, do you think disinformation is? *

- Extremely serious
- Very serious
- Somewhat serious
- Not very serious
- Not serious at all
- Don't know

13. Are you concerned about disinformation? *

- Not at all concerned
- Not very concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Very concerned
- Extremely concerned
- Don't know

14. Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about? Please select one: *

- False or misleading information from...

  - The government, politicians, or political parties in my country
  - Foreign governments, politicians, or political parties
  - Ordinary people
  - Activists or activist groups
  - Journalists or news organisations
  - I am not concerned about any of these

6/9/2021
15. Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about? Please select one: *
   False or misleading information via...
   ○ News websites or apps
   ○ Search engines (e.g. Google, Bing)
   ○ Facebook
   ○ Twitter
   ○ YouTube
   ○ Messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Viber)
   ○ I am not concerned about any of these

16. Do you avoid receiving your information from specific media outlets? *
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

17. If yes, which of the listed below match your reasoning? Please, select all that apply:
   I avoid some media outlets...
   ○ due to a lack of trust in them
   ○ due to habit
   ○ due to publication of irrelevant news
   ○ because of too much advertising
   ○ due to paid subscription
   ○ due to bad reputation
   ○ due to the journalists who work there
   ○ Other

6/9/2021
18. To what extent do you think these news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information? *

*The media outlet from which the headline is taken will not be mentioned in order to avoid bias.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“They offer money to register the dead as victims of the virus! Who benefits from inflating the victims?”</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Those who have been vaccinated against the flu are less likely to be infected with the coronavirus”</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Covid crisis in India gets more serious: Patients are dying without oxygen”</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Top 4 signs that you have had Covid”</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19. To what extent do you think these news headlines about the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections are likely or unlikely to contain true and objective information? *  
*The media outlet from which the headline is taken will not be mentioned in order to avoid bias.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>I don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Hit on the Web: Tatiana Doncheva and Hristo Ivanov meet secretly PHOTOS”</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Slavi, Maya and BSP block the financial aid of 50 lv for over 2 million pensioners”</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Here is the truth for the moratorium - the madness of ‘mutrite’ in the National Assembly leaves hospitals without deliveries of medicine and resources in the pandemic”</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cash in a bag instead of by bank transfer: Deputies kept their “unaccounted” money”</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. Do you know any fact-checking websites? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

21. Have you used any fact-checking websites? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

6/9/2021
22. If yes, please specify which fact checking websites have you used: *

23. Would you like to add any comments inline with the topic of this research?

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.

[Microsoft Forms]
Appendix 2

Galena Todorova shared a link.
26 May •

Здравейте, миeli бивши и настоящи учители и ученици на ПППЕ "Алеко Константинов"! 😊
Ще ви бъда изключително благодарна ако можете да отделите малка част от времето си, за да попълнете моя анонимен въпросник, който е част от дисертацията ми за защита на магистърска степен. *Моля, не попълвайте въпросника ако нямате навършенi 18 години!*

Накратко, проучвам възприятията на три възрастови групи към медийната дезинформация. Темата е от голям интерес за мен и търся максимално искренi отговори.

Оригиналият въпросник е на английски език и ще ми бъде по-удобно ако можете да попълнете него, но също така имам и версия на български език, ако смятate, че бi ви било по-лесно.

Въпросник на английски език: https://forms.office.com/r/z7PwwPXdmq
Въпросник на български език: https://forms.office.com/r/YQ5xnd7LH1

Ако се интересувате от резултатите с удоволствие бих ги споделила с вас след като завърша проучването.

Много благодаря за отделеното време!
Поздрави,
Галена :)}

Twitter post by a referrer

Facebook group post by researcher