MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF CRITICAL RESISTANCE AGAINST IDEOLOGICAL DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON GENERATION Z

A ALFABETIZAÇÃO MIDIÁTICA COMO ÁREA DE RESISTÊNCIA CRÍTICA CONTRA A DESINFORMAÇÃO IDEOLÓGICA NAS REDES SOCIAIS: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO SOBRE A GERAÇÃO Z

LA ALFABETIZACIÓN MEDIÁTICA COMO ÁMBITO DE RESISTENCIA CRÍTICA FRENTE A LA DESINFORMACIÓN IDEOLÓGICA EN LAS REDES SOCIALES: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO SOBRE LA GENERACIÓN Z

Ersel KİRAZ[1]
ersel.kiraz@btu.edu.tr

Melda Medine SUNAY[2]
sosyologmelda@gmail.com

Önder ŞANLI[3]
osanli@adiyaman.edu.tr

Minara ALIYEVA ÇINAR[4]
minara@uludag.edu.tr

Hakan AYDOĞAN[5]
aydoganh@hotmail.com

Çetin TAN[6]
e-mail: c.tan@firat.edu.tr

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[1] Bursa Technical University, Bursa – Turkey. Doctor. Department of Sociology.
[2] Bursa Technical University, Bursa – Turkey. Associate Professor. Department of Sociology.
[3] Adiyaman University, Adiyaman – Turkey. Associate Professor. Besni Vocational School, Department of Computer Use.
[4] Bursa Uludag University, Bursa – Turkey. Associate Professor. Department of Social Science and Turkish Language Teaching.
[5] Navoi State University, Navoi – Uzbekistan. Professor Doctor.
[6] Firat University, Elazig – Turkey. Associate Professor. Department of Physical Education and Sports.

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study investigates how Generation Z participants perceive, interpret, and respond to ideological disinformation on social media. It adopts a case study approach based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 participants selected through criterion sampling, all of whom are active users of Facebook, X, and Instagram. The study draws on Wardle and Derakhshan's information disorder framework, van Dijk and Eagleton's approaches to ideology, Çakmak's analysis of ideological disinformation, and Potter and Livingstone's perspectives on critical media literacy. The findings indicate awareness of ideological disinformation, partisanship, fake profiles, troll accounts, image manipulation, and perception management. However, responses are predominantly individual and defensive, with limited systematic information verification. The study concludes that media literacy should encompass source evaluation, contextual interpretation, recognition of ideological framing, and understanding of algorithms, thereby strengthening democratic citizenship and critical participation in digital environments.

KEYWORDS: Media Studies. Social media. Media literacy. Ideological disinformation. Generation Z.

***RESUMO**: Este estudo qualitativo investiga como participantes da Geração Z percebem, interpretam e respondem à desinformação ideológica nas redes sociais. Adota abordagem de estudo de caso, com entrevistas semiestruturadas e em profundidade realizadas com 18 participantes selecionados por amostragem por critérios, todos usuários ativos do Facebook, X e Instagram. O estudo fundamenta-se no modelo de desordem informacional de Wardle e Derakhshan, nas abordagens de van Dijk e Eagleton sobre ideologia, na análise de Çakmak sobre desinformação ideológica e nas perspectivas de alfabetização midiática crítica de Potter e Livingstone. Os resultados indicam consciência sobre desinformação ideológica, partidarismo, perfis falsos, contas de trolls, manipulação de imagens e gestão da percepção. Contudo, as respostas são predominantemente individuais e defensivas, com pouca verificação sistemática. Conclui-se que a alfabetização midiática deve incluir avaliação de fontes, interpretação contextual, reconhecimento de enquadramentos ideológicos e compreensão dos algoritmos, fortalecendo a cidadania democrática e a participação crítica digital.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Estudos de Mídia. Redes sociais. Alfabetização midiática. Desinformação ideológica. Geração Z.*

***RESUMEN**: Este estudio cualitativo investiga cómo los participantes de la Generación Z perciben, interpretan y responden a la desinformación ideológica en las redes sociales. Se adopta un enfoque de estudio de caso basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas y en profundidad realizadas a 18 participantes seleccionados mediante muestreo por criterios, todos ellos usuarios activos de Facebook, X e Instagram. El estudio se fundamenta en el modelo de desorden informativo de Wardle y Derakhshan, en los enfoques de van Dijk y Eagleton sobre la ideología, en el análisis de Çakmak sobre la desinformación ideológica y en las perspectivas de alfabetización mediática crítica de Potter y Livingstone. Los resultados indican conciencia sobre la desinformación ideológica, el partidismo, los perfiles falsos, las cuentas de trolls, la manipulación de imágenes y la gestión de la percepción. Sin embargo, las respuestas son predominantemente individuales y defensivas, con poca verificación sistemática de la información. Se concluye que la alfabetización mediática debe incluir la evaluación de fuentes, la interpretación contextual, el reconocimiento de los marcos ideológicos y la comprensión de los algoritmos, fortaleciendo así la ciudadanía democrática y la participación crítica en entornos digitales.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Estudios de los Medios. Redes sociales. Alfabetización mediática. Desinformación ideológica. Generación Z.*

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has established social media as a central component of contemporary public communication. Rather than a mere technological innovation, this shift represents a broader social change in how individuals access news, produce information, and engage in public debate. This transformation has fundamentally altered how information is produced, circulated, and legitimized in contemporary societies.

Unlike the traditional media order, which relies on editorial gatekeeping, professional ethical norms, and institutional accountability, networks now facilitate rapid, horizontal, and user-centric content sharing. Within this paradigm, users transition from passive recipients to active actors who create, discuss, and redistribute information. Although this expands opportunities for public participation, bypassing editorial filters generates significant challenges regarding accuracy and reliability. Consequently, individuals without journalistic training or institutional affiliation can achieve substantial influence over the flow of public information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Social networks exhibit a dual structure: they democratize access while simultaneously complicating the attainment of reliable knowledge. The sheer abundance of viewpoints often blurs the line between factual and misleading content. Furthermore, ranking systems, user preferences, and online relationships have transformed the public sphere into a multi-actor environment. Encountering news is no longer spontaneous. It is now highly mediated by digital architectures and interpersonal ties. As the selection function shifts from traditional newsrooms toward automated systems and social circles, individuals' exposure to civic information becomes deeply dependent on these underlying structures (Bakshy et al., 2015).

The spread of misinformation online is a complex, multilayered phenomenon encompassing production, user reception, and socio-political consequences. Disinformation extends beyond simple errors; it involves intentionally produced falsehoods designed to deceive, operating outside traditional editorial norms (Lazer et al., 2018). Yet, explaining this solely through the producer's intent fails to capture its broader societal impact. The credibility of fake news relies heavily on existing political orientations, as individuals tend to believe content that aligns with their affiliations-a tendency amplified within segregated online networks (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Building upon these discussions, the present study investigates the technical and political mechanisms driving this phenomenon, offering media literacy as an important framework for enhancing users' resilience.

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Adding the dimension of diffusion, research demonstrates that fabricated content (particularly false political news) spreads faster, deeper, and more broadly than verified facts (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Together, intentional deception, political affinity, and rapid network diffusion transform this into a multidimensional public information problem. It thrives both on users' predispositions and the structural capacity of digital environments to facilitate rapid sharing (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The flow of content is shaped by a complex interplay of digital architecture, automated visibility, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and selective exposure. Crucially, the persuasive power of fake news relies heavily on emotionally driven patterns of information distribution. Falsehoods often trigger strong reactions, such as surprise or disgust. This emotional resonance captures attention and accelerates dissemination far beyond simple cognitive assessments of accuracy (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Since exposure to opposing viewpoints is limited more by individual choices, followed accounts, and friendship networks than by automated rankings alone, combating this issue requires more than technical regulation (Bakshy et al., 2015). Rather than treating media literacy merely as a basic fact-checking skill, this study highlights its necessity as a tool for deconstructing the emotional and political vulnerabilities that make fake news persuasive. By shifting the focus from top-down censorship to user-level critical evaluation (specifically the ability to recognize manipulative framing and structural bias) this approach outlines a more dynamic and effective countermeasure for the digital public sphere.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The first part of the conceptual framework defines disinformation and distinguishes it from misinformation and malinformation, with particular attention to intentionality, context, circulation, and social harm. It subsequently examines ideology and ideological disinformation as discursive and political practices that shape group identities, establish distinctions between "us" and "them," and direct the interpretation of social and political events.

The following sections discuss social media as a contradictory digital public sphere and present media literacy as a multidimensional form of critical competence. The Method section then explains the qualitative case study design, participant-selection criteria, and semi-structured interview process. The Findings section analyzes participants' accounts of political partisanship, troll and fake accounts, visual manipulation, perception management, verification, blocking, reporting, and avoidance of debate. Finally, the concluding section synthesizes the

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findings and discusses the implications of critical media literacy education for democratic citizenship and resistance to ideological disinformation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Disinformation

Contemporary communication research defines disinformation beyond the mere presence of false information. It is analyzed as a specific information disorder, distinct from ordinary factual errors or misunderstandings, focusing on its production motives, contextual meaning, and social consequences. Fallis (2015) characterizes disinformation as intentionally misleading content that generates false beliefs. Rather than just an epistemic flaw, it acts as a strategic communicative practice with tangible socio-political impacts. Its deceptive nature is either deliberately engineered by the producer or systematically functions to serve specific interests (Fallis, 2015).

Establishing precise conceptual boundaries requires distinguishing disinformation from related phenomena. While misinformation involves sharing false content without malicious intent, disinformation is the deliberate creation and distribution of falsehoods to deceive or inflict harm. Conversely, malinformation weaponizes genuine facts by decontextualizing or strategically disclosing them for malicious purposes. These distinctions highlight the heterogeneity of online information disorders, demonstrating that rigorous analysis must account for variables like intentionality, context, and potential harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Crucially, disinformation operates discursively as well as factually (Figure 1). Çakmak (2019) illustrates how media ownership, economic ties, and political affiliations prevent entirely neutral news coverage, turning journalistic discourse into an arena for ideological meaning-making. Thus, ideological disinformation extends beyond explicit fabrications. It manifests through selective headlines, foregrounded actors, omitted details, and specific lexical choices that legitimize certain narratives. Ultimately, it functions as a targeted discursive practice designed to steer the reader's political perception in a desired direction (Çakmak, 2019).

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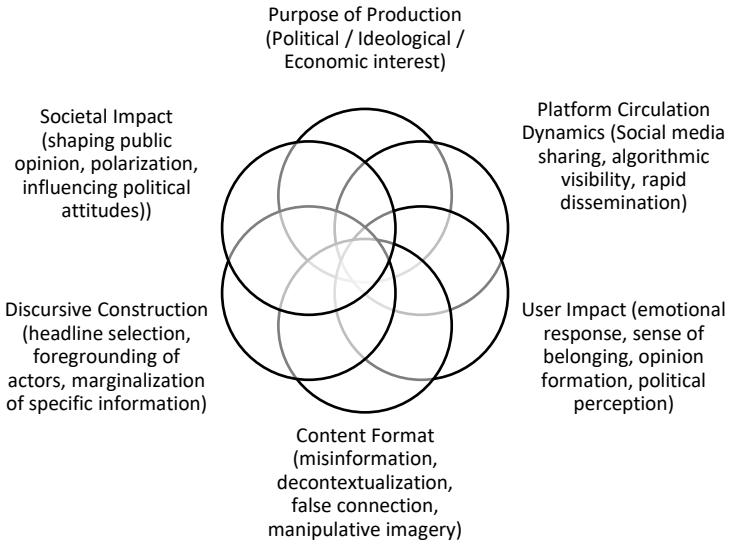
Figure 1.
The Process of Production, Circulation, and Impact of Disinformation on Social Media



Note. Prepared by the authors based on Fallis (2015), Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), and Çakmak (2019).

In social media environments, the impact of disinformation is magnified by accelerated, unverified content sharing. Crucially, this circulation is rarely random. False content is frequently engineered to serve specific political, economic, or ideological goals, utilizing emotional triggers and group identity to maximize engagement. Therefore, online disinformation functions not just as inaccurate sharing, but as a calculated communicative strategy designed to manipulate public opinion and shape political attitudes.

Emphasizing intentionality, Fallis (2015) argues that disinformation derives its meaning primarily from its deceptive purpose rather than mere factual inaccuracy. Framing the issue more broadly, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) conceptualize this within a spectrum of information disorder. They note that misleading content gains public traction through decontextualization, manipulated visuals, false connections, and emotionally resonant narratives. Consequently, headline-text mismatches, fabricated documents, and affective storytelling foster an environment where deceptive campaigns spread with exceptional speed and persuasion.

Ultimately, analyzing disinformation strictly through a true-false binary is inadequate. A comprehensive understanding requires examining the underlying motives, detached contexts, distributing actors, visibility mechanisms, and targeted audiences. Disinformation thrives at the exact intersection of digital distribution mechanics and ideological orientation. Thus, any

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rigorous analysis must move beyond content evaluation to simultaneously assess intention, context, circulation dynamics, and socio-political impact.

Ideology and Ideological Disinformation

In broad terms, ideology refers to the beliefs, values, and interpretive structures through which individuals and social groups make sense of the world and organize relations of identity and power (Eagleton, 1991; van Dijk, 1998). Rather than constituting a narrow collection of political preferences, ideologies form the cognitive and social foundations of group representations, organize collective identities, and contribute to the construction of distinctions between "us" and "them" (van Dijk, 1998).

This dynamic becomes evident when content is strategically organized to serve socio-political objectives. Eagleton (1991) argues that ideology is intrinsically linked to power relations, operating by naturalizing specific values while rendering alternative interpretations invisible. Consequently, ideological disinformation is not merely the production of falsehoods; it is a selective communicative strategy designed to reinforce a dominant worldview and discredit opposing positions (Eagleton, 1991).

This strategic framing closely aligns with propaganda, which Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) define as a systematic effort to shape perceptions and direct behavior toward specific goals. Thus, ideological disinformation transcends simple "fake news." It actively seeks to delegitimize opposing views, solidify in-group loyalty, and orient public attitudes. To achieve this, manipulative content relies heavily on biased, emotionally polarizing language that decontextualizes or entirely distorts factual realities (Table 1) (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006).

Table 1.
Fundamental Dimensions of Ideological Disinformation

Dimension	Explanation	Relationship to Disinformation
Ideological meaning-making	The process through which individuals and social groups interpret the world through beliefs, values, and interpretive frameworks.	It determines which forms of information are regarded as true, legitimate, threatening, or worthless.
Group identity	The construction of group belonging through the distinction between "us" and "them."	False or misleading content may strengthen in-group loyalty while increasing distrust towards opposing groups.
Selection and organization of information	The foregrounding, omission, or decontextualization of information in line with particular political or social objectives.	Disinformation operates not only through the production of false information, but also through the strategic organization of information.

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Propaganda logic	The attempt to shape perceptions, direct cognition, and orient behaviour towards a specific objective.	Ideological disinformation uses biased, selective, and emotionally charged language to orient the target audience towards a particular attitude.
Social consequences	The steering of political opinions, the narrowing of public debate, and the deepening of polarization.	False information ceases to be merely an informational problem and becomes a tool that erodes democratic deliberative culture.

Note. Prepared by the authors based on van Dijk (1998), Eagleton (1991), and Jowett and O'Donnell (2006).

Within this framework, ideological disinformation occurs when misleading content is weaponized within a specific belief system. Its effectiveness relies heavily on users' tendency to uncritically accept narratives aligning with their socio-political affiliations. Consequently, digital falsehoods transcend simple informational errors, acting instead as catalysts that harden group identities, foster mutual distrust, and severely restrict public debate.

Ultimately, the primary threat of this phenomenon is its capacity to drive tangible socio-political consequences. Far from remaining confined to the digital domain, it actively deepens social polarization and erodes democratic deliberation. Therefore, ideological disinformation must be analyzed simultaneously as an information disorder and a deliberate tool for political orientation. The core issue is not simply that fabrications circulate, but that they become normalized and legitimized within targeted cultural universes (Eagleton, 1991; van Dijk, 1998).

Social Media and the Digital Public Sphere

Social media fundamentally alters public communication by turning passive consumers into active producers within "networked publics." While technical affordances like replicability and scalability enhance visibility and expression, they simultaneously accelerate the dissemination of manipulative content (Boyd, 2010). Consequently, the internet facilitates political engagement but falls short of constituting an ideal Habermasian public sphere. Marred by access inequalities, fragmented communities, and superficial interactions, digital networks function not as rationally deliberative spaces, but as complex arenas where competing identities and power relations clash (Papacharissi, 2002).

Platform architecture further complicates this dynamic. Social media channels are not neutral; their underlying logic (driven by programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication) directly dictates content visibility and agenda-setting. Because algorithms structurally prioritize highly engaging, emotionally polarizing posts, ideological disinformation frequently gains disproportionate traction, thereby wielding substantial influence over public perception (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

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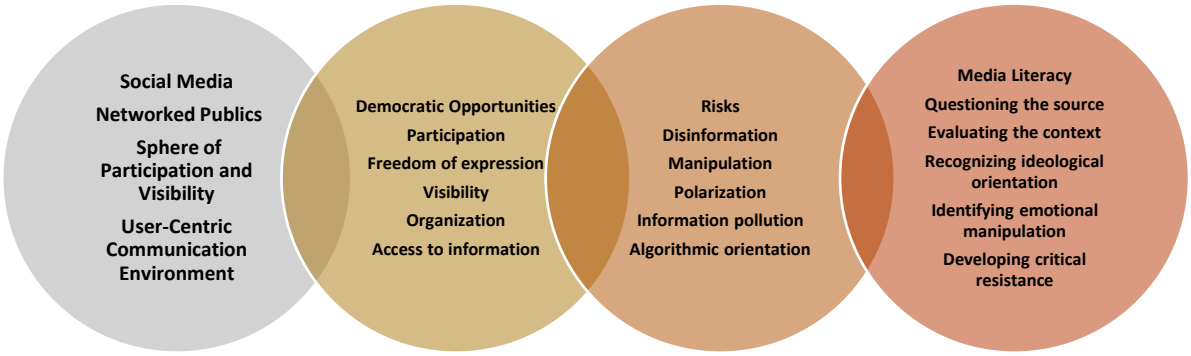
Ultimately, the democratic character of these platforms remains highly contested. While they undeniably foster civic participation, this potential is severely constrained by commercial imperatives, political intervention, and rapid information flows. Rather than an egalitarian deliberative environment, social media operates as a deeply contradictory field of digital publicity-one that simultaneously enables public debate and exacerbates severe information pollution (Figure 2) (Dursun & Yıldız, 2022).

Figure 2.
The Contradictory Digital Public Sphere Structure of Social Media



Note. Prepared by the authors based on boyd (2010), Papacharissi (2002), van Dijck and Poell (2013), and Dursun and Yıldız (2022).

Social media's communicative architecture simultaneously fosters political participation and amplifies risks of manipulation. Devoid of traditional editorial gatekeeping, digital content is driven by diverse actors (including anonymous accounts and bot networks) often sacrificing accuracy for rapid distribution. Consequently, these platforms function not merely as information conduits, but as arenas where facts are actively reinterpreted through ideological lenses.

The danger of such disinformation extends far beyond factual inaccuracy. It weaponizes representation to sharpen the "us" versus "them" dichotomy, frequently framing opposing viewpoints not as legitimate alternatives, but as moral deviations or existential threats. Thus, online falsehoods fundamentally distort how social groups perceive and position one another.

Safeguarding the digital public sphere therefore requires more than top-down platform regulation. Media literacy must evolve beyond basic fact-checking to become a comprehensive framework of critical resistance. This approach empowers users to actively deconstruct the emotional manipulations, discursive framing, and underlying power relations that drive the circulation of digital falsehoods (Papacharissi, 2002; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

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Media Literacy

Media literacy extends far beyond technical access; it is a multidimensional competence encompassing the analysis, evaluation, and conscious production of messages. This skillset fundamentally shifts the user's role from a passive receiver to an active, critical subject. Surface-level formats (whether news, advertisements, or personal posts) derive their true meaning from underlying production relations, symbolic codes, and ideological framing. Consequently, critical evaluation requires deconstructing how and why these messages are circulated. As Potter (2010) argues, this dynamic awareness empowers individuals to exert greater control over media influences, developing continuously through analytical and abstract reasoning.

In digital environments, the necessity of this competence is amplified by the rapid spread of disinformation. While information abundance provides diverse content, it simultaneously exposes users to biased and manipulative narratives. The central challenge today is no longer accessing information, but rigorously evaluating its quality.

Therefore, media literacy serves as a vital mechanism of resistance against ideological disinformation. Deceptive campaigns rarely rely solely on explicit falsehoods; they exploit curated visuals, decontextualized rhetoric, and emotional triggers amplified by algorithmic visibility. Because these tactics deeply influence political identity and group belonging, cultivating a critical distance (by questioning a message's source, context, and motives before sharing) is essential for neutralizing their impact.

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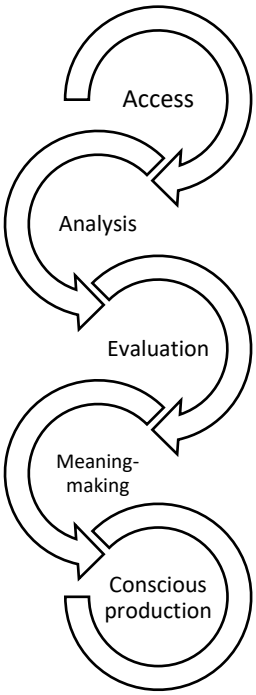
Figure 3.
Fundamental Elements of Media Literacy



Note. Prepared by the authors based on Potter (2010), Livingstone (2004), and Kurt and Kürüm (2010).

Livingstone (2004) posits that evaluation is the cornerstone of media literacy. Amidst online information abundance, users frequently struggle to identify biased or exploitative sources, making the critical assessment of social and historical contexts essential for informed decision-making (Livingstone, 2004). Similarly, research in Turkey closely aligns this competence with critical thinking. Kurt and Kürüm (2010) note that media-literate individuals actively cross-reference alternative sources, recognizing that all messages are inherently shaped by specific economic, political, and aesthetic frameworks.

Ultimately, this literacy transcends basic content consumption. It functions as a critical awareness that deconstructs the production relations, ideological biases, and manipulative techniques embedded in digital narratives. Given that online visibility is heavily dictated by algorithmic priorities, personal affiliations, and commercial interests, fostering this analytical skillset remains fundamental to safeguarding the integrity of democratic deliberation.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore how Generation Z perceives, interprets, and responds to digital disinformation. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the purpose is to understand how individuals interpret their experiences,

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construct meanings, and describe social processes within their specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study enables the in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly separable (Yin, 2018). In the present research, the case comprises the experiences and response practices of Generation Z social media users encountering ideologically motivated disinformation.

Generation Z generally refers to the generational cohort following the Millennials whose formative years coincided with the widespread normalization of internet-connected devices, mobile communication, and social media. Although the precise boundaries of generational cohorts vary across the literature, Seemiller and Grace (2019) define Generation Z as individuals born between 1995 and 2010. In the present study, Generation Z was operationally defined more narrowly as individuals born between 1999 and 2010, in accordance with the participant-selection criteria. This operational definition was adopted to establish a clear and time-specific boundary for participant selection.

Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Criterion sampling is a purposive sampling strategy in which cases are selected because they meet predetermined conditions that are directly relevant to the purpose and research questions of the study (Patton, 2015). This strategy makes it possible to identify information-rich participants who have direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. In the present study, the inclusion criteria required participants to be members of Generation Z, to have been born between 1999 and 2010, to use Facebook, X, and Instagram actively, and to spend a minimum of two hours per day on these platforms. The final participant group consisted of 18 individuals who met all the predetermined criteria. This deliberately focused sample size directly aligns with the qualitative objective of achieving profound analytical depth rather than broad statistical generalization.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This open-ended technique was utilized to capture participants' critical evaluation practices and emotional responses in their own words, circumventing the constraints of rigid, closed-ended questioning. By providing the methodological flexibility to probe emergent topics, this approach effectively maps the complex, individualized evaluative strategies these users deploy when confronting fabricated content. The semi-structured interview form consisted of open-ended questions designed to enable participants to describe, in their own words, how they encounter, evaluate, and respond to ideologically motivated disinformation on social media. Follow-up questions

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were used when necessary to clarify participants' responses and explore emerging themes in greater depth.

FINDINGS

This section investigates how Generation Z users perceive, evaluate, and navigate ideologically motivated disinformation circulated by opposing groups. The analysis specifically focuses on whether young users recognize these orchestrated efforts and what precautions they deploy against them.

Unlike general misinformation, disinformation involves the strategic distribution of fabricated content intended to manipulate public opinion. This deliberate deceptive practice traces its conceptual roots to the 1920s Soviet term *dezinformatsiya* and subsequent Cold War campaigns (McNamara, 2019).

Interviews reveal a strong participant awareness of organized digital manipulation. For instance, K6 emphasizes that political factions frequently utilize fabricated accounts to spread deceptive content:

> *I definitely think such people exist. I think they usually share posts on social media through fake profiles, like trolls. When I encounter such a post, I do not engage in debate, but I report the person and the post. Some of their posts seem to have been produced skilfully through visual manipulation programs such as Photoshop. For this reason, I think there may be several individuals or propaganda institutions behind them.* (K6)

As K6 highlights, trolls are central to accelerating the visibility of fake news. These actors intentionally disrupt digital environments by posting provocative content designed to trigger emotional responses, manufacture controversy, and ultimately undermine civil discourse. Rather than engaging in genuine debate, they operate as a negative social force, deploying hostility and sometimes weaponizing factual data to initiate destructive polemics.

Other participants corroborate this recognition of strategic, identity-driven deception. K3, for example, describes how political factions manufacture news to artificially elevate their own standing while degrading opponents:

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> *In other words, we see these groups producing false news by portraying the parties they support as superior and by degrading other parties. Since I usually like to research things, I can often see that such news is false.* (K3)

Participant K8 identifies the core strategy of these ideological conflicts as perception management, emphasizing that manipulated beliefs often override factual truth:

> *The first thing that comes to my mind is the problem of political groups settling scores with one another. This situation is ideological. In other words, ideologies are in conflict. They try to humiliate each other through lies and false news, but I cannot fully understand the events because I did not closely follow what happened before. They also use psychology here-rhetoric, presenting what happened from a different angle; in other words, it is probably done through perception. They manage perceptions. As you know, it is not important for something to be true, but it is very important for it to be perceived as true. Of course, I do not hesitate to say what I know to be true, but if the person in front of me insists on not understanding, I do not tire myself or my spirit too much; I block them or unfollow them.* (K8)

Similarly, K9 notes these actors actively struggle to manipulate public focus:

> *They definitely exist. As I said, this becomes more visible especially in political news. We see a struggle between opposing groups through attempts to change our perceptions and make us look in a particular direction.* (K9)

These insights align with O'Neill's (1989) characterization of perception management as a cost-effective instrument of soft power. Rather than relying on overt deception, this systematic process gradually constructs a target perception to influence decision-making (O'Neill, 1989). Consequently, defining a strategic objective remains the critical first stage of such informational attacks (Callamari & Reveron, 2003).

K10 highlights how modern digital tools facilitate these campaigns:

> *Yes, I definitely think so. These things can be done very easily nowadays. They can easily distort events. Yes, I can recognize them. I can make this distinction by evaluating the likelihood of whether something is possible. I have not yet developed a precaution against these sources. Yes, I would unfollow them. I have not yet gone back and made such a report. I do not get involved in debates. No, there has not been any situation that required restriction either.* (K10)

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Indeed, contemporary technologies allow actors with minimal technical skills to persuasively forge websites, manipulate visuals, and disseminate propaganda globally-a vulnerability that threatens the integrity of broader information ecosystems, including institutional library collections (Fallis, 2015).

K11 employs a comparative verification technique, observing how opposing factions radically polarize identical topics, and chooses to report rather than engage:

> *Yes, I know. Some of the posts under the technology tag that I mentioned in my previous answer are also news items deliberately designed to influence and deceive a particular segment. My own technique for distinguishing them is usually this: if a news item praises a certain element from one side, then another group on the opposite side tries to completely destroy that same element. I do not regard the news coming from either side as a real source, and I do not change my opinions based on such news. I do not express an opinion, but I report posts that are unrelated to the issue to the support section of the social platform I use.* (K11)

K12 attributes this communicative behavior directly to partisanship, noting that fake news primarily serves to consolidate supporters:

> *Of course I think they exist, and I try not to pay attention to either side. Because I know very well that they create a news item in order to use it in their own favour and gather supporters for themselves. I do not respond or report that it is fake. I do not tire myself by getting into arguments.* (K12)

This dynamic illustrates how digital environments exacerbate polarization. By retreating into echo chambers, individuals reinforce their existing ideologies, hardening negative perspectives toward out-groups and prioritizing confirmation bias over objective reality (Talisse, 2019).

Recognizing the futility of debating entrenched partisans, K13 actively severs ties with radicalized networks:

> *They do this by connecting what people say and do to different things. I always approach them critically; I never become bigoted. I cut off my relationship with these fanatical groups. I do not*

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> *get into debates because those people have already made up their minds, set themselves the goal of spreading that idea and presenting it in that way; it is impossible to dissuade them.* (K13)

Similarly, K14 highlights the socially corrosive nature of these conflicts, which McCarty (2019) explains through "belief constraint"—the tendency for voters to adopt rigidly consistent, polarized positions:

> *I think there are people who produce such false news, but in my view such an ideology is wrong; it is wrong to deliberately try to make people believe something. We have lost so much because of ideological conflicts up to now. I am in favour of not following such people or communities.* (K14)

Participant K15 reinforces this defensive posture by immediately unfollowing manipulative channels:

> *I think they exist. I have many times stopped following channels that try to spread their own ideology, or if I see that a page has shared a news item that I think is false, and if it has done so deliberately, I immediately unfollow it.* (K15)

Ultimately, Generation Z users demonstrate a clear awareness of digital disinformation. They instinctively grasp the intricate connections between extreme partisanship, perception management, and the tactical deployment of fake news.

RESULTS

This study demonstrates that ideological disinformation transcends mere factual inaccuracy, operating instead as a multidimensional problem at the intersection of identity, emotion, algorithmic visibility, and user behavior. Consequently, digital falsehoods must be analyzed beyond individual cognitive errors, recognizing their broader role in shaping public opinion and exacerbating social polarization. Addressing this, the research investigated the mechanisms driving this spread while positioning media literacy as a vital framework for resistance. By examining the motives, circulation modes, and reception of fake news, the analysis confirms that manipulative content relies heavily on emotive visuals and biased discourse, highlighting a distinct affective logic alongside its cognitive impact.

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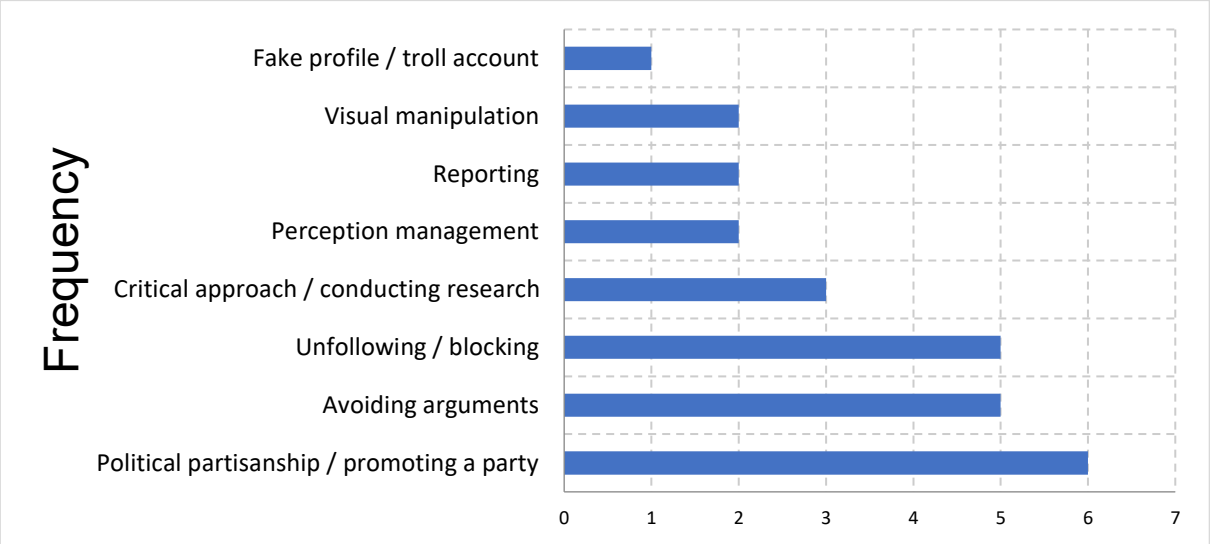
To capture this multilayered structure, the study employed a qualitative case study design focusing on Generation Z. Through purposive criterion sampling, data were gathered from 18 active users (born 1999-2010) who spend at least two hours daily across major social networks. Eschewing quantitative generalization, this approach prioritized rich, contextual insights into how young demographics interpret and navigate digital information pollution.

The findings indicate a robust awareness among Generation Z regarding orchestrated manipulation. Participants consistently identified extreme partisanship, troll networks, fabricated profiles, and perception management tactics as primary drivers of politically motivated fake news. Ultimately, this demographic does not consume online content unquestioningly; rather, they demonstrate a critical capacity to recognize the inherent links between political bias and the deliberate production of disinformation (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Distribution of Prominent Ideological Disinformation Themes in Participant Expressions



Note. Prepared by the authors based on the interview data.

Despite this awareness, participants' countermeasures rarely reflect a systematic practice of media literacy. While some actively report, block, or verify suspicious content, many bypass rigorous fact-checking, relying instead on intuitive judgment or simple avoidance. This suggests that while Generation Z is not entirely defenseless against digital manipulation, their innate skepticism must be fortified through structured, critical media literacy education.

Crucially, the study reveals that digital falsehoods heavily exploit users' existing political affiliations. Fake news frequently circulates not merely as inaccurate data, but as a deliberate representational strategy designed to elevate specific factions, discredit opponents,

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and solidify in-group loyalty. By sharpening "us" versus "them" dichotomies, these campaigns actively deepen societal polarization. Consequently, while social media retains the potential for democratic deliberation, it fundamentally operates as a contradictory public sphere that continuously reproduces and amplifies ideological divides.

Table 2.
Ideological Disinformation Themes According to Participant Views

Theme	**Relevant Participants**	**Meaning in the Findings**
Awareness of fake profiles / troll accounts	K6	False news is perceived to spread through fake accounts and trolls.
Political partisanship / glorification of political parties	K3, K8, K9, K12, K14, K15	False news is reported to be used to support particular political views or discredit opposing views.
Perception management	K8, K9	Disinformation is emphasized as aiming to direct users' political perceptions.
Visual manipulation / Photoshop	K6, K10	Visual content is stated to be distorted or manipulated.
Critical approach / conducting research	K3, K11, K13	Some participants state that they question content and do not accept it directly.
Unfollowing / blocking	K8, K12, K13, K14, K15	Participants tend to cut ties with sources of ideological disinformation.
Reporting	K6, K11	Some participants state that they report problematic content to the platform.
Avoiding debate	K6, K8, K10, K12, K13	Participants mostly prefer to stay away from ideological debates.

Note. Prepared by the authors based on the interview data.

Furthermore, the influence of online disinformation extends beyond mere factual inaccuracy. Manipulative content gains traction by exploiting emotional triggers (such as fear, anger, or belonging) and leveraging algorithmic visibility, troll networks, and curated visuals. Because its persuasive power relies heavily on political identities and group affiliations, counter-strategies must address these affective mechanisms rather than simply correcting facts. Consequently, comprehensive media literacy emerges as the most effective defense. This competence transcends basic digital access, functioning as a framework of critical resistance that empowers users to deconstruct ideological orientations, evaluate motives, and recognize sophisticated manipulations.

Therefore, media literacy education must evolve beyond standard verification techniques like source-checking. While identifying fake images or contextual mismatches is necessary, users must also learn to decode discursive framing, biased language, and algorithmic prioritization. To effectively neutralize targeted identity appeals, this training should be deeply intertwined with critical thinking, digital ethics, and democratic civic awareness.

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Findings confirm that while Generation Z accurately identifies politically motivated fake news) frequently citing extreme partisanship, trolls, and perception management (this awareness rarely translates into methodical verification. Instead, their countermeasures remain largely defensive and individualized, such as blocking accounts or avoiding debate. This gap demonstrates that critical evaluation cannot be left to instinct; it must be systematically embedded into formal education and everyday digital practices.

In conclusion, ideological disinformation represents a critical challenge for contemporary digital societies, actively destabilizing democratic deliberation by deepening polarization and manipulating public opinion. The decentralized, algorithmic structure of modern platforms intensifies this crisis, proving that top-down content regulation and standalone fact-checking are structurally insufficient. Long-term mitigation depends entirely on users' capacity to critically evaluate digital messages, interrogate sources, recognize their own ideological biases, and cultivate shared responsibility during information distribution.

While Generation Z exhibits a baseline awareness of online deception, transforming this latent potential into sustained resistance requires institutionalized, interdisciplinary media literacy training integrated across core fields like citizenship and communication technologies. Rather than a superficial technical elective, this education must be treated as an essential civic competence vital to sustaining democratic public life. To effectively counter targeted disinformation, individuals must move beyond binary true-or-false distinctions, learning instead to dissect distributing actors, strategic motives, emotional appeals, and overarching ideological frameworks. Ultimately, systematic media literacy stands as the most fundamental domain of resistance against contemporary digital information disorders.

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