

So problematic and so tied to the media: analyzing the misinformation concern in six European countries

Online
Information
Review

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper addresses the social issue of misinformation in six European countries by investigating how intangible factors associated with the collective evaluation of political-institutional behaviors and judgments regarding media practices and uses of online communication channels are related to citizens' concerns about misinformation.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a quantitative approach (data analysis), the study relies on data from the Eurobarometer 98.2 (2023), the official public opinion survey of European institutions. The analysis encompasses six European countries representing the pluralist-polarized (Spain, Italy and Greece) and democratic-corporatist models (Germany, Denmark and Sweden). With a multiple linear regression model, the research explores how independent variables help explain citizens' concerns regarding misinformation in each country.

Findings – The paper emphasizes three main findings: (1) for citizens in five out of six countries, the main factor associated with an increased misinformation concern is the distrust of political information on social network sites. (2) for citizens, how they evaluate the performance of traditional media relates to misinformation concerns and (3) this holds for countries categorized in pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist media system models.

Practical implications – Media managers and policymakers can leverage the insights from this research to address the social concern of misinformation.

Originality/value – This article adds value to existing misinformation studies by underscoring the significance of understanding how citizens' assessments of political-institutional behaviors, journalism practices and the political use of online communication channels interconnect with the misinformation concern in both pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist models.

Keywords Misinformation, Media trust, Institutional trust, Media legitimacy, Political interest, Democracy satisfaction, Use of social media, Europe

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The concern regarding misinformation has become a central issue for democratic countries in Europe and around the world. Academic interest in comprehending the phenomenon of

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misinformation gained momentum from 2016–2017 (Cea and Palomo, 2021), a period during which the renowned Oxford dictionary selected the terms “post-truth” and “fake news” as the words of the year. However, a few years prior, the “Outlook on the Global Agenda 2014” report, published by the [World Economic Forum \(2013\)](#), projected that the challenge posed by misinformation would be one of the top ten global challenges. In this paper, we will mention the term “misinformation” to refer to the phenomenon of information pollution, encompassing related concepts such as fake news, hoaxes, or post-truth, thereby encapsulating various typologies and deception techniques (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Presently, misinformation has emerged as a pertinent topic on the public, media, and political agendas within the European sphere. [Tuñón \(2021\)](#) asserts that the various initiatives undertaken by the European Union (EU) underscore the formidable challenge confronting its member states due to the widespread exposure of their citizens to misinformation. The [European Commission \(2018a\)](#) defines misinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (2018, p. 3–4). From an academic standpoint, there is consensus in highlighting three major characteristics of misinformation: its intent to deceive, its mimicry of news as a journalistic genre, and its economic intentionality ([Bennett and Livingston, 2021](#); [McIntyre, 2018](#); [Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017](#)).

This research aims to explore the factors that are relevant in determining citizens’ levels of concern regarding misinformation. Currently, there is an ongoing debate about the extent and presence of misinformation in citizens’ news information diets. In contrast to certain findings that emphasize the misinformation’s capacity to spread faster than verified information ([Vosoughi et al., 2018](#)) and the decisive role of false and deceptive information in electoral processes and referendums ([Gaber and Fisher, 2021](#); [Medina-Uribe, 2018](#); [Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020](#)), other results highlight the minority status of misinformation in citizens’ news diets ([Allen et al., 2020](#)) and question its prevalence and impact ([Altay et al., 2023](#)). In addition to these considerations, this research posits that misinformation is not merely a phenomenon of social media behavior or individual isolated actions, but rather its logics emanate from and is a consequence of the political, economic, and cultural context of countries. Thus, we aim to explore whether citizens’ concern about misinformation is explained by intangible factors related to the collective assessment of political-institutional exercise, judgments about media practice and uses of online communication channels.

2. Misinformation in the context of democratic countries

The impacts of misinformation on the democratic quality of countries have been a focal point in academic literature. Scholars such as [Tenove \(2020\)](#) assert that misinformation jeopardizes at least three fundamental aspects of any democratic system: the self-determination of countries, the capacity for the governed to choose their leaders, and the ability to maintain a well-informed public sphere. Additionally, some authors emphasize the industry generated around the production and dissemination of online misinformation ([Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017](#); [Karpf, 2021](#)).

In contrast to the prominence of misinformation studies with a focus on social media, there is a growing body of findings connecting this issue to the actions of politics and its elites ([Carrera, 2018](#); [Ong and Tapsell, 2022](#); [Waisbord, 2018a](#)). In a recent article in the *Financial Times*, Rasmus [Nielsen \(2024\)](#) puts forth the following:

[. . .] misinformation coming from the top is likely to have a far greater impact than that from most other sources, whether social media posts by ordinary people, hostile actors, or commercial scammers. People pay more attention to what prominent politicians say, and supporters of those politicians are more inclined to believe and act on it ([Nielsen, 2024](#), par. 6).

The strategic use of falsehoods in political and institutional communication has been employed in governance contexts such as the war in Afghanistan, the United States elections in 2016, the United Kingdom elections in 2019, referendums like Brexit, or in Colombia regarding the peace process with the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), and more recently, during the management of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Bennett and Livingston (2018) refer to the strategic use of misinformation by political actors as the “disinformation order.” This concept encompasses the purpose of generating support, social mobilization, and electoral gain, as well as the strategic use of misinformation by third countries to influence and destabilize states as a geostrategic element of warfare. In other words, one of the flagship concepts for addressing the phenomenon of misinformation, the “information disorder” proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), transforms into the “disinformation order,” reflecting the strategic utility of falsehoods in political contests and the technological industry of (mis)information.

Additionally, Bennett and Livingston (2018) posit that the breakdown of communicative processes is evident in the surge of misinformation dissemination, leading public spheres to divide due to challenges faced by “democratic centering principles of (a) authoritative information, (b) emanating from social and political institutions that (c) engage trusting and credulous publics.” (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, pp. 126–127). These authors place at the core of their argument “the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions of press and politics” (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, p. 127). This argument is echoed by Waisbord, who contends that the rise of misinformation stems from the chaos in contemporary public communication and the collapse of media (Waisbord, 2018b). Trust is a crucial intangible resource in an information environment rife with deceptive and false information, as it enables citizens to make decisions about deeming a message reliable or not. Canel (2018) indicates that trust is the willingness to grant discretionary leeway in the actions of an organization, leading to a certain level of acceptance.

In this regard, several scholars point towards the responsibility that political discourse bears in addressing and reducing noise and levels of misinformation (Campos-Domínguez *et al.*, 2022; Hameleers and Minihold, 2022). This is because the continuous and blatant use of political falsehoods (Gaber and Fisher, 2021) would justify low measurements of trust in politicians (Lilleker and Pérez-Escobar, 2023). Karpf (2019) encapsulates this perspective as follows:

Disinformation and propaganda are not dangerous because they effectively trick or misinform otherwise-attentive voters; they are dangerous because they disabuse political elites of some crucial assumptions about the consequences of violating the public trust (Karpf, 2019, p. 5).

The preceding assertions acknowledge the strategic utilization of misinformation as delineated by Bennett and Livingston (2018). Moreover, Humprecht (2023) notes that politicians can exploit public trust for gains. Both this article and those published by van Zoonen *et al.* (2024) and Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel (2022) demonstrate a dysfunctional effect of trust in political institutions regarding addressing misinformation: trust may diminish citizens’ ability to deploy critical thinking competencies and, therefore, their resilience to misinformation, hindering their evaluation of the informational message’s rigor communicated by political actors. Based on the previous considerations, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Trust in political institutions correlates negatively with misinformation concerns.

Regarding democratic quality, it is also pertinent to highlight citizen political engagement. Andersen *et al.* (2020) define political engagement as “individual motivations, abilities, and attitudes that reflect citizens’ involvement with politics” (2020, p.14). One might argue that an engaged citizen - one who is interested and knowledgeable - will possess the capabilities and know how to find the necessary resources to understand and contextualize the information received (Carpini, 2004) and, thus, evaluate the veracity of potentially false or misleading

content. However, nuances exist in the literature; some findings underscore that political knowledge makes a citizen less prone to disseminate misinformation when it aligns with their beliefs (Bowyer and Kahne, 2019; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), but it may also lead to enhanced argumentative capacity directed towards desired conclusions through confirmation biases and motivated reasoning. Additionally, other research states that political activism favors knowingly sharing misinformation (Steinfeld, 2022) or the linkage of online political engagement with sharing misinformation (Ahmed *et al.*, 2023; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2019), which puts in doubt that political engagement benefits an accuracy deliberative democracy functioning.

RQ1. Is the level of political engagement related to concern about misinformation?

Both trust and citizen engagement are components linked to the functioning and satisfaction with democracy, impacted by misinformation insofar as it influences perceptions of procedural aspects of democracy (Nisbet *et al.*, 2021). These authors emphasize the indirect effect misinformation has on satisfaction with democracy, making it lower, due to citizens' perceived influence on others. Other research (Jungheer and Rauchfleisch, 2024), conducted also in the U.S., found the perceived threat of misinformation is negatively associated with general democracy satisfaction; hence, a "raise of the problem perception of disinformation as a societal threat, the lower satisfaction with the current state of U.S. democracy" (p. 15). For instance, a misinformation concern is the Russian Internet Research Agency's (R-IRA) strategic misinformation campaigns to influence the running for president in the U.S. which shows indirect effects on how misinformation affects others with different political leanings (Ross *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, deeming the Government's performance when labeling a piece of news – verified as true – as "fake news", this denial of a piece of accurate information favors a reduction of citizens' general satisfaction with the government (Wang and Huang, 2020).

However, there are also other types of evidence regarding democracy satisfaction and misinformation. Humprecht (2023) hypothesized that lower levels of democracy satisfaction would be positively related to the willingness to spread misinformation. Her findings for the analyzed European countries addressed the aforementioned linkage. This finding is associated with what Marques *et al.* (2022) found in New Zealand regarding the impact of belief conspiracies on lower satisfaction with government. Scholars have pointed out that conspiracy theory beliefs tend to be related to political attitudes (partisanship and populism), which are associated with higher news consumption on partisan and alternative websites, where misinformation flourishes.

As misinformation impacts the quality of democracy deliberation and the assessment of public sector organizations' performance, which is essential for democracy well-functioning, this issue can correlate to citizens' democracy dissatisfaction. We post the following hypothesis:

H2. Democracy satisfaction correlates negatively with misinformation concerns.

3. The role of the media outlets

While misinformation does not strictly pertain to journalism, it does question the episteme of journalistic news, as contemporary public communication flows are decentralized, more horizontal, and dynamic (Waisbord, 2018b). In the era of misinformation, the media faces the challenge of reaffirming its role in providing information that aids citizens in understanding their surrounding environment while redefining the diluted meaning of "media" amidst the proliferation of online communication channels. In any case, misinformation undermines the quality of existing information and, therefore, poses a threat to democratic functioning (Masip *et al.*, 2020a).

According to the European Commission (2018b), the media plays a crucial role in combating misinformation through its professionalism and editorial independence.

However, a warning is issued about “some news media contribute to disinformation problems, thereby weakening European citizens’ overall trust in media. It is important therefore to strengthen professional and independent media and journalism that brings societal attention to disinformation and underpins the democratic process” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 11). This occurs when ethical codes are violated, including impartiality, accuracy, rigor, independence, etc., attributes from which judgments of organizational legitimacy arise (Suchman, 1995). According to Restrepo’s postulates (2016), following Gabriel García Márquez, ethics is to journalism as buzzing is to a hornet. In this sense, it is relevant to highlight cases where citizens perceive inadequate quality in news coverage, such as biases, sensationalistic reporting, or low-quality coverage that, in the eyes of the citizens, translates to media that misinform (Masip *et al.*, 2020b; Nielsen and Graves, 2017; van der Linden *et al.*, 2020; Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019). Some scholars such as del Hoyo-Hurtado *et al.* (2020), García-Galera *et al.* (2020), and Alonso-González (2022) present various cases of journalistic malpractice where traditional media outlets produced misinformation for economic or political interests. Vegetti and Mancosu (2022) discovered in Europe that when media are perceived as more likely to spread inaccurate information, citizens tend to have greater concerns about misinformation. Also, perceived exposure to misinformation diminishes trust in the media (Stubenvoll *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, what is clear is that media literacy activates corrective behaviors against misinformation (Xiao and Yang, 2023).

Considering the present scenario in which both the political discourse and the journalism practice sometimes involve the promotion of misinformation, it is pertinent to note that although trust is necessary, a critical attitude towards the media can be functional when the media do not play a watchdog role. Hanitzsch *et al.* state that “democracy greatly benefits from the public’s critical attitude and a healthy sense of skepticism toward politics and the news media” (2018, p. 19). Similarly, Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel (2023) indicate that trust in the media could be dysfunctional regarding attitudes to address misinformation. In this way, a critical evaluation of media practice facilitates resilience to disinformation because, considering the current information ecosystem, a “blind trust in the media could be dysfunctional for the misinformation challenge” (p. 37).

H3. Media legitimacy (*H3a*) and media trust (*H3b*) correlate negatively with misinformation concerns.

4. Media systems in Europe and misinformation

The previous sections presented the theoretical framework between misinformation concerns and certain political and media characteristics. These factors are patterns associated with the models proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to depict the European countries and their differences: the polarized-pluralist system (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France), the liberal system (Ireland, and United Kingdom), and the democratic-corporatist system (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium).

In this research, we explore a comparative perspective between countries belonging to different media-political systems regarding misinformation concerns. The pluralist-polarized countries tend to be characterized by high political parallelism, the instrumentalization of the media – low professionalization –, late democratization, and polarized pluralism; meanwhile, those countries associated with a democratic-corporatist model usually have a low political parallelism, media autonomy, a robust professionalization of media, a political dynamic of consensus, and an organized political pluralism.

Subsequently, Büchel *et al.* (2016) conducted a comparative analysis to examine these systems, aiming to confirm the initial typology and to discern any patterns of variation. They found some deviations that helped us to select the sample of countries included in the study. These scholars argue that the democratic-corporatist system groups Germany, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries. Compared with the model proposed by Hallin and Mancini, Büchel *et al.* (2016) found some variations regarding the Netherlands and Belgium, which have a more liberalized media market. Hence, both countries show characteristics of several models. This pattern is also, for these authors, the case of Portugal and France when considering the pluralist-polarized model. “Portugal is nowadays closer to democratic-corporatist countries” (Büchel *et al.*, 2016, p. 223), and France shows lower levels of political parallelism which led this country to “be considered less polarized-pluralist than the other three Southern European countries” (Büchel *et al.*, 2016, p. 225).

The level of polarization determines one of the cleavages between the media-political system of European countries and affects political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Considering political patterns, trust in institutions weakens due to dynamics of political and affective polarization, because these are perceived as partisan depending on the entity holding them (Waisbord, 2020), complicating negotiation and consensus-building in democratic systems (Morales-Romero and Martínez-Martínez, 2020).

In polarized countries, the term “fake news” is often used as a weapon by political actors to delegitimize political opponents (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019) and contributes to the political polarization which is associated with misinformation concerns (Vegetti and Mancosu, 2022). Those countries with higher levels of resilience to misinformation are those with a limited level of polarization (Humprecht *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, political polarization is a factor that accentuates citizens’ dissemination and belief in misinformation (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2020; Osmundsen *et al.*, 2021). Also, polarization tends to hurt people’s satisfaction with democracy (Hoerner and Hobolt, 2020). According to this, we pose the following research question:

- RQ2.* Is the level of misinformation concerns more correlated with the political and media characteristics in countries of the polarized pluralist system than those associated with the democratic-corporatist system?

5. Methodology

This article aims to examine the potential relationship between citizens’ concern about the misinformation problem and assessments regarding the political-institutional context, the media practice, and the uses of online communication channels. To achieve this, we have relied on data published by the Eurobarometer 98.2 (2023), winter 2022–2023, with fieldwork conducted between January and February 2023. The Eurobarometer is the official public opinion survey of the European institutions, regularly inquiring about matters of interest and citizens’ attitudes on political, social, or economic issues. The barometer used in this research questioned, among other topics, citizens’ attitudes related to misinformation, perceptions of media practice, and trust towards their national institutions and media, among others.

5.1 Sample

The analysis was conducted with six European countries selected by the research team, choosing countries relevant to the pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Previous research selected countries from these two clustering groups regarding other areas of interest linked to resilience to misinformation (Boulianne *et al.*, 2022; Humprecht *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez and García-Vargas,

2021). The selected countries were as follows: Italy ($n = 1,024$), Spain ($n = 1,011$), Greece ($n = 1,014$), Germany ($n = 1,531$), Denmark ($n = 1,015$), and Sweden ($n = 1,043$).

5.2 Variables and method design

Next, we present the variables incorporated into the research and the treatment of each one. After reading carefully the Eurobarometer questionnaire, we decided to include in our model variables measuring country-specific characteristics link to political and media environments which were used in previous misinformation studies as we mentioned in the theoretical section. All original variables were measured using a Likert scale. For research purposes, we omitted the response options “it depends” or “I don’t know.” Response options such as “I don’t know” do not represent a position on the continuum (Balžekienė, 2019). Considering previous research that analyzed Eurobarometer datasets, several studies omitted these options measuring, for instance, trust variables on a dichotomous scale (cfr. Brosius *et al.*, 2019; Ceron and Memoli, 2015; van der Meer and Ouattara, 2019). Additionally, we reversed the scales so that the more positive response options (e.g. “totally agree”) were represented with higher values on the scales, while we assured the ordinal characteristic of the scale. This was developed to make clear the interpretation of results between variables.

The descriptive statistic is summarized at the end of the paper as [Appendix](#).

Concern about misinformation: The dependent variable was obtained through an index that averaged the response to two statements: “*The existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem for democracy in general*” and “*The existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem in the country*” (a four-level Likert scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”). (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.872$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.747$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.827$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.805$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.685$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.706$).

Trust in political institutions: Trust in political institutions was measured on a dichotomous scale (“tend to trust” or “tend not to trust”): *trust in the national Government*, *national Parliament*, and *political parties* (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.737$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.808$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.743$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.839$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.810$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.626$. McDonald’s omega: $\omega_{ES} = 0.782$; $\omega_{IT} = 0.811$; $\omega_{GR} = 0.779$; $\omega_{DE} = 0.848$; $\omega_{DK} = 0.814$; $\omega_{SE} = 0.628$).

Political engagement: Political engagement was measured using political interest variables on a three-level Likert scale ranging from “never” to “frequently” to gauge interest in *local political matters* and *national political matters* (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.914$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.804$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.826$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.648$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.645$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.611$).

Satisfaction with democracy: Satisfaction with democracy was measured with a single question on a four-level Likert scale ranging from “not at all satisfied” to “very satisfied,” where respondents expressed their level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their country.

Legitimacy of media outlets: Media legitimacy was measured with an index averaging respondents’ answers on whether “*media in the country provide trustworthy information*” and whether “*media in the country provide information free from political or commercial pressure.*” Both statements were measured on a four-level scale from “no, not at all” to “yes, definitely” (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.815$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.739$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.843$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.828$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.716$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.712$).

Trust in the Media: Trust in the media was measured on a dichotomous scale with response options “tends to trust” and “tend not to trust.”

Use of traditional media: Media usage was calculated with a Likert scale of six levels (“never” to “everyday/almost everyday”) on the frequency of using *television set*, *radio*, and *written press* (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.374$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.374$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.311$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.604$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.397$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.523$. McDonald’s omega: $\omega_{ES} = 0.576$; $\omega_{IT} = 0.628$; $\omega_{GR} = 0.408$; $\omega_{DE} = 0.606$; $\omega_{DK} = 0.475$; $\omega_{SE} = 0.529$).

Use of online communication channels: The use of online information channels was measured with a Likert scale of six levels (“never” to “everyday/almost everyday”) on the frequency of using *internet for news* and *social networks sites* (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.641$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.829$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.780$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.624$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.470$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.489$).

Distrust in political information on social networks: We assessed this variable through the question: “*Information on political affairs from online social networks cannot be trusted,*” which had a four-level Likert scale (from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”).

Use of social networks for political purposes: The use of social network sites for political purposes was measured with a four-level Likert scale on the following statements regarding the uses and gratifications of social media in relation to politics: “*Online social networks are a modern way to keep abreast of political affairs*”, “*Online social networks can get people interested in political affairs*”, and “*Online social networks are a good way to have your say on political issues*” (Cronbach’s Alpha: $\alpha_{ES} = 0.783$; $\alpha_{IT} = 0.862$; $\alpha_{GR} = 0.862$; $\alpha_{DE} = 0.837$; $\alpha_{DK} = 0.626$; $\alpha_{SE} = 0.622$. McDonald’s omega: $\omega_{ES} = 0.784$; $\omega_{IT} = 0.862$; $\omega_{GR} = 0.862$; $\omega_{DE} = 0.838$; $\omega_{DK} = 0.628$; $\omega_{SE} = 0.627$).

Control variables. As sociodemographic variables, we included the age (from “15” to “98” years old), the gender of respondents (1 = “man”, 2 = “woman”), the ideological self-placement (from 1 = “left” to 10 = “right”), and the household (social class) self-placement (from 1 = “the working class of society” to 5 = “the higher class of society”). These control variables usually are incorporated when statistical models (i.e. regression) are performed (cf. Boulianne *et al.*, 2022; Brosius *et al.*, 2019; Vegetti and Mancosu, 2022).

6. Results

The primary aim of the research is to explore factors contributing to the understanding of citizens’ concern regarding misinformation. The research questions aim to explore the significance of citizens’ perceptions about the political-institutional assessments and media practices regarding misinformation concerns.

We conducted multiple linear regression analysis to investigate how concern about misinformation (the dependent variable) is associated with independent variables encompassing the political-institutional realm, media practices, and online communication channels across six selected countries. Table 1 presents the results of the analysis for each country. Beta coefficient (β) estimates the change in the dependent variable when the independent variable increases one unit while holding the other independent variables constant. Standardized beta coefficient allows an understanding of which independent variable has a greater effect on the dependent variable.

The first hypothesis (H1) explores potential associations between the level of trust in politics and concern about misinformation, particularly the hypothesized dysfunctional role of trust regarding misinformation concerns. The results from the multiple linear regression model indicates that trust in political institutions is a significant factor explaining concern about misinformation in one of the six studied countries (Italy: $\beta = -0.236$; $p < 0.001$). The model reveals an inverse relationship, wherein lower trust in political institutions among citizens leads to an upsurge in concern about misinformation. For the case of Italy, H1 is supported.

The first research question aimed to investigate whether citizen engagement (political interest) helps explain levels of misinformation concern. The results indicate a positive association, although it is only significant in two out of the six studied countries (Spain: $\beta = 0.104$; $p < 0.01$; Germany: $\beta = 0.096$; $p < 0.01$). In these two countries, citizens’ increased political interest, as an expression of citizen engagement, is positively associated with concern about misinformation.

	ES	IT	GR	DE	DK	SE
Age	0.038	-0.010	-0.066	-0.024	-0.001	-0.064
Gender	-0.035	-0.003	-0.026	-0.032	-0.086*	-0.053
Ideological self-placement	-0.105**	0.057	0.009	-0.126***	-0.056	-0.119**
Social class	0.025	0.023	0.091*	0.015	0.083*	0.074*
Trust in political institutions	-0.012	-0.236***	0.010	-0.054	0.012	-0.068
Political interest	0.104**	0.023	0.059	0.096**	0.033	0.053
Democracy satisfaction	-0.059	0.127**	-0.146**	-0.123**	-0.033	-0.024
Legitimacy of media	-0.146**	0.094*	-0.157***	0.036	-0.178***	-0.064
Media trust	0.025	-0.096*	-0.180***	-0.088*	-0.127**	0.002
Use of traditional media	0.018	-0.112**	0.021	-0.053	-0.028	-0.084*
Use of online channels	0.027	-0.064	-0.072	0.075*	0.046	0.073*
Distrust in pol. information on SNS	0.176***	0.174***	0.198***	0.217***	0.227***	0.159***
Use of SNS for political purposes	0.083*	0.172***	0.133**	0.054	0.050	0.089*
<i>N</i>	658	747	649	978	692	845
<i>R</i> ²	0.092	0.138	0.186	0.123	0.147	0.086
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.074	0.122	0.170	0.111	0.130	0.072
Durbin Watson	1.685	1.500	1.527	1.827	1.774	1.984
<i>F</i> statistic	5.026***	9.007***	11.187***	10.365***	8.973***	6.052***

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Standardized beta coefficients are shown. Collinearity: $1.034 < VIF_{ES} < 1.400$; $1.055 < VIF_{IT} < 1.883$; $1.124 < VIF_{GR} < 2.022$; $1.040 < VIF_{DE} < 1.649$; $1.056 < VIF_{DK} < 1.525$; $1.032 < VIF_{SE} < 1.775$

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Multiple linear regression model of concerns about misinformation

Similarly, we investigated the association between satisfaction with democracy and the level of concern about misinformation, which is significant in three of the studied countries (Italy $\beta = 0.127$; $p < 0.01$; Greece: $\beta = -0.146$; $p < 0.01$; Germany: $\beta = -0.123$; $p < 0.01$). The second hypothesis (H2) stated that democracy satisfaction correlates negatively with misinformation concerns. H2 is supported in Greece and Germany, but not in Italy. Hence, the relationship is not consistent across the three countries. While the results demonstrate a positive association for Italy, it is negative for Greece and Germany.

Regarding the media, we explored the potential relationship between assessments of their performance and accuracy with the misinformation concern. The third hypothesis (H3) indicated that media legitimacy (H3a) and media trust (H3B) correlate negatively with misinformation concerns. The results indicate that evaluations of media legitimacy are negatively related to misinformation as a concern in four out of the six countries (Spain: $\beta = -0.146$; $p < 0.01$; Italy: $\beta = 0.094$; $p < 0.05$; Greece: $\beta = -0.157$; $p < 0.001$; Denmark: $\beta = -0.178$; $p < 0.001$). Only in Italy is this relationship weakly positive; on the other hand, in the other three countries (Spain, Denmark, and Greece), a lower consideration of the legitimacy of the country's media outlets is associated with an increased assessment of misinformation as a concern. In these three countries H3a is supported, but not for the case of Italy. This negative relationship also emerges when studying the variable of trust in the media (H3b), which is significant in four countries (Italy: $\beta = -0.096$; $p < 0.05$; Greece: $\beta = -0.180$; $p < 0.001$; Germany: $\beta = -0.088$; $p < 0.05$; Denmark: $\beta = -0.127$; $p < 0.01$). Hence, regarding trust associated with media, we found a dysfunctional role of trust when considering misinformation. H3a is supported in the four aforementioned countries. The use of traditional media for information is a significant variable in two countries (Italy: $\beta = -0.112$; $p < 0.01$; Sweden: $\beta = -0.084$; $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the use of digital channels

emerges as a significant factor associated with the dependent variable in Denmark ($\beta = 0.075$; $p < 0.05$) and in Sweden ($\beta = 0.073$; $p < 0.05$).

In contrast, when querying about the perception of distrust in political information on social media, this variable is significant in all six studied countries, revealing robust and positive relationships (Spain: $\beta = 0.176$; $p < 0.001$; Italy: $\beta = 0.174$; $p < 0.001$; Greece: $\beta = 0.198$; $p < 0.001$; Germany: $\beta = 0.217$; $p < 0.001$; Denmark: $\beta = 0.227$; $p < 0.001$; Sweden: $\beta = 0.159$; $p < 0.001$). Hence, the lower perception of reliability in information posted on social media tends to increase concern about misinformation. The political use of social media as communication channels emerges as a significant factor in four of the studied countries (Spain: $\beta = 0.083$; $p < 0.05$; Italy: $\beta = 0.172$; $p < 0.001$; Greece: $\beta = 0.133$; $p < 0.01$; Sweden: $\beta = 0.089$; $p < 0.05$), with the beta coefficients being significant in Southern European countries and indicating positive relationships between the use of social media for political matters and an increase in concern about misinformation.

Considering RQ2, the results do not present a clear pattern about the media and political differences regarding the clusters of countries. Predictor variables associated with the political context are not mostly significant, and when this occurs, the results reveal significance in countries representing both systems. On the other hand, regarding media characteristics, it is more prevalent in southern countries than in countries affiliated with democratic-corporatist countries, with the nuance of Denmark. Information assessment on digital channels is transversal across countries, and the most significant predictor, regarding the distrust of political information on social network sites. Furthermore, the use of social network sites for political purposes tends to be more explanatory in southern countries than in democratic-corporatist countries.

7. Discussion

Misinformation has become a problem for countries worldwide. In this research, we explored the relationship between misinformation and the assessments of political-institutional actions, media behaviors, and information consumption channels. After carrying out multiple linear regression models, the findings allow us to highlight three main findings: (1) for citizens in five out of six countries, the main factor associated with an increased misinformation concern is the distrust of political information on social network sites. (2) for citizens, how they evaluate the performance of traditional media relates to misinformation concerns; and (3) this holds for countries categorized in pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist media system models.

This study focuses on citizens' perceptions to understand how they are worried about misinformation, associating the misinformation concern with the media and political context. Tackling misinformation involves a multilevel scope, but citizens are one of the key players, as the European Commission states when advocating for a shared responsibility for fighting misinformation. This framework requires citizens to be able to judge the information accuracy they receive from media, the political discourse, and the social network sites.

Our dependent variable measures the degree to which citizens consider misinformation to represent a problem in the country and a problem for democracy functioning and how this assessment is related to media and political characteristics. To be aware that misinformation is a threat to societies is a necessary condition to form active citizenship capable of being resilient to misinformation. Exploring how citizens perceive factors like media trust, media legitimacy, political engagement, satisfaction with democracy, and the use of social network sites is crucial for understanding the variables contributing to misinformation concerns. This understanding is meaningful for developing practical implications and addressing public policies aimed at addressing misinformation issues.

While academic literature has warned about the relevance of political actions in the evolution of the misinformation phenomenon and the issues arising from the inclusion of lies in political discourse (Campos-Domínguez *et al.*, 2022; Gaber and Fisher, 2021; Hameleers and Minihold, 2022; Karpf, 2019), the citizenship associates the misinformation concern more with their assessment of no trusting in information on political affairs from online social networks. Literature has pointed to social media and the web as sources of “informational noise,” also named as infoxication or information pollution. For instance, Bae (2020) identified not only that relying on social media as a news source is a positive predictor of political rumor beliefs, but also citizens’ belief in political rumors tend to correspond with their political ideology. Also, Boulianne *et al.* (2022) found that social media use was associated with users’ behaviors favoring misinformation; the authors emphasized that the role of social media news is “the most important factor in determining the resilience of societies to misinformation” (p.179). From their part, Vegetti y Mancosu (2022) revealed the association between the use of social media and misinformation concerns.

These pieces of evidence reveal the necessity of citizens’ literacy to assess a piece of information as trustworthy or accurate in a digital information environment where political interaction flourishes. These platforms are currently alternative information channels where misinformation is disseminated and (dis)news is shared, but some scholars perceive platforms as active political actors (Helberger, 2020). Moreover, users’ behaviors should be considered because the automatic generation of content fosters the proliferation of fake information to go viral in increasingly sophisticated ways, as users feel the need to become promoters of events that could potentially be “news.” Users are exposed to political information on social network sites where both users’ filters, cognitive bias – such as the “nobody-fools-me perception,” consisting of overconfidence in citizen’s self-ability to spot misinformation (Martínez-Costa *et al.*, 2023), or the psychological and political bias, as a pattern of information processing, lead to give more trustworthiness to ideologically congruent information and flag as misinformation that piece of information that is ideologically discordant (Bauer and Clemm von Hohenberg, 2021; van der Linden *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the algorithmic function propitiates incidental news consumption and the effect of “news-finds-me” (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2018). As Bae (2020) remarks, “the contribution to an informed democratic citizenry remains dependent not only on the individual users’ use of diverse news sources but also the characteristics of the network” (p.1534).

Beta coefficients associated with the variable *Distrust in pol. information on SNS* are significant in the six analyzed countries and are the main predictor in five out of six. Also, the statistical significance is strong both in the pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist countries revealing that in both systems social networks sites are not perceived as a channel in which political information is accuracy and trusted.

It is noteworthy that, based on data from the “Digital News Report” (Newman *et al.*, 2023), people of Southern European nations exhibit a higher propensity to utilize social media as a source of news compared to their counterparts in democratic-corporatist countries. The contradictory fact that citizens in Southern European countries consume more information on social media while there exists an audience perception concerning political misinformation on these platforms could be explained by contextual factors. The prevalence of using social media to access political news may stem from the pluralistic-polarized media system in Southern European countries that drive particular social and psychological motivations (such as sharing congruent information with contacts, consuming an online news diet, or posting content). On the other hand, social media use is associated with misinformation dissemination, which tends to be more prevalent in polarized societies, which is a pattern in these countries.

Social network sites are often the channel for interactions, where disseminating political hoaxes, rumors, and fake information regarding elections, immigration, scientific issues, or

health issues. Our results reveal social network sites are perceived as channels that do not encounter trusting political information, favoring the misinformation phenomenon because of users' social and psychological motivations that address social interactions. Both online communication channels and media outlets emerge as predictors of misinformation concerns. This scenario reveals the collapse of the information environment and the challenge that the media faces of reaffirming its role in providing accurate information that aids citizens in understanding their surrounding context. Also, the role of social network sites to warrant an informative function is put in doubt. Findings indicate that misinformation concern comes from social media behavior as the main predictor - but it also emerges from media and political factors, independently either from pluralist-polarized countries or democratic-corporatist countries. This result is unexpected considering the different degrees of polarization across countries; polarization stresses the assessment of media as creators and disseminators of misinformation (Masip *et al.*, 2020a; Vegetti and Mancosu, 2022).

Particularly, our multiple linear regression model included the media legitimacy factor based on two questions investigating citizens' assessments of information trustworthiness and independence from political or economic pressures. Our results are similar to previous findings (Vegetti and Mancosu, 2022): the negative correlation occurs between the legitimacy of media and the misinformation concern. Both legitimacy and trust in the media reveal a strong and significant association in several countries of our sample, suggesting that, for the citizens, the issue of misinformation is a concern involving the media outlets. This can be explained considering that from the citizens lens the role of media providing accurate information is essential for an informed citizenry. Surprisingly, our results did not report a clear pattern regarding our two cluster of countries.

In this sense, the traditional polarization noticed in Southern European countries might help interpret these results. However, these relationships also emerge in countries where media are considered more robust and independent. According to the theory, the journalistic culture in democratic-corporatist countries tends to be monitorial, have autonomy, and a robust professionalization that would lead to a greater accuracy level and a trust level that protects media from contributing to the misinformation phenomenon. The democratic-corporatist countries are characterized by greater journalistic professionalization than Southern European countries (pluralist-polarized model) (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) because they are associated with ethical codes of regulation or greater autonomy for independent journalism.

While the results regarding the relevance of media legitimacy and trust in predicting citizens concern about misinformation tend to be stronger in Southern European countries, it is surprising that these factors are relevant in countries classified within the democratic-corporatist model. Our results show this issue is present in Denmark with a higher beta coefficient (*legitimacy of media*) than those associated with the three southern countries: Spain, Italy, and Greece. An exploratory interpretation address that although in southern countries the perceptions of media legitimacy and trust are overall correlated with misinformation concern, questioning the media practice in northern countries, in the future, can affect also the media system.

Hence, several practical implications arise, emphasizing the importance of reinforcing journalistic ethics values such as rigor, accuracy, or independence at the newsrooms. These values can be recognized by audiences as integral to the reality of journalistic practice. Precisely, these attributes have been used to justify the rise of fact-checking journalism (Amazeen, 2019; Graves and Konieczna, 2015) and the adoption of transparency practices in reporting, considered by journalists as key elements to combat misinformation (Seibt, 2019; Vu and Saldaña, 2021).

As Lelo (2024) notes when introducing his praxeological proposal for the theoretical approach to the phenomenon of misinformation, it is crucial to assess the cultural and sociopolitical context in which deceptive and false messages are inserted or the perception of their prevalence in each national public sphere of the European countries. Intangible assets such as trust and engagement are crucial from this theoretical approach. In this sense, the variable linked to the use of social network sites to obtain information on political affairs emerges as a significant predictor of considering misinformation as a concern.

From our results emerge societal implications. First, tech companies should strengthen alliances with fact-checkers and media outlets to flag misinformation content. Also, more policies that make it easier to spot propaganda and advertising (political or commercial) can facilitate the user to distinguish information from other types of content. Second, fostering citizenry literacies is a priority. Digital communication channels are part of the news diet of citizens who need to assess the context, the creator, the circulation, the content, and the consumption to be able to discern news and information from misinformation (Tully *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that the critical assessment of media outlets and social network sites because of favoring the misinformation concern can open new avenues facilitating a restrictive regulation of information, policy interventions and regulatory measures of speech in digital communication environments limiting freedom of publishing and sharing accurate or inaccurate information.

For the U.S., when citizens perceive misinformation as a threat, they are more likely to support restrictive regulation policies implemented by tech companies and the government (Jungheer and Rauchfleisch, 2024). As these authors explain, a potential “public support for restrictive regulation at the cost of political expression is troubling and is potentially detrimental for democracy and democratic discourse” (p.14).

This finding opens new avenues for studying social interactions in these environments, which may delve into the causes explaining the indirect effects of such interactions on misinformation. We mention this because the personal political interest of the respondent, as a fundamental element of the intangible asset of citizen engagement from which we can interpret that interest acts as a facilitator of abilities to understand and contextualize received information (Carpini, 2004), behaves, at least in two countries, as a positive predictor. However, when asked about people’s use of social media for political purposes to obtain information, show interest in political affairs, or express opinions about political issues, misinformation as a concern increases.

8. Conclusion

This article explores the relationship between citizens’ assessments of the conduct of political institutions and media outlets and their perception of misinformation as a prevalent issue in their respective countries. The analysis of Eurobarometer data from six countries (Spain, Italy, Greece, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden) with different cultural, sociopolitical, and media contexts allows us to analyze a snapshot in which the citizens’ evaluations of the information trustworthiness on social networks and the use people make of social media for political purposes show a positive relationship with the misinformation concern. This requires delving into the causal origins of these social interactions, leading to indirect consequences in the recognition of misinformation as a societal concern.

Findings reveal a negative view of media practice (legitimacy and trust), which has clear repercussions on the role of media outlets within the democratic ecosystem. This is particularly relevant as the literature highlights the current prominence of political communication as part of the misinformation concern (populist rhetoric, post-truth discourses, lies as a core of strategic communication). However, variables related to the quality of democratic functioning do not emerge as predominant predictors: trust in political

institutions does not appear as a significant predictor in most studied countries; citizen political interest only emerges in two countries, and satisfaction with democracy in three of them. Future lines of research could explore how variables such as voting recall, levels of support or sympathy for governments moderate the relationship between political variables (trust, engagement, or satisfaction) and their connection to misinformation.

Setting apart the salient significance of the variable distrust on political information disseminated on social network sites, the prominence of results indicating that the issue of misinformation is more related to the media practice than to political conducts occurs in both countries classified in the so-called pluralist-polarized cluster and those in the democratic-corporatist cluster. While a few years ago, the trend seemed to indicate that the media systems of Western democracies would move closer to the liberal model (Hallin and Mancini, 2017), populist rhetoric, partisan information, and polarization dynamics could be reversing this situation, moving it closer to the pluralist-polarized model—a shift that Hallin (2019) already foresaw for the U.S. media system.

Inconsistencies across different countries between variables and concerns about misinformation indicate the complexity of misinformation studies. Also, it underscores the necessity of studying the problem based on the specific characteristics of the countries or environments under analysis, as well as how citizens relate to them. Our results do not provide consistent and robust evidence to support the theoretical hypotheses, thus emphasizing the importance that solutions to tackle the misinformation concern must be tailored to address the media, political, and information usage particularities in each context about misinformation concerns.

9. Limitations

This research is not without limitations, as the data used come from a reliable source such as Eurobarometer, which, however, limits our ability to fully assess all referenced theoretical concepts. This is the case for media trust, which the literature breaks down into various categories (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020), or political engagement (Andersen *et al.*, 2020), for which we could only measure it through political interest. This component, along with other unconsidered variables, could increase the percentage of explained variability in the linear regression models developed in this research. We also acknowledge that the internal reliability test associated with media usage (Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega) did not report adequate values across countries. This issue should be considered in future studies.

Furthermore, we only analyzed six countries (Italy, Spain, Greece, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden). Although the selected countries encompass the pluralist-polarized and democratic-corporatist media systems models according to updated characteristics (Büchel *et al.*, 2016), our analysis excluded other countries associated with these clusters. Hence, the generalization of our findings should be cautious because of the exclusion of other European countries and for extrapolating findings beyond the selected countries to other geographical regions with diverse political and media landscapes.

On the other hand, the variables under analysis focus on media outlets, online communication channels, and political contextual factors; however, our analysis lacked measuring items regarding politicians (i.e. trust, the accuracy of political discourse, or party polarization) that, as the literature references, are responsible for the assessment of the inaccuracy in the political discourse, the dissemination of propaganda, and misperceptions. Future research should consider these kinds of variables. The inclusion of more variables regarding societal and political context and information consumption also can help understand and provide further contextual explanations to interpret contradictory findings, such as the case of Italy regarding how *democracy satisfaction* correlates to misinformation

concerns or why the variable *trust in political institutions* emerges as the main predictor when in the other five studied countries do not provide statistical significance.

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	Spain (ES) <i>N</i> = 658		Italy (IT) <i>N</i> = 747		Greece (GR) <i>N</i> = 649		Germany (DE) <i>N</i> = 978		Denmark (DK) <i>N</i> = 692		Sweden (SE) <i>N</i> = 845	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Disinformation as a problem	3.39	0.66	3.07	0.64	3.51	0.67	3.17	0.75	2.87	0.79	3.40	0.67
Age	45.82	17.05	50.10	16.83	47.99	15.89	51.35	18.32	55.04	17.28	55.80	18.25
Gender	1.49	0.50	1.49	0.50	1.47	0.50	1.44	0.50	1.44	0.50	1.46	0.50
Ideological self-placement	4.60	2.02	5.59	1.92	5.37	1.75	4.92	1.65	5.23	1.97	4.78	2.16
Social class	2.12	0.98	2.82	0.70	2.39	0.82	2.56	0.86	2.76	0.92	2.80	0.91
Trust in political institutions	1.15	0.28	1.33	0.40	1.22	0.33	1.36	0.41	1.57	0.42	1.47	0.36
Political interest	1.84	0.69	2.14	0.61	2.41	0.56	2.26	0.52	2.23	0.57	2.28	0.52
Democracy satisfaction	2.42	0.80	2.66	0.72	2.16	0.88	2.62	0.77	3.33	0.75	3.10	0.69
Legitimacy of media	2.29	0.80	2.67	0.72	1.99	0.77	2.57	0.75	3.05	0.69	2.93	0.71
Media trust	1.22	0.42	1.46	0.50	1.19	0.39	1.40	0.49	1.65	0.48	1.61	0.49
Use of traditional media	3.86	1.26	4.46	1.02	4.25	0.87	4.69	1.28	4.59	1.23	4.80	1.23
Use of online channels	4.73	1.62	4.40	1.79	4.90	1.65	4.32	1.67	5.13	1.31	5.12	1.31
Distrust in pol. information on SNS	3.03	0.88	2.83	0.87	2.80	0.83	2.79	0.87	2.84	0.80	3.06	0.80
Use of SNS for political purposes	3.04	0.77	2.91	0.73	3.03	0.79	2.82	0.78	2.90	0.69	2.94	0.64

Source(s): Created by author