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Perception of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content in Digital Media—A Generational Approach

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Abstract: The presence of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in the media is nothing new, but this area has largely expanded with the emergence of the Internet and digital media, thus opening itself up to anyone who has online access. As a result, there is an increasing amount of such content in the media, especially in digital media. This paper deals with the perception of fake news and potentially manipulative content by various generations—in particular, the perceptions of the young and the middle-aged generations, with the focus being on their ability to recognise, verify, and relate to such content. The results of this study were gained by means of a qualitative methodology applied to focus groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The results are presented through a thematic analysis of the differences in perception of “fake news” between these generations, firstly in terms of their apprehension and interpretation of it, and secondly in terms of their relation to it. The authors conclude that both generations lack competence concerning media literacy, and that providing education in the field of digital media might offer a long-term solution for building resistance to “fake news” for future generations.

Keywords: “fake news” and potentially manipulative content; digital media; generational approach; media literacy



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1. Introduction

Taking the social significance of digital media¹ [1] and the opportunities it offers in disseminating various content as a starting point, it is necessary to emphasise its role in spreading fake news and disinformation alike. This type of content is not a new phenomenon and not solely a product of digital media either: “The problem of information credibility is nothing new” [2] (p. 70). As Obadă [3] (p. 148) states: “Fake news is not a new phenomenon [4,5] because the partisan press has always peddled biased opinions and stories lacking factual basis” [2,5] (p. 70); “New technologies, from the telegraph in the 19th century to contemporary social media algorithms, have led to the proliferation of fake news” [2,4] (p. 70). However, it is evident that various forms of digital media, in a technical sense, have great potential to spread and multiply information, although they are not the sole carrier. The exponential growth of content that has a primary intention of deception or manipulation represents one of the threatening features of the contemporary digital environment². To what extent this content is widespread is obvious from the reference to the past decade as being “fake news” [6] (p. 977). Having recognised disinformation as a serious threat to democratic processes, security, and the welfare of citizens, the European Union adopted an Action Plan Against Disinformation in December 2018, with the aim of increasing awareness, social resistance, private sector mobilisation, and the ability of EU institutions to find, analyse, and discover disinformation [7,8] (p. 7).

The production and distribution of fake news, disinformation, and content with a solely commercial function significantly endangers the approach to credible information, which further problematises both the inability to recognise and deconstruct such contents from the perspective of digital media users. With regard to the latter, in relation to fake news

and potentially manipulative content, it is necessary to examine the level of competence in the domain of information and digital literacy, especially the skills that imply a critical approach and an ability to deconstruct media content. Namely, this research considers members of the young and the middle-aged generations in order to compare their respective competences at recognising fake news, photographs and video footage, disinformation, and potentially manipulative content. Furthermore, their respective competences at verifying these contents and the levels of their responsibility in relation to the listed contents in the digital sphere. In this paper, a distinction is made between media literacy and other factors that constitute the concept of literacy in the 21st century. In this respect, this is different from IT literacy, information literacy, and digital literacy in that it is a complex notion with numerous definitions, but the authors opt for the definition describing it as an ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create a message in various communication forms [9]. The idea of access to media content refers to technical competences—those denoting analysis and evaluation to critical thinking competences—whereas the idea of creating media content implies practical competences [10]. The notion of information literacy is observed as the effective usage of information within the context given [11], while IT literacy could be seen as “an ability to use and understand new information technologies and a wide range of their possible applications” [12]. In this regard, digital literacy refers to the application of information literacy in a digital form [11].

The significance of this research is reflected in a generational approach to ubiquitous and increasingly viral ethically problematic content and in comparing and qualitatively analysing the differences in competences between a generation that was raised using digital technologies, on the one hand, and a generation that has come into contact, both professionally and privately, with digital technologies subsequently and in a gradual manner on the other. The leading assumption of the paper is that growing up in a digital environment and intense use of digital media do not necessarily imply that one possesses the competences to recognise and verify fake news and potentially manipulative content. We ask the following research questions: in what way do members of different generations (young and middle-aged generations) perceive the phenomenon of “fake news” and similar content in digital media? Can they recognise them, and what do they do to verify them? What relation do they establish towards them? What are their proposals for building resistance to them? The answers to these questions will imply the achievement of our research goals.

In addition, it is assumed that those who have not experienced living in a digital environment could have developed digital and media competences, given that they belong to the middle-aged generation and that they possess lifelong experience concerning the use of various other media. The auxiliary hypotheses that the paper is based upon are as follows: (1) both young and middle-aged generation members in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not possess adequately developed media and digital literacy competences to recognise and verify “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media, and (2) neither of the aforementioned generations have fully established a resistance mechanism to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media. The principal goal of the research is to examine how members of different generations (young and middle-aged generations) perceive the phenomenon of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media. In this respect, the additional goals of the research are to examine whether members of the aforementioned generations are able to recognise “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, how they verify them, what kind of relationship they have developed towards them, and what their proposals are for building resistance to such content.

According to our findings, no research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in regard to a generational approach to fake news, but as a result of the current interest in this issue, there has been other research related to its various aspects. Consequently, some of the comprehensive research in the field, encompassing 450 digital media entities, offers an insight into the patterns of creation and dissemination of disinformation and

points to the level of their presence in the aforementioned media. Namely, the results of the research show that “media reports featuring incorrect or deceptive contents are widely released in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region of former Yugoslavia, most often in the form of ‘fake news’—inaccurate pieces of information released on purpose—that makes up almost one third of all disinformation analysed in this research” [8] (p. 7), with anonymous portals being identified as main sources and carriers of disinformation in the online area [13]. Based on the results of the conducted research, authors Lejla Turčilo and Belma Buljubašić highlight the issue of “fake news” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, pointing out that hyper-production of “fake news” in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the result of “media enslaving, whose employees have agreed to or have been forced to serve political and economic tycoons and their particular interests” [14] (p. 49).

The extreme presence and exposure of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to “fake news”, disinformation, and potentially manipulative content, whose hyper-production has been determined not only by technical but also social—that is, political and economic factors—in the first place contributes to the justification of this research. Within the context of a generation approach, the research encompasses age groups that exclusively and primarily use digital media for gaining information, along with traditional information channels. In the end, the research makes a contribution to the field in terms of the lack of empirical studies concerning the manner in which different generations perceive fake news and potentially manipulative content.

2. Fake News and Potentially Manipulative Content

There is a lack of research into the role of age regarding the consumption of ‘fake news’ on social media [2], but we know that the hyper-production of fake news and potentially manipulative content is followed by a multitude of definitions and classifications that attempt at clearly dividing fake news from content that is similar in its nature but different in terms of their function, intention, format, and structure. In that sense, one of the important features is either the presence or the lack of an intention to deceive audiences. It is possible to observe fake news and potentially manipulative content as various forms of media manipulation, and this particular research is interested, apart from fake news, in the following phenomena: disinformation, satire, clickbait, conspiracy theory, and photo-manipulation. With regard to the latter list, the idea of manipulation is best reflected in the phenomena of “fake news”, clickbait, and photomanipulation. The rest of the aforementioned contents are potentially manipulative, which depends on the context and perception of the user of such content, but these phenomena cannot be generally considered as featuring any intention of manipulation.

At the core of numerous definitions of fake news lies a statement that it contains information that does not correlate with facts and that it is directed towards disinforming the public in a conscious manner [15] (p. 48), which implies that the major features of fake news are untruthfulness/incorrectness and intended deception. For this reason, Jaster and Lanuis attribute the lack of truth and lack of truthfulness to the notion of fake news and, using this as a starting point, they claim that fake news is “wrong or deceptive (lack of truth) and that it is released with the intention of deceiving or, eventually, discrediting or neglecting the truth (lack of truthfulness)” [16] (p. 208). In her efforts to draw a line between fake news and the contents similar to it, Milica Kuljić defines the former as “incorrect information containing unprovable, mostly completely fabricated data or claims, as well as quotations, released with a view to deceiving audiences” [17] (p. 13).

As a prevalent form of media manipulation, and one quite similar to fake news, there is the notion of disinformation, “which is based on facts, but which misrepresents them—that is, which contains a ‘mixture’ of facts and false information or semi-truths” [15] (p. 52). In relation to fake news, disinformation is a wider notion, with the key difference being reflected in the fact that the latter is not necessarily intentional, meaning that there is no intention of deceiving audiences. Matthew R. X. Dentith claims that in the case of disinformation, “one does not necessarily deal with completely fabricated information, but

that it may contain some elements of truthfulness, yet not the entire context, that it may be completely false, or that it may lack one piece of information so that the picture would be complete, and the media release truthful in its entirety" [18] (p. 66).

Unlike fake news and disinformation, satire does not represent a form of media manipulation. Yet, if there is no reference to the fact that it is a case of satirical contents based on fabricated news, it is possible to perceive such contents as true to reality. This sort of danger is exactly what Bhawna Narwal points to, stating the following: "This type of news is intended for entertainment and parody—the purpose is not to harm anybody but it can be misinterpreted as facts. Lots of websites and social media offer critical commentary on society, celebrities and politicians to amuse readers, but these stories have the potential to fool" [6] (p. 977). In relation to fake news, which is based on incorrect information whose purpose is to deceive the public, satirical news is "based on information that is exaggerated, overturned, and accentuated in order to point to deceptions", implying elements of humour at all times [17] (p. 13).

Clickbait represents one of the most widespread forms of manipulation in digital media, but it is not its exclusive feature. According to the results of a research work entitled *Dezinformacije u onlajn sferi: slučaj BiH* (Disinformation in the online sphere: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina), clickbait appears as the second most common type of media manipulation [8] (p. 21). In reality, it appeared as a technique for drawing attention much earlier in the form of sensationalist and intriguing titles in tabloids. With regard to digital media, it does not relate solely to titles construed in a sensationalist manner, but, in general terms, to contents whose primary function is drawing attention and generating "clickability" on a massive scale. "The review of the literature on the subject allows us to point out two main notions or definitions: a restrictive one that reduces clickbait to the strategies used in the formulation of news headlines, and a more general and inclusive one that encompasses different formulas to attract readers' attention and increase traffic to a webpage" [19] (p. 97).

Next is the conspiracy theory notion, which refers to "a media release that makes claims concerning some organised and harmful actions of an entity, but that offers no proof for such claims (...) conspiracy theories emerge at the moment when the very assumption of possible harmful action is presented as a fact, without any actual investigation into the subject matter and presentation of any piece of evidence to support the claim" [15] (p. 52).

Multimedia, as one of the features of digital media that makes it superior to traditional mass media, implies a possibility of the visualisation of media contents as well, which is largely realised, apart from various illustrations and video footage, by means of photography. The latter, as a valuable asset within the context of gaining information, represents, at the same time, a means of manipulation that can significantly contribute to the credibility of fake news and potentially manipulative content, without verifying their authenticity³ [20,21]. "The manipulation of images has become an increasingly common occurrence with the advent of digital photos, powerful image manipulation software, and knowledge of techniques" [18] (p. 144). Where the subject matter of our research is concerned, the most significant definition of "fake news" is the one that features it as information that is not consistent with facts and that is intended for the conscious and deliberate manipulation of the public [16] (p. 48), since it successfully divides "fake news" from other potentially manipulative content.

2.1. Recognition and Verification of "Fake News" and Potentially Manipulative Content

The recognition and verification of "fake news" and potentially manipulative content represent significant competences in the contemporary digital environment. In this sense, digital media users have at their disposal tools whose usage, in addition to possessing certain knowledge and skills, makes an important contribution to identifying contents primarily intended for deception and manipulation.

The hyper-production of "fake news" and potentially manipulative content is mostly evident on Facebook, but the activity has been lately gaining strength on Twitter [22] as

well—the social media company that provides the most popular service for mainstream media reporting. Tools such as Bot Sentinel, Botcheck.me, Botometer, and Hoaxy are intended to detect and monitor trollbots and false accounts, and they have been developed for Twitter exclusively [23]. The Objective Analysis Effective Solutions—Fighting Disinformation network database features the tools of “Dirt Protocol” and “Emergent.Info”, which offer a high level of interactivity to users⁴ [24].

In addition, the same database offers tools for verifying the credibility of photographs as well, along with metadata on photographs, video contents, and texts⁵ [24]. With regard to the aforementioned, the tools for verifying newspaper contents and for differentiating between the notions of “fake news”, satire, conspiracy theories, and the like are the following: Disinformation Index, Factcheck.org, Factchecking, FakerFact, Fakey, Lead Stories FactChecker, KnowNews, and Polygraph (BBG).

Although the existing technical tools are indisputably useful, it is necessary, within the context of responsible and adequate media usage and the recognition and verification of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, that users should continually develop their media literacy competences⁶ [25,26], the complexity of which implies special training courses for media users—in other words, media literacy. For that reason, the key factor is education in the field of media, which implies “gaining knowledge about every single form of media, whether printed, electronic, or digital. Under no circumstances is this type of education to be confused with media-assisted learning, which is within the domain of media didactics” [27,28] (p. 25).

2.2. Influence of “Fake News” on Media Users’ Emotions

The key to the success of fake news is that it relies, for the most part, on media users’ emotions, along with other elements of cognitive partiality, in opposition to critical thinking. One of the disturbing features with regard to fake news consumption is the fact that users are actually under the impression that other people are more influenced by fake news than they are [29,30]. “Given that fake news is seen as potentially harmful [29,31], a small but growing number of studies have documented the effect of fake news on TPP, generally indicating that TPP persists in the context of fake news” [29,30,32] (p. 6).

Sivrić [33] points out that social media, so far, has been observed as mere places to have fun, but it has lately gained much more impact. By using social media, people, often unconsciously, become a part of social spheres circulating fake news and disinformation “for various reasons, such as satire, humour, and fun” [33] (p. 10). In their paper, Martel, Gertler Rand, and Pennycook [34] refer to the claims of scholars who advocate the thesis that a negative, anxious, and sad state of mind increases the overall quality of searching for information, skepticism towards fake news, and doubt and the amount of critical thinking about opposed standpoints, whereas positive moods increase users’ level of gullibility and decrease their ability to detect deception [35–38]. The factor that makes a difference between fake and credible news is that articles featuring the former show “higher levels of anger and disgust and substantially lower levels of ‘joy’ in their article body than real news stories” [39] (p. 18).

As for the contents of fake news, it could be filled with images and narratives of violence which, according to Katarina Kacer [40], can urge us to develop emotions, such as compassion, pity, and empathy for victims and fascination for such scenes, but contents like these often open an opportunity for the radicalisation of viewers, for developing some mental unease by disturbing one’s mental balance, as well as for becoming numb and indifferent to suffering. Kacer [40] says that this depends, in the first place, on the level of cognitive involvement, where the intensity of the latter is disproportionate to the influence of the message.

3. Methodology

The qualitative research method of focus groups provides the ability to collect empirical material necessary for the subject of the research and requires a review of various

opinions and attitudes towards the perception, recognition, verification, and relation to users as regards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content. In addition, the discussion always concerns one or more topics approached from different angles and provides important insights into the meanings upon which group marks are based, as well as into the norms upon which a group relies on when assessing something [41]. Therefore, this research technique was also chosen because of the approach to the subject of research, which is a generational approach [42,43] (p. 5). Focus groups, usually encompassing “6 to 12 participants” [41] (p. 585), are carefully selected following some precisely determined criteria, with the main criterion with regards to this paper being the instance of belonging to a certain generation. The authors contacted participants for panels (focus groups) through a public call, which was previously approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Political Sciences. The call contained the details necessary for understanding the concept and goals of the research, as well as the prerequisites for the selection of potential candidates. With regard to this, the call demanded that participants be aged between 18 and 34 (young generation) and 35–65 (middle-aged generation) and that they be Internet and digital media users for the purpose of gaining information.

Given the fact that the paper deals with a generational approach to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content—both the young (18–35 years of age) and the middle-aged (36–65 years of age)—it was necessary that group sessions were organised with members of respective generations. For the purpose of this particular research, there were four focus organised groups—two for each generation. Every focus group featured six members, all living in the city of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), taking into consideration the fact that results might differ in terms of geographic areas. Some earlier research into the matter of the media literacy of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina [43,44] and the way that they use and value information has shown no difference in this respect.

All sessions were organised in the period of 21–26 May 2021, with the first three sessions organised on the first day of the period. The first group encompassed young people born between 1992 and 2001. The session lasted for an hour and a half, and it was balanced in terms of gender, with an equal number of male and female participants. Although the issue of gender is of no importance for the research, the authors insisted on this for the purpose of objectivity and representation. The second group assembled young participants as well (1990–2000), lasting for 72 min and gathering two men and four women. With regard to the third group, it featured members (four women and two men) of the middle-aged generation born between the years of 1965 and 1983 and lasted for 95 min. Finally, the session with the fourth group was conducted on 26 May, and it encompassed members of the middle-aged generation born between 1960 and 1981 and lasted for two hours. Like the first group, it was balanced in terms of gender. Overall, there were 24 participants (10 men and 14 women)⁷. Concerning the subject matter and the goal of the research, the authors opted for four homogeneous groups, two of which comprised members of the young generation and two of which featured members of the middle-aged generation. The participants were selected by means of intentional sampling, given their respective eligibility for the research (that they belong to one of the said groups and that they use digital media for gaining information). With regard to the number of participants in each group, the authors decided upon a figure of 6, thinking it to be an optimal solution given the type of research and equal involvement in discussions.

The primary research goal is to examine in what way members of different generations (young and middle-aged) perceive the phenomenon of “fake news” and similar contents in digital media, whether they can recognise them, what they do to verify them, what relation they establish towards them, and what their proposals for building resistance to them are. The research excluded members of the elderly generation (over 65 years of age), since studies have shown that senior citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina almost never use digital media for the purpose of gaining information given their low level of digital literacy [43]. In line with the goal of the research, there was a guide⁸ designed as the basic instrument for focus group research, with a form similar to a semi-structured interview.

The guide consisted of information provided to the participants at the beginning of a session (basic goals of the research, purpose of the results gained, guaranteed anonymity of participants, as well as clarifications concerning the process of a focus group interview) and a set of questions divided into five sections: the notion of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content; recognition of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content; verification of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content; relation towards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content; and recommendations for building resistance to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media. All focus groups were recorded using a Dictaphone, based upon which the sessions were transcribed so that the data could be entered into the MaxQDA qualitative data software.

An analysis of the results gained during focus group sessions was based on studying the transcribed material. In this paper, the authors use a qualitative thematic analysis method, which represents “a method for identifying, analysing, and writing a report on patterns (themes) from the data collected” [41,45] (p. 79). This method makes it possible for the transcribed data to be analysed and interpreted through the process of encoding and identifying certain themes, patterns, and concepts. A thematic analysis provides a qualitative, detailed, and gradual overview of data [45] and is convenient for analysing data collected through focus groups. The inductive approach is applied over the course of this analysis, which means that codes and categories are not predefined but formed during the process of encoding and data analysis, thus yielding concepts and conclusions.

In order to ensure the reliability of the coding process, all three authors became acquainted in detail with the data by reading the transcripts, and then individually generated the initial codes; i.e., they compressed and summarised a huge amount of information from the transcripts. During the process of coding, the authors individually assigned codes to texts and sentences that represented the basic idea of a separate part of the conversation. After comparing the codes of the authors (intercoders) and the extent to which they coincided, the codes obtained by this process were separated and regrouped into larger groups or topics at a higher level of abstraction. Based on the degree of matching of the intercoder codes, a code list with 25 codes was obtained, distributed in 5 groups⁹, which was preceded by a revision of the topics. This stage implied and included thinking about identifying more general and specific topics, but also ignoring those that are not of particular importance, while the codes were regrouped in a meaningful and coherent way within the topics; at the same time, there was a significant difference between topics [41]. We list the topics obtained by grouping the codes as follows: the notion and types of “fake news”; the capability of recognising “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media; the knowledge of tools for identifying, verifying, and deconstructing “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media; the relation towards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media; and recommendations for building resistance to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media. After we regrouped the codes into thematic units, we analysed the data within the topics and interpreted them in accordance with the research questions on which we based our research.

4. Results of the Research

4.1. Notion of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

The results of the research show that the majority of the young population gain information through Internet portals of traditional mass media from the country, from the region of former Yugoslavia, or from abroad. Half of young respondents think that social media is not a credible source of information and that it is the main channel for spreading fake news. They seem not to fully understand the difference between fake news and disinformation.

Fake news is a piece of news that does not contain convincing facts. It is written with a hidden agenda behind it and it is a longer piece of text, whereas disinformation is a shorter one, like some sort of a statement (Participant 6).

I would say that fake news is based upon something imaginary, in order for the portal in question to get more clicks and views, while disinformation can be released not solely out of bad intention but because they have received it in that form and merely forwarded it. For that reason, I am of the opinion that disinformation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, it simply means that the person who has released it was not knowledgeable about it at that point of time (Participant 4).

In addition, they think that fake news is distributed with a view to discrediting a certain person or harming the image of an institution, while they deem disinformation a less damaging phenomenon—one that could be labelled as a wrongly interpreted piece of news without malice. None of the participants could provide the definition of disinformation. However, half of them were aware of the notion of clickbait, they could provide an instance of it, and they often encountered such contents. All of the respondents were of the opinion that YouTube is becoming a domain that does the most to promote clickbait contents and that it is a trend imposed by global YouTube stars, with only a few of them openly stating that they resort to such a practice. With regard to the phenomenon of clickbait, they refer to Facebook and Twitter, as well as the main platforms for its promotion. Furthermore, they are familiar with the notion of satire, and they have already encountered such contents. In this respect, one of the female participants said that satire is “a lie, in its essence”, while one male participant regarded satire as “a socially engaged lie”. For another female participant, satire is intended for people “who understand the context and who are the only ones to laugh at it”. Clickbait, out of all forms of potentially manipulative content in digital media, was the form that they were most introduced to, which is, according to their opinion, used for gaining profit in most cases. As soon as a user clicks to open certain contents, it is recorded as a view and used to attract advertisers. As a result, they think that spreading fake news and disinformation is merely a consequence of clickbait.

With regard to members of the middle-aged generation, they gained information through Internet portals as well (they mostly accessed webpages of printed and electronic media, both public and commercial, along with portals that do not have printed or electronic counterparts), and, to a lesser degree, from social media. Out of those, four participants claimed they did not have an account registered on any instance of social media, with two of them claiming they never had one and two of them saying they did but that they eventually shut it down. They defined fake news as incorrect information and they encountered it quite often, almost on a daily basis. With reference to this, one of the female participants mentioned a situation from her own life, when she was a victim of “fake news”. In addition, she pointed out that she actually could see for herself, based on the comments following the release (around 300), how gullible people are and how easy it is to manipulate them.

I have found myself the subject matter of an incorrect piece of information that referred to my workplace, and it feels normal to me to analyse all that and ask myself if it is true (Participant 15).

Within the context of differences between disinformation and “fake news”, respondents provided different opinions.

Disinformation has a goal of its own, it is directed towards someone, and it has a background story to it, while “fake news” is merely a type of disinformation (Participant 16).

Fake news is not a novelty, it has been around since the Neolithic Revolution, when first recorded states released such contents in order to manipulate and control the business of trade. A more technologically developed age multiplies fake news—there is a greater volume of it and it circulates much faster but, at the same time, the volume of credible information is equally greater. It is necessary to develop selection skills in this respect, and this is where media literacy as a form of education proves indispensable in order for people to recognise fake news easily, given that our world is flooded with it. At the time when the media was not interactive, it was more difficult to respond to it. I would say that the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina used to be more notorious in terms of releasing fake news, it was completely under the control of the authorities. What I find interesting is

that people were restricted to one media company as a source of information so they relied on social interaction to learn about the truth, and today the situation is reversed, where people receive 200 different pieces of information on a certain event by means of their smartphone and still struggle to reach the proper one. Therefore, the teaching subjects of political and media literacy are inseparable from each other and would be a valuable asset to the high school curriculum. Even that of the primary school as well (Participant 23).

When one considers everything that is said about the differences between “fake news” and disinformation on the part of the participants, it is evident that they are not quite knowledgeable about the two, but that they are aware of the fact that there are differences between these categories. Half of the participants of the middle-aged generation had no idea what clickbait was. Upon the clarification of the notion, they all confirmed that it was a phenomenon they encountered on a daily basis.

Those are sensationalist titles. One title reads there was a death in a family, so when I checked it out I learned that it was a family cat that died (Participant 14).

Clickbait is an item of information that aims at capturing the attention of a viewer, it is well-placed for marketing purposes, and it is, for the most part, dramatically consistent with some of the overwhelming social trends that are interesting and attractive. It is all about the quantity of clicks or views, depending on the context. There are numerous examples of clickbaits, such as the relation of the title of an article and the subsequent text, with the latter not corresponding to the former at all. Often, the photograph is more effective than the text itself, since we are more attuned to visual stimuli today, so the textual section of the title and the body of the text are of less importance. That this is so is proven by Instagram, which is a very popular social media company, but which is basically nothing else but a (children’s) picture book, a social media intended for people with less developed cognitive abilities, given that it only features images. Furthermore, it is also a common case that there is no logical relationship established between the photograph and the title and, if it happens that there is one, then the two have nothing to do with the body of the text (Participant 24).

Respondents had encountered cases of satire as well, especially on social media. They were able to recognise it, and they often logged on to such pages for fun.

I think that using satire to release some piece of news is an excellent idea. Satiric cartoons are a great tool for representing the social reality, and I like to gain information by watching shows featuring such contents. What is essential in this matter is who these contents are meant for, since not everybody possesses the intellectual capacity to understand it (Participant 21).

Based on the interpretation of research results on the understanding of fake news and potentially manipulative content, it is evident that there are significant differences in the perception of research participants.

“Fake news” and potentially manipulative content are mostly encountered on social media (by those who are registered users) and software applications intended for correspondence. They come in the form of clickbait and satire in most cases, but these are present on Internet portals as well.

4.2. Recognition of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

The young claim that they can recognise “fake news” by the “lack of internal logic”, by the omission of the source, by the fact that the source is referred to as anonymous, or by the fact that the source seems incompetent for the topic discussed (this is especially so, in the words of Participant 5, when there is a discussion on social media on topics such as living, diet, health, and the like, with incompetent persons passing on advice on those topics). They claim it is difficult to recognise a fake photograph, except for those that are photoshopped.

There are some features that are self-evident and I need no tool to notice that the photograph is not genuine (Participant 7).

In terms of other forms of fake media contents, they have encountered fake video footage, in particular on YouTube and TikTok.

There are a lot of instances of video footage featuring people engaged in activities that are impossible to perform (Participant 10).

Respondents were not familiar with any concrete tools for verifying photographs and video footage. Half of the young participants could recognise automated profiles on social media.

I can recognise them by their not featuring any profile photo, by nobody following them and, at the same time, them following around 2,000 people, and by direct and vulgar comments, with them frequently responding (the reason they have been created in the first place) to topics dealing with sensitive issues of ethnic designation, political relations, intolerance etc (Participant 8).

Furthermore, half of them knew what an Internet domain is and what differences there are between them, but they did not know how to verify it. In addition, they were aware of the advanced Google search, but they rarely used it. What raises suspicion in members of the middle-aged generation as regards to the truthfulness of a piece of news is a situation when there is no source stated or when the source is unknown. In that case, they resort to verifying the source.

I verify the speaker, not the contents (Participant 18).

I verify both the media company (authenticity) that has released the information and the collocutor, their expertise and competence (Participant 14).

I do my best to 'skip' the clickbait type of news, not to verify it. What sets off my alarm is when the title seems exaggerated and when the topic is discussed without support of any arguments and in a superficial manner (Participant 17).

There are indicators that can help you easily recognise fake contents, for instance, source, authorship, style, or font size, since it is an uncommon practice for the media companies with a solid reputation to feature an all-capital-letters text (Participant 21).

It is possible to identify it at first sight, but there are several components that should be taken into account: source of information—who releases the piece of information (what media company), since the media company of significant reputation verifies each piece of information it releases—that is the first level of filtration. As for the rest, there is the semantic level (the way the information is structured in linguistic terms, the visual level (what the photograph refers to), and there is something that could be labelled as the level of literacy (a way to judge whether a person possesses the knowledge necessary to write such a text) (Participant 24).

When disinformation is concerned, they do not make a clear difference between this notion and that of “fake news”, but they understand the similarities and the context.

I compare various sources, I analyse the background of an event and potential impacts depending on the media that has released the contents, I make connections between various elements of the contents, that is, how mutually related they are or whether there is some sort of deviation as regards to other facts (Participant 23).

Based on the factors above, respondents expressed their doubts as to the credibility of information in the following situations: when the title is sensationalist in its nature, when the release is approached in a superficial fashion, and when the collocutor lacks expertise on the topic discussed. None of the middle-aged participants knew how to recognise a fake photograph, while half of them claimed they were able to tell fake video footage from a genuine video. In all probability, they had already encountered such contents without realising it.

It is a difficult task, one has to take into account the competences of the author of the photograph and their intentions. In my opinion, an average consumer faces an almost impossible task of detecting a fake photograph, given the fact that such a process is very demanding in technological terms and that the possibilities of forging such contents are virtually unlimited (Participant 24).

In addition, they were not familiar with any of the tools for recognising and verifying such contents. Out of those participants that had registered accounts on social media, two thirds claimed that they could recognise automated profiles.

I can recognise fake profiles by the way they express their opinions in comments, and I know that some individuals “hide” behind fake profiles when they use insulting language, when they swear, and when they resort to the speech of hatred (Participant 17).

It appears that members of the middle-aged generation do not know how to verify the domain of an Internet portal or the authenticity of a webpage on social media (except for the methods they have stated). Furthermore, they do not know how to browse a removed page or removed contents. Two thirds of respondents pointed out the fact that they used an advanced Google search by putting, in most cases, certain words in quotation marks when they wanted to find some information quickly.

4.3. Verification of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

Most of the young participants verified the authenticity of information based on the source (whether it exists, whether it has been stated, whether some other media company has released the same contents, or if they have asked someone else who is more familiar with the topic), while the other half said they were neither familiar with the method of verification nor knew which factors should be verified in order to determine whether the piece of information in question is true or false.

If the issue is a political one, I verify the information in various media companies based on their respective political beliefs so I can get a balanced approach to it (Participant 9).

They did not verify whether the source is a primary or secondary one, as they did not find it an important feature.

On rare occasions do I search for the primary source, when some information is really important to me, but I do not recall the last time I did that (Participant 3).

None of the young participants knew what the imprint is. When they were introduced to the notion, they were unanimous in their claim that they did not verify the imprint of the media nor the transparency of the page, and that they had never heard about it.

I think that elder generations find it important, whereas the young merely search for information. Although we resort to critical thinking, I do not see us ever verifying the fact who the editor of a certain portal is (Participant 5).

I like to read comments, and by the number and type of them I assess the quality of the page as well. The more comments, especially in terms of some quarrel or argument, the more likely that the media company is sensationalist (Participant 6).

None of the young participants signed their comments in public—they were not convinced that they could make any change by that, and they would not like to hurt anyone or start an argument by doing so. They were unanimous in their claim that, if they share some contents, they read the whole text first. Only one female participant pointed out the fact that she shared any contents concerning humanitarian campaigns without previously verifying them, since she was interested in passing the information around as soon as possible and to as many addresses as possible. What is more, they said that they circulate entertaining, satiric contents that they know are not true and that they do it for the purpose of having fun.

The middle-aged participants, when they doubt the truthfulness of a piece of news, mostly verify “the parties”, they verify who the parties involved in the story are, who

the story refers to, and everything related to them (Participant 17), they verify what other media companies have released on the topic, the source of information and, ultimately, according to Participant 6, they verify the information right at the source it comes from.

I verify whether the information has been released by multiple sources and what these sources are, I observe the comments on the information, and then I form my opinion. This concerns low- and medium-level information, with the high-profile information not being released in this manner. For such information I turn to experts—expert sources (Participant 19).

Unless they deem the information to be important, not even middle-aged participants verify whether the source of information is a primary or secondary source and whether the piece of information has been provided by another media company as part of a news exchange or it has been generated by the media company in question.

I verify from time to time, but it so happened on several occasions that I did not recognise that the source was not authentic. Collocutors, as well as various media analysts, are asked to comment on a certain topic as part of an arranged deal. If necessary, I verify if the information has been released by other media and then make comparison, or I search for the information by means of key words, to see whether it has appeared somewhere else and in what manner (Participant 24).

They verify the competence of the collocutor, but also their partiality. They refer to examples of different interpretations of the same piece of news by a public broadcasting service and by a commercial media company. They think that the truth lies “somewhere in the middle”, and that one needs to verify information using multiple sources. Given the fact that they find the imprint and the transparency of the portal/webpage important (who the owner of the media company is, who the members of the editorial board are, who the journalists are, and all other information available), they resort to verifying the information by means of key words when they encounter an unknown/new page.

With regard to the contents of news, they do not analyse them often, unless there is something they find important. Similarly, they do not share contents either, but Participant 3 said that she sometimes did. In that case, she only shares them with persons that might find interest in them and she warns them to verify them. Six participants claimed that they did not share any contents through social media, and five of them that they sometimes share the contents they consider credible.

4.4. Relation towards “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

With regards to their relation towards “fake news”, the young usually ignore and avoid it and do not comment on it in public.

Do I object to the presence of fake news? Unfortunately, it seems that we have agreed to that fact as it is all around us. It does bother most people, but given that little can be done to rectify the situation, we have accepted it as normal (Participant 1).

Such phenomena do not disturb them and, after they have read such contents, they try to forget them over a short period of time.

I think that the media is slowly starting to lose its significance, since it all too often serves as a leverage for authorities. It is no longer a matter of convincing us to accept a lie but we have to ask ourselves whether there is truth at all, and we, as a society, can do a lot in terms of not accepting a lie for truth by making an adequate selection of information and by engaging in critical thinking (Participant 4).

All young participants have a negative attitude towards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, and they think it degrades the quality of journalism. At the same time, they think that they, as individuals, have no influence, so they mostly ignore it. Although they have a negative attitude towards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, four of the participants claimed they did not mind its presence in media space,

one of them claimed that she was a “bit” bothered by it, and another one claimed that he did not care about them at all and that he could not understand why we are asking these questions. When they are faced with a piece of news with troublesome contents, four of the participants stated that they read the whole contents since they find it amusing. They approve of the contents they are not convinced are true because they are attracted by some detail or because they think they are funny, except for two participants who claimed they seldom approve of any contents, even when they really like them, since they find them irrelevant. All respondents were unanimous in their claim that they retell conspiracy theories in conversations, but that they do not post them and share them—at least those they are aware of. They think of them as funny, but they do not pay too much attention to them. All the young participants were familiar with the notion of a conspiracy theory and they can easily recognise it and provide examples.

Those are thoughts that have not been proven, but that have been well supported by words. They spread fast, such as the story that Bill Gates is going to put a chip inside each and every one of us (Participant 10).

Conspiracy theories, in their opinion, are mostly spread on Facebook accounts, followed by the YouTube and Instagram profiles of certain celebrities.

There is a conspiracy theory that Sponge Bob is a drug addict. There is nothing to it, it is merely a cartoon, but I still like to read about it. I find it interesting, but I do not consider it serious (Participant 3).

In general, they do not believe in such contents.

Only if I find such contents consistent with some of my earlier findings on the topic do I conduct a thorough research and make comparison, but in most cases it proves to be exaggerated (Participant 1).

They say they reflect readers’ emotions; that is, the impact of disinformation on them, both those who are subject matters of such stories and those who are going to read it.

When I read a fake piece of news about the death of a celebrity, I always think how it must feel to them, what they feel when they wake up in the morning and read it (Participant 3).

They never share contents that are disturbing or that they consider damaging to someone. In this respect, they think that unverified and incorrect contents in the media may cause harm both to the public and individuals, especially in case of exerting influence on attitudes of members of certain groups (LGBTQ, for instance), in case of invading their privacy or endangering their security, or in case of discrimination against them on the grounds of sex, race, etc.

All the middle-aged participants stated that they were bothered by the presence of “fake news” in the media, that such contents disturbed them, and made them feel uncomfortable, even putting them in a bad mood. They try to avoid such contents, with most of them not sharing them consciously and with intention, except for instances of satire, when they want to make someone laugh. Those who are registered on social media say they may have approved such contents without verifying first. They are keen on conspiracy theories content and they readily share it since they find it amusing. More to the point, two of them even created and share contents on social media that could be labelled as conspiracy theories since they found it interesting. While doing so, they felt no responsibility at all, believing that by sharing such contents they might be helping others to better understand, in terms of providing information that differs from what they have encountered earlier. They do not bother thinking about the emotions of those who are going to consume such information, given that they are convinced of doing the right thing.

True, I have shared such contents and I always do, and I approve of them. If the public discourse is considered to be truth, and if what deviates from it is considered conspiracy theories, I am the one to support the latter (Participant 24).

I myself design the contents that might be interpreted as conspiracy theory. I compare certain historical figures and reflect on the truthfulness of historical facts. I share respective video footage on my YouTube channel (Participant 18).

What is more, other middle-aged participants also view conspiracy theories as a source of additional information that can be true and that they consider useful for public.

At first, I resisted conspiracy theories. Yet, I am no longer convinced whether they should be called that at all or that we are being inadequately informed. It could be that we are merely a convenient material for manipulation since we have little knowledge on certain topics and thus refer to them as conspiracy theories in an uncritical manner (Participant 20).

Conspiracy theory is an utterly legitimate construction, but it has a negative connotation because official science does not want to support it as a serious theory. For that reason, it is often the case that the content released by various channels gets characterised as scientifically unfounded due to the lack of methodology, although they provide solid evidence to the matter in hand. Conspiracy theory should be assigned a scientific dimension and thus verified as one of the most serious theories. Given the fact that conspiracy theories are taking up more and more media space now, there is a fear generated of their power, and I am fully convinced that, for the most part, the contents we consume are, to a certain degree, associated with some conspiracy theories and that they are true (Participant 22).

Most of them reflect on the emotions of other people and they never share any contents that might disturb or cause harm to the public or individuals.

Every piece of information has an emotional and aesthetic effect, it lacks an intellectual potential, and it aims at offering excitement at an emotional and aesthetic level. It does that in various ways, it provokes emotionally irrational behaviour. Given all that, the best approach is not to respond to it emotionally. (Participant 24).

4.5. Recommendations for Building Resistance to “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

The young think that education in the field of media and information literacy might be in everybody’s interest in terms of a critical approach to information—in particular, in the interest of the elderly—but they are doubtful if the elderly would embrace the idea. In any case, the process should be adjusted to their needs in a subtle way. They think that this type of education is necessary for their generation as well, along with the middle-aged generation.

Yes, I agree that education in the field of media is necessary, especially in terms of fake news. For instance, my grandmother often leaves unethical comments and I have trouble explaining to her why that is wrong (Participant 3).

The middle-aged participants agree with the young ones regarding the necessity of education in the field of media across the population, emphasizing the elderly generation as well.

I think that it would be necessary to introduce education in the field of media in all curricula, from kindergarten to university, with offering assistance to the elderly in the same respect (Participant 14).

Furthermore, we point out the significance of such an education as regards to professional communicators, and especially journalists. There was only one participant that expressed their doubts concerning this.

If media literacy were designed to move people away from media reality, it would be useful. Does it encompass passing on advice to the elderly to not watch the news because it is very harmful? Passing on advice to people not to trust medical doctors and politicians, explaining to people what the function of media is? I consider myself moderately media literate. The role of the media is nothing to do with the truth but rather the manipulation

and swaying of public beliefs with a view to establishing political control over citizens, and that is my starting point. Again, the media has nothing to do with the truth (Participant 24).

5. Discussion

A thematic analysis of a generational approach to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content shows the justification of the application of this approach to the research, since differences in the perception and experience of and relation to this content are evident between members of the young and middle-aged generations.

In the first place, the difference between the two regarding this issue can be noticed in the way they perceive the notions of “fake news”, disinformation, and potentially manipulative content. As for the young, they approach the aforementioned phenomena in a superficial and uncritical manner, without analysing the contents, thus resulting in equally superficial answers, offering no wider context and detailed analysis. They are aware of the presence of such contents in the media, but they do not put too much effort into searching for proper information since they think they are able to recognise and avoid the contents that lack credibility. One finds it difficult to accept their claims, given they have neither heard about notions such as imprints nor are familiar with the idea of the ownership structure of the media and editorial policy, which points to an uncritical approach to information sources. Unlike the young, the middle-aged participants reveal a much more serious attitude towards these issues, featuring an analytic and complex approach to negative media contents. Although they are also not able, like the young, to clearly define potentially manipulative content concerning incorrect and unauthentic information, they possess a more profound knowledge about the media itself and the way it functions, so they find the imprint an important issue, along with the ownership and history of the media company and the editorial policy. They pay a great deal of attention to the context of the information itself, and they relate the contents to their previous findings on the topic; they compare and analyse and create a wider image within the frame of the current socio-economic situation, which is an indicator of maturity in their approach to media contents.

It is interesting that neither group are familiar with the tools for verification and advanced searching for digital media contents, as well as for the verification of Internet portals and transparency of social media pages. In this respect, it is the middle-aged participants who show a higher level of knowledge and usage of an advanced Google search than the young respondents, which is contrary to a common belief that the young are “digital natives” [46] and that this is what makes them digitally literate. This research shows that this is not necessarily so, and it confirms the hypothesis of the paper that the young, despite their many hours on the Internet, are not familiar with all its capacities and that they have inadequately developed digital competences, whereas members of the middle-aged generation, probably due to their experience and an established critical approach to the media, reveal a higher level of critical media literacy and information literacy. They rely more on their previous experience and knowledge of media functioning, so they do not access the portals of the media they are not familiar with but only those they trust.

Another obvious difference between the two groups is their respective relation towards conspiracy theories. Namely, the young do not deem such contents as serious, they do not either produce or share the information, they merely read it for fun, whereas the middle-aged experience the material in question in a much more earnest manner; that is, they think of it as an alternative source of information that can help them to better understand certain situations or phenomena. Two participants even considered themselves conspiracy theorists (in a positive connotation), designing and sharing such contents and thus contributing to the general population in terms of informing them on various topics.

So, the middle-aged are, due to a greater level of distrust they show concerning media contents and a critical approach to information, more likely to believe in “alternative

facts”, as they call them, or to leave the possibility for such contents to be credible and reliable. That shows that even these respondents, despite their years of personal and professional experience, are not media literate to a satisfying degree, and that they do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of personal responsibility regarding the designing and sharing of media contents in a virtual environment. Responsibility in the usage of media content (creating and sharing) is the foundation of media literacy, along with consciousness as regards the media company (its role and significance) and honesty (during usage and interpretation of media messages). The responsibility is developed within the personal context of media literacy, where individuals further their already existing skills and knowledge of media literacy. A low level of responsibility in this respect may point to an undeveloped personal context of media literacy [28,43].

The key factor for the approval of conspiracy theories is the necessity for the introduction of order, purpose, and control into one’s own life, since, otherwise, people feel anxious due to the seriousness of the situations they find themselves in and the sense of impotence against them, and they wish for them to be resolved immediately [47]. Thus, conspiracy theories help the disempowered to “understand their disadvantaged social reality” [47,48] (p. 208). Individuals resort to the so-called confirmation bias, which is defined as a mechanism by means of which “we recall data and events in such a manner that confirms our beliefs or standpoints” [49] (p. 4) to reduce fear and anxiety, and it is a kind of cognitive bias and a fault of inductive reasoning; it is in human nature to believe that they must only choose what to believe in, and it is usually something that is consistent with their previous standpoints [49].

If we ask ourselves what emotion it is that makes people share “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, some scientists claim [50] that they have an answer to that, pointing out that one of the most dominant emotions is the fear of missing out, which is “related to the use of social media and can be a factor that contributes to the user’s need to share information” [50–52] (pp. 6–7). In that context, our research shows that the middle-aged participants who design and share contents they are not convinced are authentic on social media neither take into account the emotions of consumers of such contents nor are aware of the fact that the same contents can have a different effect on different users. They do not think too much about the emotions of others and the consequences that “fake news” may cause in them, but the majority of them still do not share such material without verifying it first. The young sometimes think of the emotions of consumers of various types of incorrect information in digital media (mostly about those who are the subject matter of such material), but they do not share it or try not to be a part of the circles that do. In essence, none of them are aware of the importance and responsibility of personal actions in the public sphere of digital media, but they perceive that space in more personal terms, not thinking about others that are present there as well, only in a virtual fashion. This is an important piece of evidence for the overall study, given the fact that it points to the lack of concern for other media content users in the young, which implies a lack of critical thinking as regards creating and sharing media content. Moreover, this also provides a ground for further research into the matter and searching for the ways to change it. Although one might expect young users of social media to be more anxious, considering the fact that they are more associated with media addiction and an enormous amount of time spent on social media, recently, other authors [53,54] (p. 10) have stipulated the contrary, since their study found that middle-aged adults (between 35 and 44 years) had higher rates of addiction to social networks compared to young adults. Therefore, the amount of time spent on social media is in correlation with anxiety, but this sense of anxiety can be contributed by the very media release that causes more or less uncomfortable feelings, which, as our research shows, can depend on the treatment of this release itself.

The results reveal that the young do not bother to a great extent about “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in the media, and they think that, as individuals, they cannot do anything to change that situation. On the other hand, the middle-aged oppose such contents, they mind them, and they find them burdening at times, but they think they

can influence their presence in the media by ignoring them and by creating contents on their own that they consider valuable. These differences in approach are in favour of a thesis that the middle-aged have a more mature attitude to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, putting the content into a wider social context and by making efforts to provide a personal contribution in order to reduce the presence of such contents in the media. The research published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Journal* [55] shows that those who hold stronger beliefs are more susceptible to “fake news”, which corresponds with the results of our research, which is an additional argument for education in the field of media for all media consumers.

To our knowledge, there is no similar research that relates to the perception of “fake news” as regards a generational approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but all the previous research directed towards the level of media literacy of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the presence of fake news and disinformation in digital media indicate, on the one hand, a low level of media literacy and a lack of education in the field and, on the other hand, an increasing amount of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media [14,43,44,56–59]. Further research might aim at revealing the relation towards unverified and incorrect contents in the media with regard to the level of education, since this research recognised the latter as an important indicator for building resistance to “fake news”, and that relation should be additionally investigated.

6. Conclusions

Considering the fact that, for an interpretation of media contents, which implies both the recognition and verification of so-called potentially manipulative content, the knowledge of media literacy elements is highly important, especially those elements that relate to the assessment and analysis of various media contents with a view to evaluating their authenticity, reliability, and truthfulness in order to make responsible decisions, education in the field of media literacy for all generations, as a solution for building resistance to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, appears to be the proper tool.

With the analysis of media contents and the verification of the authenticity and truthfulness of information, media consumers should take care of several issues that could be distributed under the following labels: audience and authorship (who designed the message, who is it intended for and for what purpose, who paid for the message, who is it important for, and who might be harmed and in what way); messages and meaning (what values and attitudes are represented in the message and what is left out, what techniques for drawing attention were used, how different people are going to react to and interpret the message); and representation in the media and reality (when was the message generated, in what capacity was it released to audience, whether it is a fact, opinion, interpretation, or something else, how reliable the message is and who the sources of the idea, claim, and information are) [60] (p. 39). As Scheibe and Rogow state (2012, p. 268), “we think of literacy as the broad set of skills and habits that enable one to engage thoughtfully with the community and the world” [60,61] (p. 268; p. 49).

To conclude, the research shows that both groups of participants have a developed conscience as regards the role and significance of media literacy within the context of building resistance to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content. The research participants see in the field of media education solutions for overcoming the phenomena in the digital sphere that confuse consumers, who have trouble deciding which piece of information is true and which is not.

Based on the experiences of the countries that have broadened their curricula with the aforementioned topics and that provide constant education for all generations concerning the media industry [44], a conclusion is imposed that media literacy, along with frequent updates to the curricula given the changes in the media sphere, is the best long-term solution for the proper use of media contents—in particular, digital ones. In addition, the research shows that both groups lack media competences, though not in the same segments and at the same levels, but there are visible voids that should be compensated

for by organising training courses in the field of media so that they can critically interpret media contents, recognise or avoid unreliable information, and be responsible for their own behaviour in a virtual environment. None of the participants referred to themselves as lacking such competences, with all of them featuring a high level of confidence in terms of their resistance to so-called fake news, but their answers reveal a lack of certain media competences.

7. Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are reflected in our inability to encompass members of elderly generation (over 65 years of age) in our research as well. Given that the research focuses on the perception of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media, this section of the general population is left out due to the fact that findings of previous research into the subject matter (there is an overview provided in the Introduction) show that this segment of society in Bosnia and Herzegovina almost never uses digital media for the purpose of gaining information. For that reason, the authors concluded that it would be pointless to involve them in the research, although that would contribute to the completeness of our generational approach, thus resulting in a clearer image of the way that different generations view “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media.

Taking into consideration the current COVID-19 pandemic, our capacities and resources as regards participants and establishing focus groups were significantly limited by the then highly restrictive counter-pandemic measures. There was no access to schools granted, so there were no minors involved in our research. Despite that, the research was successfully conducted, though in quite unfavourable circumstances.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Faculty of Political Sciences University of Banja Luka (protocol code 08/1.145/21, approved 15 February 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. List of participants in focus groups.

Ordinal Number	Code	Year of Birth	Sex	Uses Digital Media for the Purpose of Gaining Information
1	Participant 1	2001	Male	Yes
2	Participant 2	1998	Male	Yes
3	Participant 3	1999	Female	Yes
4	Participant 4	1998	Female	Yes
5	Participant 5	2001	Female	Yes
6	Participant 6	1992	Male	Yes
7	Participant 7	1990	Male	Yes
8	Participant 8	1995	Male	Yes
9	Participant 9	1997	Female	Yes
10	Participant 10	1998	Female	Yes
11	Participant 11	1998	Female	Yes
12	Participant 12	2000	Female	Yes
13	Participant 13	1974	Female	Yes
14	Participant 14	1970	Female	Yes
15	Participant 15	1965	Female	Yes
16	Participant 16	1966	Female	Yes
17	Participant 17	1983.	Male	Yes
18	Participant 18	1970	Male	Yes
19	Participant 19	1970	Female	Yes
20	Participant 20	1960	Female	Yes
21	Participant 21	1981	Female	Yes
22	Participant 22	1975	Male	Yes
23	Participant 23	1981	Male	Yes
24	Participant 24	1981	Male	Yes

Appendix B

Guide for the “fake news and potentially manipulative content in digital media—generation approach” focus group.

Place: _____

Date: _____

Participant number and year of birth

(M/F): _____

Moderator: _____

A qualitative research work into the attitudes of members of the young and middle-aged generations on the perception of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content is conducted by Ms Dragana Trninic, PhD, Ms Andjela Kupresanin Vukelic, PhD, and Ms Jovana Bokan, MA, for the purpose of writing a scholarly paper. With regard to this research, no personal data of the participants shall be required, so their anonymity is guaranteed. The interview is designed as a panel discussion, with all the participants responding to the moderator’s questions individually, without any previous suggestion or soliciting on the part of the moderator. The participants are entitled not to answer the question if they choose to.

1. THE NOTION OF “FAKE NEWS” AND POTENTIALLY MANIPULATIVE CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIA

How do you usually gain information and from what source (by means of digital media, social media, or some other way)? Do you know what “fake news” is? Do you know what disinformation is? Are you familiar with the notions of clickbait and satire? Have you ever encountered such phenomena? If yes, where (on portals, social media, messaging applications)? How often do you encounter such content?

2. RECOGNITION OF “FAKE NEWS” AND POTENTIALLY MANIPULATIVE CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIA

How do you recognise “fake news”? How do you recognise disinformation? Would you be able to recognise a fake photograph or fake video footage? Are you familiar with some tools for the recognition and verification of fake photographs and instances of fake video footage? Can you recognize an automated profile on social media? Can you verify the domain of an Internet portal or the authenticity of a Facebook or some other page on social media? Do you know how to browse removed pages and content? Are you familiar with the advanced Google search?

3. VERIFICATION OF “FAKE NEWS” AND POTENTIALLY MANIPULATIVE CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIA

How do you verify a piece of news if you doubt its authenticity? Do you check on the source of information (whether it is primary or secondary one or whether it has been stated at all), do you verify the credibility, competence, and biasness of the collocutor, or do you search for the same piece of news in other media companies? do you search on the Internet using key words? Do you verify the transparency of the portal/page and the imprint? Do you analyse the contents of a piece of news and compare them with similar previous releases? Do you read the whole text or just the title?

4. RELATIONSHIP TOWARDS “FAKE NEWS” AND POTENTIALLY MANIPULATIVE CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIA

What is your relationship towards “fake news” and potentially manipulative content? Does their presence in the media bother you? How do you react upon coming across a piece of news whose content is questionable? Do you share or approve of the content that you cannot verify? Have you ever thought of the impact of disinformation on the public? Do you think that unverified content may do harm to the public or certain individuals? Do you find yourself responsible when you create and share some content in the virtual space? Have you ever shared or approved of the content that you could not verify?

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING RESISTANCE TO “FAKE NEWS” AND POTENTIALLY MANIPULATIVE CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIA

According to your opinion, what is the best method for building resistance to “fake news” and potentially manipulative content in digital media? How can each individual protect themselves from such content and still gain necessary information? What would you recommend?

Appendix C

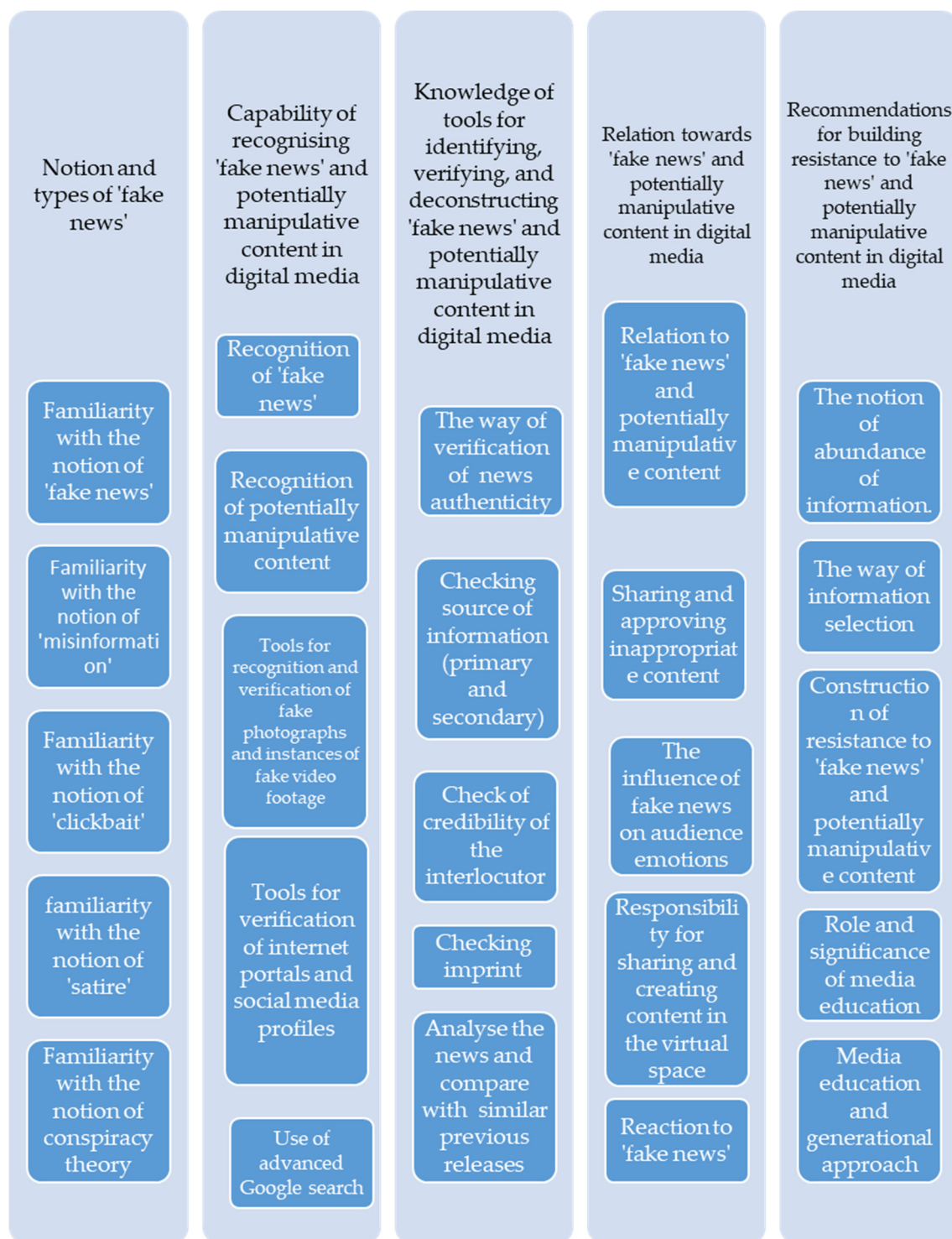


Figure A1. Pictorial representation of grouping codes into topics.

Notes

- ¹ In this paper, the mass media is observed within the context of traditional media (newspapers and magazines, film, radio, and television) and new, digital, and social media (the Internet, web pages, computer multimedia, virtual reality, and video footage exchange platforms) [1], but it is the latter that is in the primary focus.
- ² "Fake news can affect public perceptions, distort election campaigns and shape human emotions. Through designated keywords and comments people's minds can be influenced" [6] (p. 977).

- 3 Zubiaga and Ji (2014) used this operationalization of fake news in their study of manipulated photos that were circulated on Twitter during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. They examined many examples of photomanipulation, one of which was a photo that showed the Statue of Liberty in New York City being battered by waves, with a superimposed logo that made it appear to originate from a live broadcast by channel NY1. However, the photo was actually a composite of a fictitious disaster movie and an actual image from Hurricane Sandy [20,21] (p. 144).
- 4 The aforementioned tools, along with their respective descriptions, are available on the Objective Analysis Effective Solutions, Fighting Disinformation page, where users are provided with an opportunity to conduct an online search; almost every tool there is intended to counter fake news and potentially manipulative content.
- 5 “Fotoforensics”, “Forensically Image Verification Tool”, “Get-Metadata Viewer”, “Youtube data Viewer”, “Verification Tool”, “Reveal Image Verification Assistant”, “HackerFactor”.
- 6 In order for us to demistify “fake news” and similar phenomena, the user can ask themselves some of the whole set of questions suggested by Lana Ciboci, Igor Kanižaj, and Danijel Labaš. Some of the questions can raise an issue regarding whether a certain release provides all the answers to a journalist’s questions, who the author of the release is, whether they can identify the source of information, whether the title block has a link to the content of the text, whether product promotion is represented in a particular text, whether the information can be verified, and whether there is a photo to accompany the release [25]. Some of the tactics which Ms Tatjana Krpan Mofardin [26] suggests to users include that users should verify the imprint, date, and time of the release, that they verify the very same piece of news in other media as well, and that they subject it to the process of critical thinking before sharing it.
- 7 The participants were assigned code numbers (ciphers) from 1 to 24, and that is how they are referred to in the paper. The data on sex and age of participants are available in the table at the end of the paper.
- 8 Guide for the “fake news and potentially manipulative content in digital media—generation approach” focus group is available at the end of the paper (Appendix A).
- 9 A diagram showing the codes is attached in the appendix to the paper.

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