SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS OF ONLINE DISINFORMATION

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the social and demographic determinants of narrative influence in Romania, with a specific focus on how disinformation campaigns are tailored to different age groups based on their digital behavior. By examining the intersection of social media consumption habits, cultural biases, and socio-economic factors, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on developing more effective strategies to combat the spread of disinformation and protect the integrity of societal resilience in Romania's digital landscape.*

Key words: *disinformation, social media, cultural biases.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, social networks have expanded rapidly, becoming an integral part of daily life worldwide, including in Romania. Current statistics reveal that a significant portion of the Romanian population—approximately 85%—maintains at least one account on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, reflecting the growing digital engagement in the country. This widespread online presence has transformed social media into a powerful tool for both state and non-state actors to disseminate various narratives. These actors, ranging from government bodies to private organizations and malicious entities, have increasingly employed sophisticated methods like fake news, deepfakes, bots, and trolls to influence public opinion and manipulate information flow. Studies such as those by Chiru et al. (2021) have highlighted how disinformation campaigns in Romania, particularly during electoral periods, have intensified through automated bots and troll farms, further complicating the online information ecosystem.

The impact of this digital manipulation is especially pronounced in environments with high social media penetration, where socio-demographic factors such as age, education, and digital literacy levels play a crucial role in determining the spread and reception of online narratives. Research conducted by Balica and Dragomir (2022) demonstrates that younger generations in Romania, though more digitally literate, are not entirely immune to disinformation, mostly when narratives are crafted to appeal to specific emotional or political biases. On the other hand, older generations, often less proficient in discerning

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credible online content, are more susceptible to fake news and propaganda, which frequently targets them via platforms like Facebook, as shown in studies on media consumption patterns (Dobre et al., 2023).

Given the complex dynamics of online disinformation dissemination, this article aims to explore the socio-demographic factors that favor the spread of narratives in the online environment, with a specific focus on Romania. By reviewing recent studies and surveys conducted on the Romanian population, we seek to understand the role of generational differences, digital literacy, and social trust in shaping how different groups engage with and spread online content, including disinformation. The findings from this analysis will provide insights into how specific demographic groups can be targeted by online manipulation, offering better understanding and awareness for both policymakers and educators.

2. Background

Consumption and dissemination of information have dramatically evolved due to Romania's rapidly growing digital ecosystem. In 2024, 67.4% of the population (13.3 million) are active social media users, while over 18.06 million use the internet, highlighting a highly interconnected society reliant on digital platforms for shaping public opinion (DataReportal, 2023). However, this surge in online activity provides fertile ground for misinformation, with bad actors exploiting platform-specific vulnerabilities to tailor false narratives to targeted demographics.

Social media platforms, through algorithmic design and user-centric content suggestions, accelerate misinformation's spread, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce biases (Cinelli et al., 2020). In Romania, Facebook attracts 9.05 million users (45.9% of the population), particularly older adults who spend 13 hours monthly engaging with long-form content (NapoleonCat, 2023). Conversely, younger users increasingly prefer TikTok, where 8.97 million over-18 users average 32.5 hours monthly, reflecting a global generational shift towards short-form, visually engaging media (Freeman et al., 2021).

These consumption patterns have profound implications for disinformation spread, with distinct cognitive vulnerabilities between age groups. Older adults, with lower digital literacy, are more prone to disinformation on platforms like Facebook (Guess et al., 2019; Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Younger users face viral, visually driven misinformation on TikTok, often bypassing fact-checking (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Broader socio-demographic factors—age, education, and socio-economic status—also shape susceptibility to disinformation. Individuals with lower education or socio-economic status are more vulnerable due to limited access to reliable information and digital literacy training (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Education and digital literacy correlate with critical thinking and a stronger ability to assess online content credibility, reducing susceptibility to false narratives (Hameleers et al., 2020). Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, often undermine fact-based corrections (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Political ideology further influences disinformation engagement. Polarized environments, where individuals prefer information aligning with their beliefs, amplify its impact (Bovet & Makse, 2019). In Romania's socio-political context—marked by national

mistrust and digital dependency—disinformation exploits generational fears and mistrust, particularly among populist and authoritarian-leaning groups with low trust in traditional media (Gallup & Knight Foundation, 2020).

Socio-demographic factors such as age, education, income, and geography critically affect the spread of disinformation by shaping individuals' access to information, digital literacy, cognitive biases, and media habits. Understanding generational and cultural differences is key to addressing the dynamics of misinformation, as these differences influence digital behavior, communication, and trust in authority. Generational gaps reflect sociocultural contexts, shaping worldviews and behaviors across the population.

3. Cultural and Psychological Profile of Romania

To understand better how Romanians navigate their personal and professional lives and how they respond to challenges such as modernization, technological advancements, and global integration, this analysis will explore the key cultural and psychological elements that shape Romanian society. Romania's collective mindset, deeply rooted in its communist past, continues to influence its social dynamics, impacting everything from interpersonal interactions to attitudes toward innovation and authority. This profile also examines Romania's high uncertainty avoidance, emphasis on conformity, sensitivity to criticism, and the deep-seated relationship between religion, superstition, and societal behavior.

3.1. Conformity and Individuality

Romanian society tends to emphasize conformity over individuality. The collective mentality, shaped by decades of authoritarian rule and collectivist policies during the communist era, still exerts a strong influence today. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, Romania scores high in collectivism, with a preference for tight social frameworks where individuals are expected to conform to group norms rather than pursue individual autonomy (Hofstede, 1980). This cultural preference for conformity can suppress personal expression, as assertiveness is often misinterpreted as aggressiveness, leading to a societal reluctance to stand out or challenge the status quo (Ganea & Neculăesei, 2019).

This cultural dynamic is further reinforced by Romania's educational and institutional reward systems. In many sectors, rewards are distributed uniformly, which discourages excellence and individual initiative. Since top performers receive the same recognition as their less-contributing colleagues, research has demonstrated that this type of incentive system can breed complacency (Andrei & Gorski, 2021). Over time, this has contributed to a societal environment where pursuing professional or personal development is frequently devalued. The lack of differentiation between high and low achievers diminishes the motivation to excel, reinforcing a collective mindset that prioritizes group cohesion over individual success. This uniformity in rewards and recognition can stifle innovation and ambition, leading to stagnation in professional growth and personal aspiration, particularly among younger generations, who may feel disincentivized to push boundaries or pursue unique paths in their careers.

3.2. Sensitivity to Criticism

Romanians often display a heightened sensitivity to criticism, whether positive or negative. This trait is deeply rooted in the country's collectivist culture, where social cohesion and reputation are highly valued (David & Stefan, 2017). In this environment, criticism is frequently seen as a threat to one's social standing rather than an opportunity for growth. This defensiveness can suffocate open dialogue, making it difficult for individuals to embrace feedback and improve. In Romanian workplaces, employees tend to take feedback personally, interpreting it as a direct attack rather than constructive guidance (Iliescu et al., 2015). This attitude fosters a rigid organizational culture where creativity and innovation are stifled, as people become more focused on avoiding critique than on pursuing new ideas or approaches.

3.3. Punitive social regulation

Romanian social behavior is largely regulated through a system of punishments rather than rewards, a legacy of its communist past where conformity was enforced through fear of repercussions rather than encouragement of initiative (Chelcea, 2020). This punitive approach has left a deep cultural imprint, making Romanians more risk-averse and cautious in their social and professional endeavors. Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance reflects this trait, with Romania scoring high in this category, indicating a societal preference for avoiding ambiguity and resisting change (Hofstede, 1980). As a result, change is often seen as a threat rather than an opportunity, and many individuals tend to focus more on avoiding mistakes than on exploring new ideas or innovations. This mindset perpetuates a culture of caution, where fear of failure stifles initiative and innovation, making it difficult to break free from traditional norms and embrace modern, adaptive thinking.

3.4. Role of Religion and superstition

Religion, specifically Eastern Orthodox Christianity, plays a significant role in Romanian culture. While Romania is predominantly Orthodox, religious practice often blends with local superstition, creating a unique cultural dynamic where religious rituals are sometimes followed more for their traditional value than for theological understanding (Stan & Turcescu, 2007). Romania's religiosity, however, does not fully align with Western Christian values, which emphasize personal faith and community service. Instead, religious practices in Romania often reinforce the collectivist and hierarchical social structure, where adherence to tradition takes precedence over critical engagement with contemporary societal challenges (Pew Research Center, 2018). This focus on tradition supports a framework in which religion acts as a stabilizing force within the community, prioritizing the preservation of cultural norms rather than encouraging individual exploration or social reform.

The intersection of religion and superstition in Romania is evident in the strong belief in fate and external control, which aligns with the country's high uncertainty avoidance. This

fatalistic outlook can discourage individual agency, as many Romanians perceive their life circumstances as being largely determined by external forces, such as destiny or divine will, rather than personal effort or innovation (David & Stefan, 2017). This cultural tendency to attribute outcomes to external factors rather than individual actions can limit the motivation to challenge the status quo or pursue ambitious goals. The blend of religious devotion and superstition reinforces this worldview, fostering a mindset where adaptation and personal responsibility are often overshadowed by a sense of inevitability and predetermined outcomes.

3.5. Collectivism vs. Autonomy

Romania's collectivist orientation contrasts sharply with the more individualistic societies of Western Europe. In collectivist cultures, loyalty to in-groups such as family, close friends, and trusted colleagues is paramount, while outsiders are often viewed with suspicion (Hofstede, 1980). This cultural trait has significant social implications, particularly in how Romanians interact with strangers and newcomers. The reluctance to engage with outsiders is rooted in a historical fear of exploitation by foreign powers, which has further reinforced a cultural tendency to maintain strong in-group boundaries (Ganea & Neculăesei, 2019). This cautious approach toward those outside the immediate social circle can manifest in both personal relationships and professional settings, limiting openness to new ideas and reducing the willingness to embrace external influences or collaborations, especially when trust has not been firmly established.

3.6. Uncertainty avoidance

An important aspect of comprehending the cultural dynamics of Romania is its high uncertainty avoidance score. Hofstede recognized this cultural factor as reflecting a deep-seated reluctance to change and a strong preference for organized situations. Romanians tend to regard innovation as a chance for development rather than as a threat to stability and possible bad results. Hence, they frequently view change with distrust (Hofstede, 1980). This can hinder both personal development and societal progress, as individuals and institutions alike may resist new ideas and technologies.

As a result, there is a collective psychological need for predictability and control, which manifests in a cautious approach to both personal and professional decisions. This cultural trait also affects how Romanians engage with new technologies and social media, with older generations particularly hesitant to adopt digital innovations compared to their younger counterparts (DataReportal, 2023).

4. Interaction of psychological and cultural factors

Romanian society is characterized by a complex interplay of psychological and cultural elements that influence how various generations behave and think. For example, a society that values uniformity and hates disturbance is the result of the reinforcers of high uncertainty avoidance and collectivist orientation. These cultural traits are deeply

embedded in Romania's historical experience, particularly its communist past, which emphasized conformity and social order (David, 2017).

Furthermore, the combination of Romania's religious traditions and collectivist culture creates a society that values tradition and group allegiance above individual expression and critical thought. These cultural characteristics, which have their roots in both collectivism and Orthodox Christianity, provide social stability and a strong feeling of community but can also make it more difficult for people to question accepted norms or follow unconventional career routes (Stan & Turcescu, 2017; Voicu, 2013). In contrast to encouraging social cohesion, this cultural framework tends to discourage critical questioning of authority and established practices, which could impede innovation, particularly in domains like technology, education, and economic reform that call for creative problem-solving and adaptability (Rusu, 2020). The influence of religion, which is deeply intertwined with national identity in Romania, further strengthens the collective orientation, often shaping societal attitudes toward modernity and change (Sandu, 2018).

4.1. Age and group analysis based on digital behaviour preferences

In recent years, a significant divide has emerged between the digital consumption habits of different generations, reflecting broader cultural, cognitive, and social distinctions. These variations, especially in terms of preferences for short-form vs. long-form material, are directly related to the speed at which digital platforms are developing and the diverse ways in which different age groups utilize them. Analyzing the wider effects of digital media on social behavior and communication patterns requires an understanding of these generational differences (Rideout & Robb, 2018).

4.2. Digital behavior of younger generations: Millennials and Generation Z

Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are often described as "digital natives," having grown up immersed in the internet age and with constant access to mobile technologies and social media platforms (Prensky, 2001). Their cognitive processes have been designed in a way that favors speed, multitasking, and visual engagement. Studies indicate that these younger generations prefer platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, which provide short-form, visually rich content (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Freeman et al. show that 72% of Generation Z users prefer videos under 60 seconds, emphasizing the demand for quick, accessible, and entertainment-driven media (2021).

Due in large part to their need for rapid satisfaction, younger generations place a higher value on hedonic and entertainment-based interactions on the internet (Laghi et al., 2020). This tendency is highlighted by the popularity of platforms such as TikTok, which by 2023 had 7.58 million users in Romania, accounting for over half of the adult internet population in the nation, mostly those between the ages of 18 and 34 (DataReportal, 2023).

4.3. DigitaL behavior of older generations: Generation X and baby boomers

By comparison, the digital behavior of Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) and Generation X (born 1965–1980) differs significantly. In the opinion of Anderson and Perrin (2017), these generations are more likely to choose long-form, serious information over amusement, placing a higher value on depth and utility. These age groups are drawn to social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn because they offer chances for professional networking, knowledge collecting, and interaction with in-depth postings and articles (Nimrod, 2017). Also, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics confirms that Generation X tends to approach technology with a focus on practicality, using it for tasks like information searches and communication rather than for entertainment purposes (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

5. Age Groups' Narrative Vulnerabilities

Different age groups are vulnerable to disinformation due to differences in media consumption habits, cognitive processes, and socio-cultural contexts. Disinformation actors take advantage of these weaknesses by crafting stories that speak to the unique identities, values, and anxieties that are unique to each group.

5.1. Cross-Generational disinformation tactics

Disinformation operates differently across generations, with specific tactics tailored to exploit the vulnerabilities, media consumption habits, and cognitive biases of each age group. Therefore, the most common tactics used in the development of disinformation narratives consider people's mistrust of public institutions, conspiracy theories, the feeling of nationalism, and the concept of identity.

A cross-generational disinformation tactic involves the erosion of trust in governmental and societal institutions. According to Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018), disinformation targeting older generations often focuses on healthcare systems, government transparency, and social security, evoking nostalgia for a perceived "better" past. This demographic tends to rely on traditional media and thus is susceptible to narratives that challenge institutional credibility (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). In contrast, younger generations, particularly those entering adulthood, exhibit mistrust towards educational institutions and the job market, with disinformation narratives tapping into their economic insecurities and uncertain futures (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Conspiracy theories have been a pervasive form of disinformation across all age groups, although the content of these theories often varies. For instance, older adults (aged 50-64) may be more susceptible to conspiracy theories involving national security or technological advancements, such as those linking 5G technology to health risks (Guess et al., 2019). This aligns with research that shows older adults with lower digital literacy are more likely to believe authoritative-looking but false information (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Meanwhile, younger individuals (16-24) encounter conspiracy theories that

exaggerate environmental crises or political scandals, fostering feelings of disempowerment and social alienation (Levy, 2021).

Disinformation targeting nationalist sentiments and identity politics is particularly effective among middle-aged and older adults. Studies suggest that narratives that evoke threats to national sovereignty, cultural identity, and traditional values resonate more with older adults, who may feel alienated by rapid social and technological changes (Freelon & Wells, 2020). These narratives are often designed to stoke fears of immigration, globalism, and the loss of national identity (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Younger generations are more vulnerable to identity-based disinformation framed around social justice issues or globalization, where disinformation exploits social division and activism (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Age groups exhibit distinct vulnerabilities to disinformation based on media consumption habits, cognitive tendencies, and social concerns. Older adults are more susceptible to **fear-based narratives** about health and societal stability. At the same time, younger generations are more likely to fall victim to disinformation concerning **economic insecurities and social justice issues**.

6. Age-Specific Characteristics and Vulnerabilities

To provide a clearer understanding of the findings presented thus far, the table below was developed to examine the extent to which individuals from various age groups are vulnerable to online disinformation. This analysis considers the influence of social, cultural, psychological, and generational factors.

Denomination of the table   Table 1

Factor	Youth (16–24)	Young Adults (25–34)	Middle-Aged Adults (35–49)	Older Adults (50–64)	Elderly (65+)
Peer Influence	High	High	Medium	Low	Low
Overreliance on social media	High	High	Medium	Low	Low
Low Digital Literacy	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	High
Lack of Critical Thinking Skills	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Economic Anxiety	Low	High	High	Medium	Low
Trust in Familiar Sources	Low	Low	Medium	High	High
Fear-Based Narratives	Medium	Medium	High	High	High
Echo Chambers	High	High	High	Medium	Low
Confirmation Bias	High	High	High	High	High
Cognitive Decline	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High
Technological Illiteracy	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High
Mistrust in Institutions	High	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Exposure to Conspiracy Theories	Medium	Medium	High	High	High

Elderly (65+ Years Old) - shaped by life under communism and the subsequent transition to democracy, exhibit a preference for stability and a deep mistrust of foreign media and institutions. Having grown up with state-controlled propaganda, many retain a conservative media outlook and are vulnerable to narratives invoking nostalgia for the past and fear of societal decline (Stan & Turcescu, 2007; Chelcea, 2020). Their lower digital literacy and trust in authoritative-looking sources further exacerbate their susceptibility to false information about healthcare and national security (Brashier & Schacter, 2020).

Older Adults (50–64 Years Old) - Born during the late communist era, this group experienced the 1989 Revolution and the economic turbulence of the 1990s. Their media consumption spans both traditional outlets (television, radio) and social media platforms like Facebook, where they are vulnerable to health-related disinformation and narratives evoking societal decline (Loos, 2020). Economic insecurities persist for this group, making them particularly receptive to narratives that promise stability and resist change (Chelsea, 2020).

Middle-aged adults (35–49 Years Old) - are highly active on social media and vulnerable to partisan narratives that exploit ideological divides. Having witnessed significant societal transitions, including Romania's EU accession, they are often targeted with narratives about the erosion of traditional values, family concerns, and education (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). These narratives frequently deepen ideological polarization by framing progressive social movements as threats to cultural identity (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Young Adults (25–34 Years Old) - with no direct memory of communism are influenced by Romania's post-communist integration into the EU. They are particularly susceptible to narratives amplifying economic insecurities, such as unemployment and housing instability, exacerbated by their significant online presence (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). While highly digitally literate, they are vulnerable to financial misinformation and narratives that exploit their concerns about political corruption and globalization (Stan & Turcescu, 2007).

Youth (16–24 Years Old) - The youngest generation, immersed in digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram, is particularly vulnerable to visually-driven and emotionally charged narratives. Misinformation on mental health, social justice, and political activism spreads rapidly on these platforms, exploiting their emotional engagement with global issues such as climate change and human rights (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). The rise of deepfake technology further complicates their ability to discern manipulated content, making them susceptible to fabricated narratives involving trusted digital influencers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

7. Conclusion

The increasing digitization of society presents both opportunities and challenges, underscoring the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to combat disinformation. Younger generations, immersed in fast-paced digital platforms, require targeted interventions to enhance critical thinking and resilience against sensationalized content, while older generations, shaped by Romania's political transitions, need tailored support to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape and resist nostalgic and fear-based

narratives. Addressing these generational differences is essential to building a more informed and critically engaged society.

A balanced, multi-generational strategy is critical for safeguarding Romania's public discourse. By prioritizing lifelong digital literacy, fostering cross-generational dialogue, and aligning educational reforms with the unique cognitive and emotional needs of each generation, Romania can more effectively counter disinformation. Integrating technological, educational, and social efforts will strengthen cognitive security and ensure a resilient, critically aware society prepared to engage meaningfully in the digital age.

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