

# Misinformation on Social Media: Between Usage Practices, Digital Literacy and Social Influence

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## Abstract

The rise of social media as a primary source of information has significantly changed how individuals access, consume, and share content. However, this shift has also facilitated the spread of disinformation, with notable effects on public opinion, particularly among younger users. This study investigates factors influencing the acceptance of false or misleading information on social media, focusing on variables such as media literacy and interpersonal trust. Based on an online survey of 187 participants, it examines patterns of social media use, levels of digital literacy, and trust in content shared by friends and social groups. Findings indicate that higher levels of Communication and Digital Literacy are associated with lower susceptibility to

disinformation, whereas unverified interpersonal trust increases acceptance of false content. Interestingly, time spent on social media showed a negative correlation with disinformation acceptance, suggesting that prolonged exposure may foster critical thinking. The study concludes that addressing disinformation requires an integrated approach, combining media literacy education with awareness of online social influence. Its originality lies in connecting sociocognitive variables with digital practices, offering a critical perspective on how disinformation is accepted in online spaces. This research contributes to academic discussions and informs media education policies aimed at strengthening digital democracy.

Keywords: Misinformation, Media Literacy, Social Media, Interpersonal Trust, Informed Citizenship.

## 1. Introduction

The rise of social media as a primary source of information has redefined how individuals access, consume, and share news. Alongside opportunities for participation and exposure to diverse perspectives, these platforms have also enabled the viral circulation of misinformation – false or misleading content that can shape public opinion and undermine informed decision-making. Understanding why individuals accept such content is therefore a pressing challenge for research and policy.

Existing studies suggest multiple explanations, but the debate remains unsettled. Cognitive approaches emphasise digital literacy as a protective resource against misleading content. Relational approaches highlight interpersonal trust as a powerful heuristic: information shared by peers or ingroup members is often accepted without verification. Usage-based perspectives argue that greater time spent on social media increases exposure and, consequently, vulnerability, although recent findings suggest more complex, non-linear dynamics. These perspectives point to theoretical tensions that require further empirical testing.

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The investigation draws on these three strands to examine the acceptance of misinformation among social media users. Specifically, it considers (i) digital literacy as a cognitive safeguard, (ii) interpersonal trust as a relational shortcut that may promote acceptance, and (iii) time of use as a potential driver of exposure, whose role remains contested. By articulating these mechanisms, the research seeks to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of misinformation acceptance. The analysis is exploratory in nature, based on data collected in Portugal. The study does not aim to offer a definitive explanatory model but rather to identify patterns and correlations that can inform future research. In doing so, it anticipates the theoretical debates that structure the article: whether exposure alone is sufficient to explain vulnerability, how relational trust mediates information acceptance, and to what extent literacy initiatives can build resilience. This framing not only situates the study within ongoing academic discussions but also underscores its relevance to the socio-political context in which it was conducted. The corpus focuses on Portuguese social media users, predominantly younger adults, who represent the most active group in online networks and are particularly exposed to political and social content. These users not only spend significant time online but are also directly targeted by media literacy initiatives and fact-checking programmes in Portugal. Understanding how this public evaluates and accepts online information is therefore critical, as it sheds light on both the vulnerabilities and the potential resilience of the segment most engaged in digital environments.

By articulating the mechanisms of digital literacy, interpersonal trust, and usage time, we seek to resolve central theoretical tensions in the field. The first lies in the debate between the exposure perspective, which suggests that time spent on social media increases vulnerability to misinformation, and the familiarity perspective, which argues that prolonged experience can foster critical heuristics that act as a protective shield (H2). The second tension pits the protective power of digital literacy (H1) against the potentially negative influence of interpersonal trust (H3), questioning which of the two factors – cognitive competence or relational shortcuts – proves more decisive in the acceptance of false information. By empirically testing these hypotheses in the Portuguese context, the research presented here not only contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of the acceptance of misinformation but also offers a critical perspective on how it is negotiated in online spaces, thus placing itself at the heart of contemporary academic and political debates.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Acceptability and Dissemination of Disinformation

The phenomenon of disinformation – conceptualised as the intentional dissemination of false or misleading information for the purpose of manipulating public perceptions and behaviours (Tandoc et al., 2018) – emerges as a central object of analysis, supplanting the generic term “fake news” due to its greater conceptual precision and lesser political connotations (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018). Its acceptability and rapid spread are attributed to multiple interrelated factors.

A crucial element lies in its intrinsic viral potential. Seminal research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) empirically demonstrates that false information spreads faster, wider and deeper than true information. This phenomenon is partly explained by the psychological attraction of novelty – false content often features unexpected or sensational elements that stimulate cognitive interest and the need for social sharing, giving users a perception of privileged access to exclusive knowledge.

The complexity of this information ecosystem has accelerated exponentially with the advent of Artificial Intelligence-based technologies, namely deepfakes. These tools enable hyper-realistic replication of human attributes (faces, voices, gestures) and make it more difficult for humans to distinguish between what is authentic and what is fabricated (Allen et al., 2020). This technological sophistication creates an opaque information environment that is structurally vulnerable to manipulation.

Relational legitimacy is another fundamental pillar in the acceptance of disinformation. Tandoc et al. (2018) highlights the critical role of trust in social networks, particularly when information comes from close contacts. The perception of social proximity tends to override critical scrutiny and lead to uncritical acceptance and subsequent replication of information, even in the absence of verification. This behaviour is exacerbated by the information overload characteristic of digital environments, where users are bombarded by continuous streams of content of heterogeneous origin and reliability, making it difficult to thoroughly evaluate each element.

## 2.2. Social Media Usage Patterns and Algorithmic Architecture

The consolidation of social media as a primary source of information for significant segments of the community stems from its ubiquitous accessibility, informative nature, and seemingly light consumption format (Tandoc et al., 2018). These platforms transcend the function of mere distribution channels and transform users into active agents of production, curation, and dissemination of narratives about a wide variety of events.

The underlying algorithmic architecture plays a decisive role in shaping this informational experience. Algorithms, designed to maximise engagement – time spent, interactions – operate by selecting and prioritising content based on individual behavioural history (Pennycook et al., 2020). However, this optimisation logic tends to favour content that elicits strong reactions – sensationalist, emotionally charged, polarising or frankly misinformative – due to its superior potential for virality (Wardle & Derashkan, 2017). Thus, the technical infrastructure of the platforms themselves acts as an amplification mechanism for problematic content.

Distinct usage patterns among demographic groups add layers of complexity. Studies such as that by Bonsaken et al. (2024) highlight striking generational differences: older users tend to adopt more active behaviours (commenting, sharing), while younger users are more likely to take a passive stance (viewing). These behavioural differences influence the degree of exposure to and engagement with content, potentially modulating vulnerability to misinformation and the way it is processed and replicated.

## 2.3. Media Literacy and Digital Education

Given the saturation of the media ecosystem with inaccurate or fraudulent information, strengthening media and digital literacy has become a societal imperative. Connaway et al. (2013) position information literacy as a fundamental civic competence, indispensable for authentic and informed democratic participation. The core of this competence lies in the ability to critically evaluate information sources and content, regardless of their format or medium, forming the basis for conscious citizenship.

The role of information professionals (librarians, journalists, archivists) is highlighted as crucial in this educational effort – they act as specialised mediators in the promotion of critical digital skills (Connaway et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is recognised that many of these professionals themselves lack the specific and continuous training necessary to perform this role with maximum effectiveness.

Although not a panacea, media literacy is recognised as one of the most promising and structural responses to fostering individual and collective resilience in the face of misinformation (Allcott et al., 2019). Effective media education programmes should promote a comprehensive range of skills, including, but not limited to: i) fact-checking techniques; ii) critical analysis of visual (images, videos) and linguistic (manipulation through headlines) elements; iii) identification of the underlying intent of messages (manipulation, persuasion, satire); iv) understanding of how algorithms and platform business models work.

While misinformation research has often been framed within communication and media studies, its dynamics are better understood through an interdisciplinary lens. Cognitive psychology contributes insights on heuristics and biases (e.g., confirmation bias, motivated reasoning) that predispose individuals to accept congruent falsehoods. Sociology and political science emphasize the role of social identity, group belonging, and polarization in shaping information acceptance. Finally, insights from computational and data science highlight algorithmic amplification, virality, and the economics of attention as structural drivers. Bringing these perspectives together strengthens the theoretical foundation for the three hypotheses and clarifies why misinformation is not merely a matter of individual literacy, but the outcome of cognitive, social, and technological interplay.

In the Portuguese context, media and digital literacy have been increasingly recognised as key elements in combating misinformation. National observatories and research centres have highlighted persistent gaps in critical digital skills, but also a growing investment in literacy initiatives. Recent reports from OberCom (2024) and OBS\* (2024) underline the importance of integrating media education into both formal curricula and civic programmes. These initiatives often target younger audiences, particularly university students, who constitute a highly active segment of social media users and who are directly reached by fact-checking projects and training promoted by institutions such as ICNOVA and the Sindicato dos Jornalistas. Situating the present study within this context helps explain the unusually high proportion of participants with prior training in fact-checking and reinforces the relevance of analysing digital literacy as a protective factor against misinformation. Furthermore, notable initiatives in this regard include media literacy programmes promoted by the Portuguese Journalists' Union (2023) in schools and communities, and the rigorous fact-checking work of the *Polígrafo* newspaper – key references in the fight against disinformation in Portugal, which aim to build a more informed and critical audience.

## 2.4. Trust in Social Media

The axis of trust in information has undergone a profound transformation: from traditional institutionalised media to digital environments and social media. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) conceptualise this trust as the perception of credibility and the belief in the absence of manipulative intentions in circulating content. However, Tandoc et al. (2018) warn of the risks of blind trust – a passive and uncritical acceptance of information found online, devoid of active efforts to confirm or contextualise it.

Pennycook et al. (2020) argue that explicit awareness of the mechanisms and dangers of disinformation can catalyse the development of critical literacy and contribute to a more robust information ecosystem. However, the attribution of trust remains strongly conditioned by complex individual factors: political interest, prior ideological alignment, and the user's levels of interpersonal trust (McGregor, 2019; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

To capture this multidimensionality, Gray et al. (2020) propose a three-part typology of digital trust: i) trust in content, based on belief in the truthfulness and accuracy of specific information; ii) trust in the issuer, understood as the perception of the credibility of the source (a personal contact, a journalist, an institution or an influencer); iii) trust in infrastructure, which lies in the belief in the reliability and good intentions of the technological platform that conveys the information.

Pennycook et al. (2020) add crucial nuances to this typology, highlighting qualitative dimensions such as factual accuracy, perceived impartiality, transparency about sources, and appropriate contextualisation. This perspective reinforces that trust is not a monolithic construct, but multifaceted, dynamic and built in layers through continuous experiences and evaluations.

## 2.5. Algorithms and Reinforcement of Preferences

The operationalisation of algorithms on social media acts as a powerful mechanism for reinforcing ideological, emotional, and cognitive preferences (McGregor, 2019). These systems do not merely reflect users' existing inclinations; they actively amplify them through preferential exposure to content that echoes and validates their prior beliefs. This process generates self-reinforcing confirmation bias loops, which can inhibit critical thinking and confrontation with dissonant perspectives.

This reinforcement is catalysed by the symbolic interactions characteristic of platforms – likes, shares and comments. These actions function as powerful signals of social validation and markers of identity belonging within specific groups (Stroud, 2010). Users with high political engagement tend to consume and actively promote content aligned with their beliefs – fostering a form of voluntary and algorithmic “information segregation”.

Cass Sunstein (2017) coined the term “filter bubbles” to describe this phenomenon of information encapsulation, in which users inhabit highly homogeneous and self-referential digital ecosystems. In these environments, cognitive diversity is drastically reduced, and encounters with alternative worldviews or substantive debate of ideas become rare events. Empirical research by Guess et al. (2019, 2023) corroborates this dynamic and demonstrates that the exposure and spread of misinformation occurs predominantly in a concentrated and selective manner in groups characterised by high political polarisation, ideological cohesion, and low heterogeneity of thought. Disinformation, therefore, is not distributed randomly, but circulates virulently within epistemically closed communities.

## 3. Methods and Data

### 3.1. Hypotheses

This study seeks to understand the factors that influence the acceptance of misinformation on social media, based on a quantitative and exploratory approach. From the literature review, three central hypotheses were formulated, which guide the analysis of the data collected through an online survey.

To justify the hypotheses, we highlight three complementary mechanisms. First, cognitive empowerment: media literacy promotes verification skills and critical analysis, reducing susceptibility to misinformation (H1). Second, social shortcuts: interpersonal trust operates as a heuristic of validation, reinforcing the acceptance of information shared by peers (H3). Third, exposure and familiarity: time spent on social media may have ambivalent effects – increasing exposure and thus risk of misinformation, but also fostering critical heuristics through repeated experience (H2). Recent literature in the Portuguese and Southern European contexts reinforces the need to combine media literacy with the analysis of relational circuits of information exchange (see Obercom, 2024; Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza, 2023).

The first hypothesis (H1) examines whether academic training in the field of Communication and/or the acquisition of Digital Literacy skills are associated with a lower propensity to accept disinformation content. The assumption is that technical and critical training to evaluate sources, verify the veracity of information, and understand digital mediation processes acts as a protective factor against the uncritical acceptance of content. This hypothesis is based on the contributions of Tandoc et al. (2018), who defend the central role of media literacy in mitigating disinformation, and Connaway et al. (2013), who highlight the importance of digital literacy as a structuring skill for informed citizenship in the digital age. In the Portuguese context, media literacy has been framed as a core dimension of citizenship



and democratic participation (OBS\*, 2024). Reports by Obercom (2024) show that younger cohorts display higher technical skills but also remain vulnerable to emotional or identity-based misinformation, underscoring the importance of sustained literacy programs.

The second hypothesis (H2) proposes that exposure time to social media is negatively correlated with the acceptance of misinformation. This hypothesis is based on the idea that prolonged familiarity with digital environments may favour the development of cognitive defence mechanisms and informal content evaluation strategies. Studies such as that by Connaway et al. (2013) suggest that as users interact repeatedly with different information sources, they tend to develop, albeit unconsciously, critical skills that enable them to detect inconsistencies, recognise patterns of manipulation and adopt more sceptical attitudes towards the content they consume. Evidence from Southern Europe suggests that the relation between exposure time and vulnerability is not necessarily linear. Comparative studies indicate that frequent users may develop routines of source-checking, while occasional users may rely more heavily on surface cues Sierra et al. (2024).

Finally, the third hypothesis (H3) investigates whether interpersonal trust – namely trust in information shared by friends and social groups – is positively associated with the acceptance of disinformation. This hypothesis is based on the principle that relational proximity and social capital affect the perception of information credibility. When content is shared by people with whom one has emotional or identity ties, it tends to be received with less scepticism, regardless of its veracity. In the Iberian context, trust in interpersonal networks remains a decisive factor in information circulation. Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza (2023) found that local journalists and community networks in Portugal and Spain rely heavily on social validation mechanisms, which, while fostering cohesion, may also facilitate the spread of unverified content. This aligns with broader theories of epistemic bubbles and social validation heuristics.

This phenomenon has been extensively documented by authors such as Allcott et al. (2019), who highlight the role of social trust in the uncritical dissemination of content, especially in digital contexts where traditional journalistic verification criteria are often replaced by social validation logic.

### 3.2. Methodology

This research adopts a quantitative, exploratory approach with the aim of analyzing the factors that influence the acceptance of misinformation by users of digital social networks. To this end, a structured online survey was applied, designed to collect relevant data on informational behaviors, individual perceptions and sociodemographic variables that enable an understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. The analysis of the data obtained was achieved using the SPSS statistical tool.

The recruitment of participants (n = 187) was conducted exclusively through social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp – between 20 and 27 October 2024, which inherently involves self-selection bias and the under – or over – representation of demographic groups with active use of these platforms. The inclusion criteria were based on participants' self-determination regarding the requested sociodemographic parameters. The characterization of the sample (see Figures 1–2) shows a diverse age distribution, although concentrated in younger age groups, and a significant predominance of females. In addition to age and gender, the corpus of the sample consisted mainly of university students, with a broad regional distribution across Portugal. Notably, 95.2% of respondents reported previous training in fact-checking or media literacy, suggesting that participants were relatively digitally skilled and socially engaged users rather than a representative cross-section of the Portuguese population. The study was conducted in Portugal, and the questionnaire was administered in European Portuguese. All respondents were therefore Portuguese-speaking residents, which situates the findings within the Portuguese media ecosystem.

The sociodemographic data reveal a specific profile. The overwhelming majority (92.0%) were currently attending or had already completed higher education. In terms of field of study, 44.9% of participants had or were currently attending a course in Communication and Social Sciences, while 55.1% came from other academic fields. Regarding their main occupation, 78.1% identified themselves as students, 15.5% as active professionals (of which 8.0% were in communication/journalism), and 6.4% in another field.

Importantly, the sample is not representative of the Portuguese population. The high percentage of participants with fact-checking training reflects the likely dissemination of the survey in communication – and journalism – related networks. While these characteristics limit the generalisability of the results, they also position the study within a particularly relevant population: younger, digitally active users who are both at high risk of exposure to misinformation and a key target for literacy programmes. This makes the sample especially suitable for examining the role of literacy, trust, and time of use in misinformation acceptance.

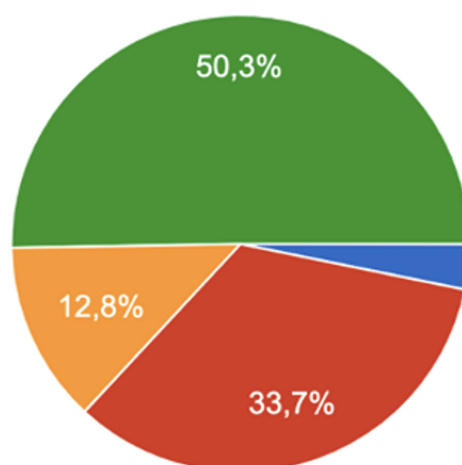


Figure 1 – Age distribution of respondents (Blue – Less than 18; Red – 18-20; Yellow – 21-24; Green – 25 or more)

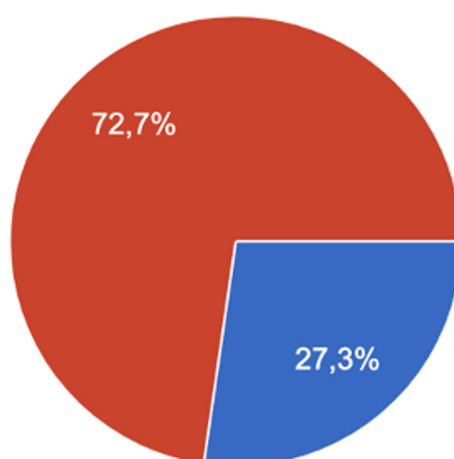


Figure 2 – Gender distribution of respondents (Blue – Masculine; Red – Feminine)

The choice of an online survey was based on three main reasons:

1. The possibility of efficiently reaching a diverse sample, covering a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds;
2. The logistical feasibility and accessibility of the digital application;
3. The suitability of the instrument for statistical analysis, as it allowed for the standardisation of responses.

The survey consisted exclusively of non-cumulative multiple-choice questions, in order to ensure the standardisation of responses and simplify subsequent statistical processing. The structure of the instrument was organised into five blocks:

1. Demographic Characterisation – variables such as age, gender and level of education, with the purpose of describing the sociodemographic profile of the sample.
2. Training in Communication and Digital Literacy – participants' level of training in critical digital navigation practices, including source verification, understanding of information security concepts, and analysis of the credibility of online content.
3. Use of Social Media – frequency of use, most used platforms, and perception of their role in shaping public opinion, focusing on the type of involvement (active or passive) and the information routines adopted.
4. Predisposition to Accept Misinformation – respondents' inclination to believe digital information content, as well as their willingness to share it, regardless of its perceived veracity.
5. Interpersonal and social trust – influence of trust in information shared by friends and social groups on the acceptance of digital content, taking into account the role of relational proximity in the perception of credibility.

The analysis of the collected data was conducted using descriptive and correlational statistical methods, which allowed us to test the research hypotheses and identify patterns of behaviour and thinking associated with the acceptance of disinformation in digital environments. The methodology adopted thus provides a solid empirical basis for understanding how formative, social and usage variables influence the way individuals interact with online information.

To operationalize the main constructs under analysis, participants responded to a structured set of items designed to capture both dependent and independent variables. All items were presented in the same online questionnaire, using 5-point Likert scales unless otherwise noted. Reliability tests (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) were computed for multi-item indices.

The construct "Acceptance of misinformation" (dependent variable) was measured using a 5-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), adapted from previous studies. Items assessed the tendency to believe, share, and rely on social validation of information on social media. One item was reverse-coded ("I usually check the source of information before I judge it credible"). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = [0.82]$ ), and a composite score was calculated as the mean of all items. For robustness, analyses were conducted with both the continuous scale and a dichotomized version (see Figure 3). To assess the "Interpersonal trust", we measured trust in information shared by close contacts by a single item: "I trust information shared by my friends on social media" (1–5). Higher values indicate stronger trust. To test "Digital/media literacy", we considered that literacy was assessed with three items: "I know how to verify the source of an article," "I can evaluate the credibility of a website," and a binary item indicating previous formal training in fact-checking or digital literacy (yes/no). An index was computed from the Likert items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = [0.73]$ ). Finally, achieve "Time spent on social media", respondents indicated average daily usage in four categories: <1 hour, 1–2 hours, 3–4 hours, and  $\geq 5$  hours.



<b>Acceptance of misinformation</b> (DV; 5 items)	1. <i>When I see a news item on social media, I tend to believe it before checking its accuracy.</i>	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly disagree → 5 = Strongly agree)
	2. <i>I often share information on social media even if I am not sure about its truthfulness.</i>	
	3. <i>I assume most items shared by my contacts are generally accurate.</i>	
	4. <i>I usually check the source of information before I judge it credible.</i>	
	5. <i>The number of shares/likes a post has makes me more likely to believe it.</i>	
<b>Interpersonal trust</b>	<i>I trust information shared by my friends on social media.</i>	5-point Likert
<b>Digital / media literacy</b>	<i>I know how to verify the source of an article.</i>	5-point Likert (first two)
	<i>I can evaluate the credibility of a website.</i>	
	<i>Have you received any formal training on fact-checking or digital literacy?</i>	Yes / No (third item)
<b>Time spent on social media</b>	<i>On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?</i>	Categories: <1h, 1–2h, 3–4h, ≥5h

Figure 3 – Survey questionnaire items used to measure digital literacy, interpersonal trust, and acceptance of misinformation.

### 3.3. Data

The descriptive analysis of the data collected from 187 participants provides an overview of the practices and perceptions of respondents regarding the use of social media, information verification, and trust in digital content. We adopted an exploratory quantitative methodology, given the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for initial pattern mapping.

With regard to the average daily time spent on social media, most participants reported being online between 1 and 2 hours per day (37.4%), followed by 31.6% who reported spending between 3 and 4 hours. A smaller group (21.9%) uses these platforms for less than 1 hour, while only 9.1% said they spend 5 or more hours a day online. These data indicate moderate frequency of use, concentrated in short to medium-length sessions.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (95.2%) stated that they had already participated in training or courses on fact-checking – a high level of prior exposure to information literacy practices. The data in Figure 2 are consistent with the results of another analysis, which shows that 63.1% of respondents say they frequently verify the accuracy of information they find on social media, while 9.1% always do so. Even so, 25.1% admit to doing so only rarely and 2.7% never do so, highlighting a significant margin of behaviour vulnerable to disinformation.

As for trust in social media as a source of information, participants' perceptions are divided. Half of the sample (50.3%) attribute a medium degree of trust, while 24.1% consider it low and 10.2% very low. Only 15% of respondents expressed high trust and only 0.5% very high trust. These data suggest a tendency towards scepticism or caution regarding the informative role of social media.

The distribution of responses to the statement ‘Generally, the information that appears in my social media feed is credible’ reinforces this critical perception. The majority (51.3%) are neutral, 25.7% agree, while 18.2% disagree and 2.7% strongly disagree. Only 2.1% strongly agree. This dispersion indicates that the perceived credibility of posts in the feed is not widely recognised as reliable.

When asked about their trust in information shared by friends on social media, 46.5% adopted a neutral position, 38% said they trusted it and 1.6% trusted it completely, while 12.8% disagreed and 1.1% disagreed completely. The data points to a significant, albeit not overwhelming, weight of interpersonal trust in the process of accepting information.

Regarding the perception of truthfulness associated with virality, 47.1% of participants disagree with the idea that the most shared posts tend to be true, 16% totally disagree, and 18.7% remain neutral. Only 16% agree and 2.1% totally agree with this association. This distribution shows a critical awareness of the misleading nature that can accompany online virality.

Finally, most respondents expressed resistance to the statement “When I see information on social media, I tend to believe it before even checking its veracity.” About 43.9% disagree, 19.8% strongly disagree, and 20.3% remain neutral. Only 15.5% agree and 0.5% strongly agree, confirming a dominant attitude of initial scepticism towards the content found.

To complement the descriptive analysis presented, Figure 6 visually summarises the main data relating to the time spent on social media, training in fact-checking, the frequency of content verification and the degree of trust in digital platforms. This graphic support allows us to observe more clearly the behaviour patterns and critical perceptions of the sample with regard to the information consumed online.

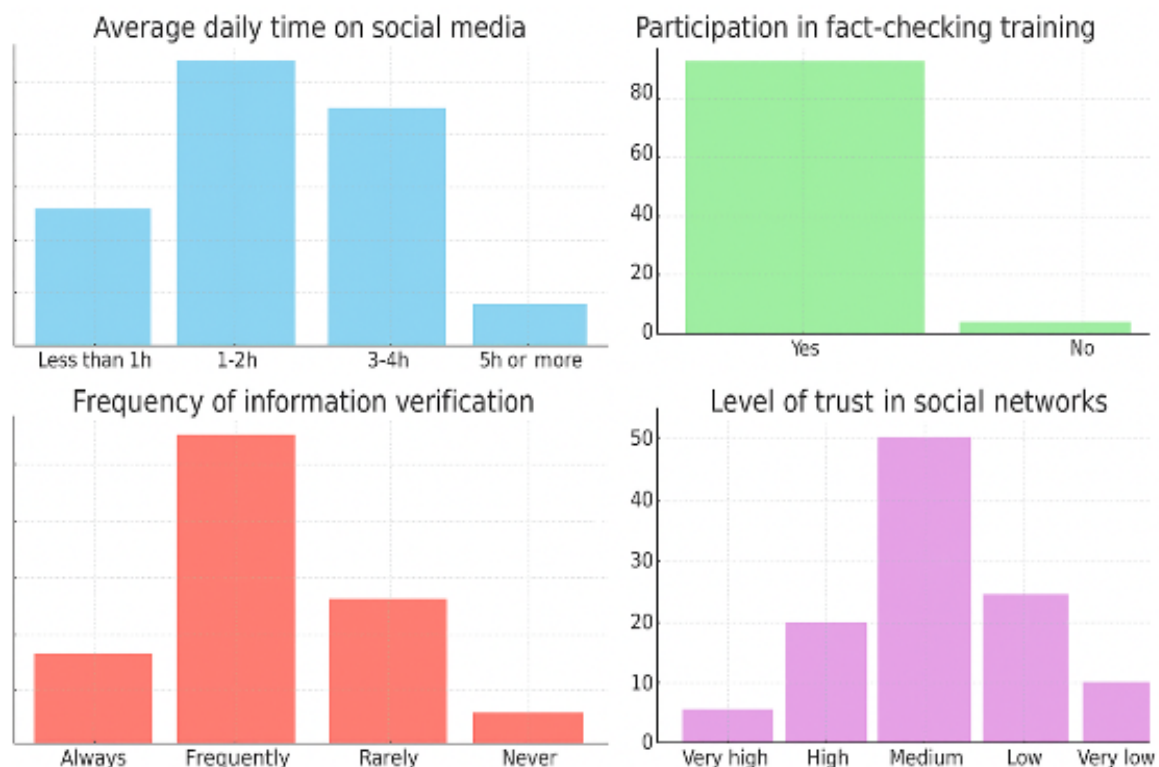


Figure 4 – Results based on exploratory sample (n=187); observed trends require validation in studies with population representativeness.

#### 4. Discussion of Results

The data obtained in this study reinforce the importance of understanding the acceptance of misinformation on social media as a multifactorial phenomenon, conditioned by formative, relational, behavioural, and structural variables, in line with perspectives that emphasise the interplay of cognitive skills, relational trust, and socio-technical environments in shaping information practices. The analysis of the data collected from 187 participants identified trends in line with contemporary literature on media literacy and misinformation and empirically validated part of the proposed hypotheses.

We highlight the high level of awareness of media literacy: 95.2% of respondents reported previous training in fact-checking, and 72.2% said they ‘frequently’ or ‘always’ check the accuracy of the information they find on social media. These data suggest a high degree of awareness of media literacy, in line with Connaway et al. (2013), who emphasise the importance of these skills in the formation of informed citizenship. Systematic verification of sources, critical analysis of information and awareness of manipulation mechanisms are practices clearly driven by specialised training in this area.

Thus, we can affirm that H1 is valid: individuals with a degree in Communication or with Digital Literacy skills may demonstrate a greater ability to recognise and question information from dubious sources. The binary logistic regression model reinforces the pattern described: individuals with training had an Odds Ratio (OR) of 3.05 (95% CI = 1.82-5.11;  $p > 0.001$ ). Translating this result, this means that having training in digital literacy makes individuals approximately three times more likely to verify the information they find on social media, an effect that is highly significant from a statistical point of view. The model met the statistical assumptions, with no multicollinearity (Tolerance  $> 0.7$ ; VIF  $< 1.5$ ) and good fit (Hosmer-Lemeshow:  $p = 0.32$ ), supporting the thesis that formally acquired critical skills enhance more resilient digital navigation.

This result is consistent with the contributions of Tandoc et al. (2018), who suggest that critical skills acquired through specialised training enhance more informed digital navigation. Connaway et al. (2013) and Lewandowsky et al. (2017) also highlight the role of digital literacy in combating disinformation: they point out that the ability to identify and reject false content depends, to a large extent, on developed cognitive and informational skills. However, it should be noted that this association does not imply direct causality, given the methodological design of the study.

Figure 5 summarises the relationship between media literacy training and information verification behaviours. Panel A (bars) illustrates the high prevalence of prior training (95.2%) and the frequency of active verification (72.2%) among respondents. Panel B (forest plot) confirms hypothesis H1 and shows that individuals with training are 3.05 times more likely to verify information than those without training (95% CI: 1.82–5.11).

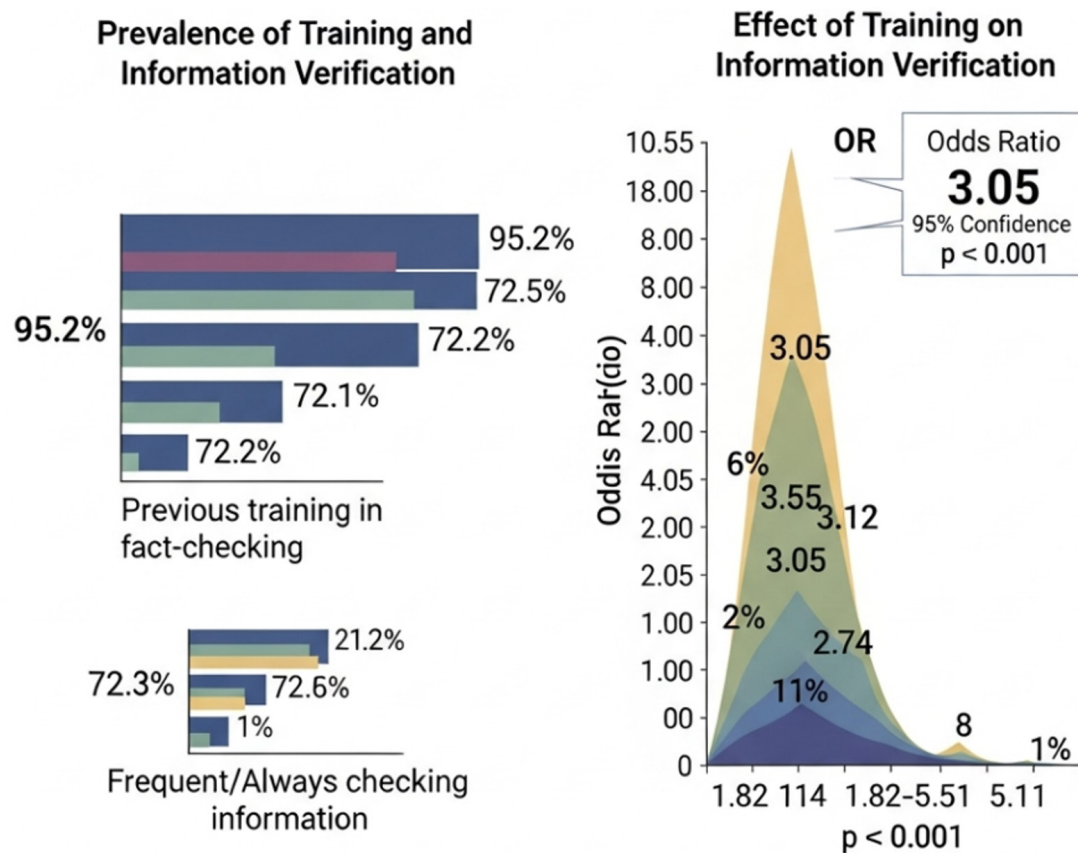


Figure 5 – Impact of media literacy training: (A) Prevalence of training and verification behaviours among respondents; (B) Statistical effect of training on information verification (OR = 3.05; 95% CI: 1.82-5.11). Source: Prepared using Gemini based on survey data.

H2, which postulated a relationship between social media usage time and vulnerability to misinformation, was rejected. The observed correlation was negative, weak and did not reach statistical significance ( $r = -0.11$ ;  $p = 0.18$ ; 95% CI = -0.26% to 0.05). In practical terms, this indicates that, in this sample, there is no measurable or robust linear association between the amount of time a person spends on social media and their propensity to accept misinformation. The marginal p-value (0.18) and insufficient statistical power (0.38 for  $\alpha = 0.05$  and small effect size,  $f^2 = 0.02$ ) suggest sampling limitations for detecting subtle effects. However, the theoretical hypothesis of mediation by “repeated exposure to misinformation” (Allcott et al., 2019) remains relevant and requires further investigation with path analysis. This result therefore requires a more nuanced analysis: although isolated usage time does not predict vulnerability, it is hypothesised that repeated exposure to misinformation may foster heuristics of distrust in experienced users – a mediating mechanism not tested empirically in this study, but aligned with Allcott et al. (2019) and Bonsaken et al. (2024), for whom the quality of the digital experience, the platforms used, and the relational contexts mediate this effect. The non-significance of usage time resonates with findings in cognitive psychology that challenge simple “dose–response” assumptions. Instead, theories of motivated reasoning suggest that users actively filter content in ways consistent with their prior beliefs, regardless of exposure level. Similarly, sociological theories of digital habitus point to how everyday practices structure engagement beyond sheer time online.

The rejection of H2 challenges linear exposure – vulnerability models such as cultivation theory and certain strands of media effects research, which predict a dose – response relationship between screen time and susceptibility to misinformation. Instead, our data suggest that exposure effects may

be conditional or curvilinear, with time online sometimes fostering familiarity and critical heuristics rather than increasing vulnerability. Our results suggest that exposure may have non-linear or conditional effects: increased time online can also correlate with greater familiarity with platform dynamics, leading to the development of critical heuristics. This aligns with dual-process models of information processing, where repeated exposure fosters recognition of manipulative cues. Future theoretical work should therefore move towards curvilinear or contingent models of exposure effects, rather than assuming monotonic increases in vulnerability.

The binary logistic regression model, which used ‘frequent acceptance of false information’ (dichotomised) as the dependent variable and ‘digital literacy training’, ‘time of use’ and ‘degree of trust in friends’ as independent variables, is also in line with the arguments of Connaway et al. (2013): constant exposure to diverse content can favour, even if implicitly, the development of more refined information skills. In this scenario, frequent users become more adept at recognising patterns, inconsistencies or signs of manipulation and operate as more resilient information consumers. Figure 6 shows us the above-mentioned data, highlighting the magnitude of the observed relationship.

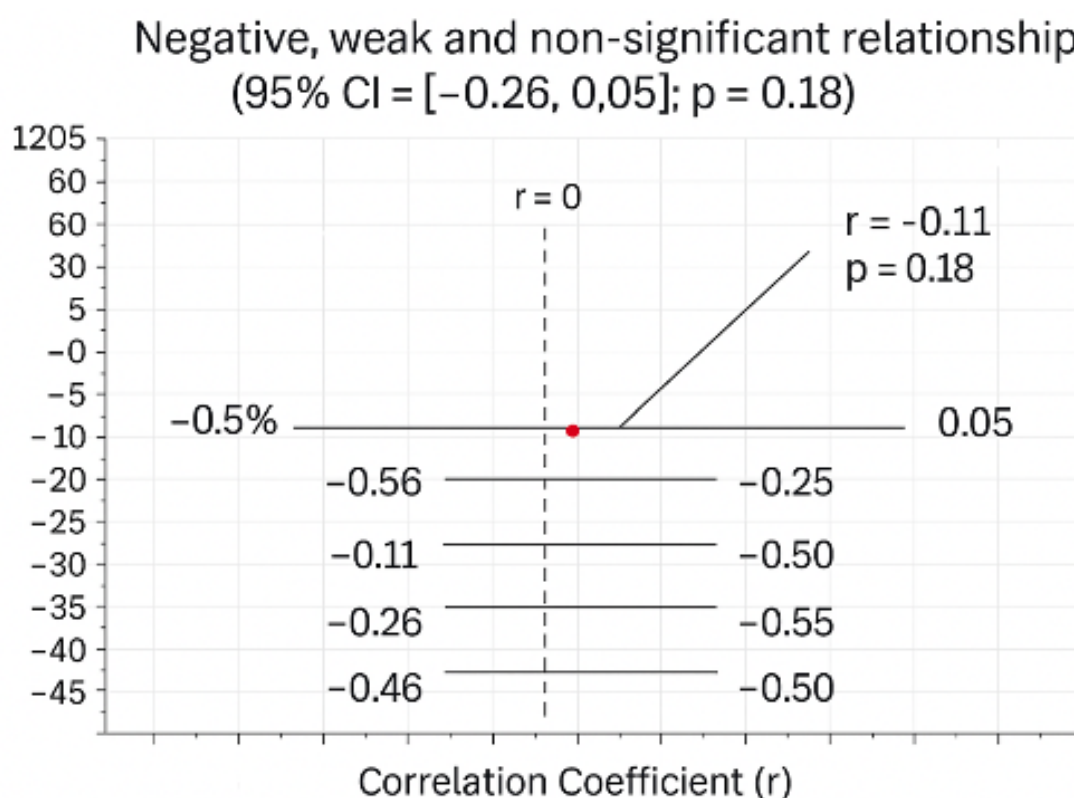


Figure 6 – Confidence interval diagram for the correlation between time spent on social media and vulnerability to misinformation. Source: Prepared using Gemini based on survey data.

Another crucial finding is that interpersonal trust emerged as the strongest and statistically significant predictor of acceptance of misinformation (OR = 2.31; 95% CI = 1.37–3.89;  $p = 0.002$ ) confirming H3. This result is substantive: for a given level of trust, a unit increase in the trust scale in friends' shares more than doubles the probability (OR > 2) of a user accepting false information. This relationship is visible in the fragmentation observed: 46.5% of participants adopt a neutral position towards information shared by friends, while 38% say they trust these shares – a dynamic symptomatic of the so-called information disorder, characterised by Wardle and Derakshan (2017) as an ecosystem where facts, opinions and manipulation are confused. This mechanism reflects how social validation and perceived



ingroup belonging operate as cognitive shortcuts, reducing the motivation to verify information independently. Consequently, selective trust based on social ties – often shaped by ideological affinity – can reinforce exposure to biased content, as Stroud (2010) and Sunstein (2017) point out, and contribute to the creation of information bubbles and affective polarisation. Pennycook et al. (2020) complement this reading by demonstrating that selective alerts against fake news have contradictory effects: reducing scepticism only in relation to unlabelled content. The discriminatory capacity of the model (AUC-ROC = 0.78; 95% CI = 0.72–0.84) reinforces this conclusion, and is considered acceptable to good, indicating that the model has substantive accuracy in distinguishing between those who accept and those who reject misinformation. The salience of interpersonal trust aligns with theories of social capital and networked trust, which explain how group belonging and relational validation override content scrutiny. In political sociology, this dynamic is further linked to populist communication strategies that leverage identity-based trust to circulate unverified claims.

In contrast, the strong confirmation of H3 underscores the centrality of interpersonal trust in misinformation dynamics. Trust in peers appears to function as a social validation shortcut, consistent with theories of social proof and epistemic bubbles, whereby credibility is inferred from relational ties rather than content evaluation. This mechanism also resonates with the concept of “networked trust” in digital sociology, highlighting how perceived ingroup membership suppresses verification practices. Such findings reinforce the need to reconceptualise misinformation acceptance not only as a cognitive deficit, but as a socially embedded process shaped by group identity and relational validation.

An additional layer of interpretation emerges when situating the findings in the broader socio-political context of Portugal. The unusually high proportion of respondents with backgrounds in communication – and journalism – related fields highlights a subgroup of users whose skills and practices may not mirror those of the general population, but who act as particularly influential actors in shaping the circulation and credibility of information online. These individuals are often positioned at the frontline of news production, verification, and dissemination. Their comparatively high levels of digital literacy, reflected in the strong protective effect observed in our results, suggest that communication professionals and students may develop an “amplified capacity” to critically engage with misinformation.

This finding carries both opportunities and risks. On one hand, it reinforces the potential of targeted literacy initiatives within journalism and communication fields to build resilient information gatekeepers who can help mitigate the spread of false content. On the other hand, it underscores the gap between these more digitally skilled groups and the broader public, who may not have access to similar training. In a political climate where misinformation and populist rhetoric are increasingly used to mobilise opinion, this divide risks creating asymmetries in vulnerability: while professionals are equipped with critical heuristics, ordinary users remain more exposed. However, these observations should be read as preliminary tendencies, given the characteristics of the sample, and require confirmation in larger-scale studies before guiding systematic curricular or policy changes.

A critical implication, therefore, is that combating misinformation cannot rely solely on the self-regulation of informed elites, but requires the scaling up of literacy practices and critical verification skills across society. This includes integrating digital literacy into civic education, expanding community-based fact-checking initiatives, and addressing the relational trust dynamics that drive the acceptance of misinformation beyond professional contexts.

These data allow for a more robust inferential reading, which transcends descriptive frequency analysis and maps associative relationships between central variables. Thus, the conclusions of Allcott et al. (2019) and Tandoc et al. (2018) are confirmed, who identified interpersonal trust as a direct factor in the acceptance of false content – a “cognitive shortcut” that reduces the predisposition to verification, especially when validation occurs by peers. Figure 7 illustrates, through a double panel, how interpersonal trust consolidates itself as the central driver of vulnerability to disinformation.

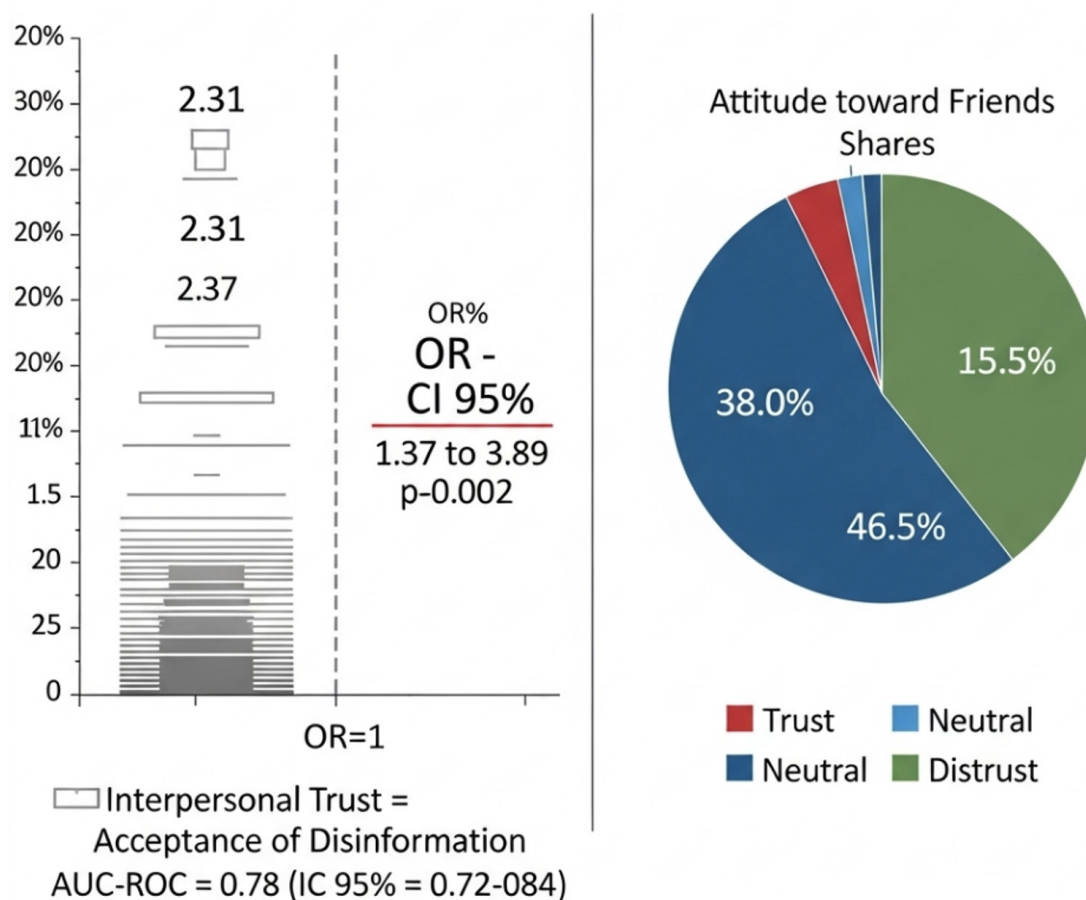


Figure 7 – Double panel combining odds ratios for interpersonal trust and distribution of attitudes towards sharing friends.  
Source: Prepared using Gemini based on survey data.

Despite the high level of media literacy training, 27.8% of participants stated that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ verify the accuracy of information – a theoretical and practical gap that deserves attention. This gap can be interpreted considering mechanisms such as information overload, decision fatigue, or epistemic cynicism (Lazer et al., 2018), which hinder the practical application of acquired knowledge. Pennycook et al. (2020) emphasise that mere exposure to correct information is not enough: it is necessary to understand the emotional, motivational, and contextual factors that inhibit critical action. This data suggests that media literacy interventions should go beyond the transmission of technical skills, also integrating training in emotional resilience and metacognitive awareness.

The analysis of perceptions about the credibility of social media feeds reinforces this complexity: only 2.1% of participants totally agree with the credibility of the content, while the majority (51.3%) adopt a neutral position. This ambivalence confirms the idea of Lazer et al. (2018) that we live in an “ambiguous information environment”, subject to the risks of normalisation of misinformation due to information fatigue – users oscillate between the functionality of networks and their awareness of their vulnerability to algorithmic manipulation.

The choice of binary logistic regression was based on the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable (‘frequent acceptance of false information’), with alternatives (e.g., ordinal regression) rejected for violating the odds proportionality assumption (Brant test:  $p < 0.05$ ). The model met the essential assumptions: independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson = 1.92), absence of influential outliers (Cook's distance  $< 1$  in 98% of cases) and logit linearity (non-significant interaction terms:  $p > 0.10$ ).

The dependent variable (acceptance of misinformation) was initially treated as a continuous scale (mean score of five items). However, the distribution was highly skewed, with 28% of respondents clustering at the upper end of the scale. To capture the subgroup of participants with frequent acceptance of misinformation, the variable was dichotomised at the median (score  $\geq 3.4$ ). This operationalisation allows a clear contrast between low-to-moderate and high acceptance. At the same time, we acknowledge that dichotomisation reduces variability and statistical power (MacCallum et al., 2002). To ensure robustness, we ran additional models: (i) an OLS regression with the continuous acceptance score; (ii) an ordinal logistic regression treating acceptance as an ordered outcome; and (iii) logistic models with alternative cut-points (top tertile). Across these specifications, the patterns of association remained consistent: digital literacy significantly reduced acceptance ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ), interpersonal trust increased it substantially ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and time spent on social media showed no significant effect (all  $p > .10$ ). Full results are reported in Figure 8.

Model	DV operationalisation	Digital literacy	Interpersonal trust	Time spent
Model 1	Logistic regression (median split, $\geq 3.4$ )	OR = 0.68, 95% CI [0.54– 0.86], $p =$ .002	OR = 1.74, 95% CI [1.35–2.25], $p$ < .001	OR = 1.08, 95% CI [0.89– 1.32], $p =$ .45
Model 2	Linear regression (continuous score)	$\beta = -0.32$ , SE = 0.10, $p = .001$	$\beta = 0.41$ , SE = 0.08, $p < .001$	$\beta = 0.06$ , SE = 0.07, $p = .37$
Model 3	Ordinal logistic regression (quartiles)	OR = 0.65, 95% CI [0.51– 0.83], $p =$ .001	OR = 1.81, 95% CI [1.38–2.36], $p < .001$	OR = 1.09, 95% CI [0.91–1.31], $p = .34$
Model 4	Logistic regression (top tertile vs. others)	OR = 0.62, 95% CI [0.47– 0.81], $p =$ .001	OR = 1.92, 95% CI [1.43–2.58], $p < .001$	OR = 1.11, 95% CI [0.92– 1.35], $p =$ .28

Figure 8 – Robustness checks for alternative specifications of the dependent variable.

Taken together, these results point to a broader theoretical implication: misinformation acceptance cannot be fully explained by individual-level variables (e.g., literacy, time of use) alone, but must be understood at the intersection of cognitive, relational, and contextual factors. Models of misinformation

resilience should therefore integrate digital literacy with relational heuristics (trust, belonging, social validation), while considering how algorithmic amplification interacts with these processes in platformed environments.

It is important to emphasise that the inferential weight of the results should be interpreted with caution. The sample ( $n = 187$ ), although offering relevant exploratory insights, is relatively small and not representative of the Portuguese population. Furthermore, despite the inclusion of variables such as age, gender, and training, the characterisation of respondents remains limited, which restricts the external validity of the findings. While the analyses suggest significant patterns of association, these cannot be generalised without further replication in larger, probabilistic samples. As such, the pedagogical recommendations and policy suggestions advanced here should be understood as preliminary indications, anchored in the tendencies observed in this subgroup of digitally skilled users, rather than as definitive prescriptions.

Although the exploratory nature and limited size of the sample call for caution in generalising the findings, some preliminary indications can be highlighted. First, media literacy programmes could benefit from integrating not only technical verification skills but also practical and emotional components – for instance, simulated exposure to viral content with strong affective charge – to train users to critically re-situate information in relational contexts (OBS\*, 2024; Obercom, 2024). Second, public awareness campaigns may usefully go beyond technical fact-checking and explicitly address the taken-for-granted credibility of social shares. Nudges such as prompting users with simple questions (“Have I verified this?”) before sharing could help disrupt automatic trust. Third, platform-level interventions might explore ways to promote diversity-of-source signals in feeds, counterbalancing algorithmic homogeneity and reinforcing verified content. While these suggestions emerge from patterns observed in this study, they should be understood as exploratory directions rather than definitive policy prescriptions, requiring validation in larger and more representative samples. Such measures echo initiatives already debated in the Portuguese media literacy ecosystem (ICNova, Sindicato dos Jornalistas, 2022).

While the results offer valuable theoretical and practical insights, they must be interpreted with caution given several methodological constraints. First, the recruitment strategy relied exclusively on social media and produced a strong self-selection bias: younger users and women are overrepresented, and an unusually high proportion of respondents (95.2%) reported previous fact-checking training. Recruiting exclusively via social media groups likely attracted participants who are not only more digitally active but also more exposed to fact-checking initiatives, as reflected in the unusually high rate of respondents reporting prior training. This recruitment context helps explain why digital literacy showed a protective effect and why time of use did not emerge as a significant predictor: the sample is biased toward digitally experienced users, for whom mere exposure is less decisive than relational or cognitive factors. In other words, the very conditions of data collection – social media channels, digitally literate respondents, Portuguese-speaking context – reinforce the interpretation that misinformation acceptance must be seen as a socially and contextually embedded phenomenon. It is therefore important to clarify that the study does not examine “the general Portuguese public,” but rather a digitally active, younger-leaning group of social media users with higher-than-average exposure to literacy initiatives. This profile likely shaped the results, particularly the strong protective effect of digital literacy and the non-significant role of time of use. The characteristics of the sample also inform the interpretation of the findings. The protective effect of digital literacy and the non-significant role of usage time may be partly explained by the fact that the respondents were predominantly younger, digitally skilled users. For this public, exposure alone does not predict acceptance; rather, relational dynamics such as interpersonal trust become more decisive.

Second, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, and longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to disentangle selection effects from learning effects, especially regarding the complex relationship between time of use and critical engagement. Third, the operationalisation of “acceptance

of misinformation” through self-reports may be subject to social desirability bias, potentially underestimating true acceptance. Fourth, the dichotomisation of the dependent variable, although justified by the skewed distribution, inevitably reduced variability and statistical power. Finally, the relatively modest sample size ( $n = 187$ ) may not provide sufficient power to detect small effects; for example, a post-hoc calculation indicated that the power to detect an odds ratio of 1.5 at  $\alpha = 0.05$  was approximately 0.38. Future research should therefore replicate with larger and more representative samples, employ longitudinal or experimental designs, and incorporate behavioural measures of verification (e.g., experimental fact-checking tasks) to validate and extend these results.

Moreover, the fact that the survey was conducted in European Portuguese with a Portuguese sample further limits the external validity of the findings. It is important to note that the study does not analyse the Portuguese population as a whole, but rather a younger, digitally literate group of social media users with a high incidence of prior fact-checking training. This specific corpus explains some of the findings – particularly the protective role of literacy and the limited effect of usage time – and limits the generalisability of the results. While this contextual focus strengthens the relevance of the study for Southern European media environments, cross-cultural replication is needed to assess the generalisability of the results.

#### 4. Conclusion

The empirical data support three fundamental axes: i) training in Communication and Digital Literacy acts as a protective factor (H1 valid); ii) the time spent using social media does not correlate with greater acceptance of disinformation (H2 rejected), although mediating mechanisms (e.g., development of critical heuristics) deserve further study; iii) interpersonal trust is a critical facilitator of the spread of disinformation (H3 valid). These three axes – training, use and trust – are crucial to understanding the mechanisms that sustain (or limit) the spread of disinformation in digital environments.

In light of the results obtained, concrete guidelines for social and pedagogical interventions emerge. In the context of public policy, we recommend prioritising campaigns to deconstruct automatic trust in shares originating from contact networks, combined with the promotion of independent verification even in relationally mediated contexts. This approach, based on the robust association between interpersonal trust and acceptance of misinformation (OR = 2.31), aims to combat the ‘cognitive shortcut’ identified by Tandoc et al. (2018), according to which social ties inhibit critical practices of informational validation. Such initiatives should incorporate behavioural framings that expose the risks of digital homophily (Stroud, 2010) and encourage the triangulation of sources beyond affective circles.

At the same time, we propose that educational strategies transcend the mere transmission of technical skills and structurally integrate training in emotional resilience and information overload management. As evidenced by the dissonance between training and practice (27.8% of trainees do not verify content), non-cognitive factors – such as decision fatigue (Vosoughi et al., 2018) or normative pressure from groups – compromise the operationalisation of knowledge. Media literacy programmes should therefore adopt experiential models that simulate scenarios of high emotional pressure (e.g. viral content with identity appeal), developing critical self-regulation mechanisms in line with the proposals of Lewandowsky et al. (2017) on cognitive inoculation. This dual dimension – dismantling relational biases and psychological fortification – is an indispensable axis for proactive governance of the disinformation ecosystem.

It should also be noted that the dichotomisation of the dependent variable may have underestimated non-linear relationships and suggests future studies with structural equation models (SEM). The gap between knowledge and practice (27.8% of participants rarely check information) reinforces the need for interventions that integrate behavioural and emotional dimensions, in addition to cognitive compo-



nents. Ambivalence regarding the credibility of networks (51.3% neutral) reflects the ‘ambiguous information environment’ described by Lazer et al. (2018) and highlights the need for strategies that combine media literacy and ethical platform design.

In this context, it is essential that public and educational policies consider multifaceted strategies. We recommend: i) promoting informational diversity algorithms that break epistemic bubbles and reduce continuous exposure to ideologically homogeneous content; ii) integrating emotional education modules into media literacy programmes, focusing on recognising emotional triggers used in disinformation; iii) encouraging pedagogical practices based on simulation and collaborative analysis of real cases that foster applied critical thinking.

Despite the limitations identified – the small size and skewed age composition of the sample – this study offers valuable and relevant exploratory contributions to understanding the dynamics between digital literacy, social media use, and attitudes towards misinformation. As preliminary research, it aligns with widely documented trends in the literature, pointing to the central role of digital literacy as a mitigating factor for informational credulity and highlighting the urgency of multilevel approaches – technical, critical, and relational – to address the complexity of the information ecosystem. Thus, the study constitutes a promising empirical basis for future broader and more rigorous research, which will deepen the relationships outlined here with more representative samples and greater sociodemographic diversity.

Overall, the study underscores the need for interdisciplinary theorisation: misinformation cannot be explained by cognitive shortcuts alone, nor by purely technological or social factors. It emerges from the convergence of psychological biases, relational dynamics, and algorithmic structures – a nexus that requires integrative frameworks across communication, psychology, sociology, and political science. The socio-political context of Portugal also helps interpret our findings. The strong protective role of digital literacy may reflect recent national investments in media education and fact-checking initiatives. Conversely, the salience of interpersonal trust resonates with a political climate marked by polarization and the spread of populist messages through social networks, where group belonging often trumps individual verification. While these contextual factors strengthen the internal relevance of our results, they also caution against assuming direct applicability to countries with different media systems or political cultures.

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