
Miscellaneous

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Youth in the face of disinformation: A qualitative exploration of Mexican college students' attitudes, motivations, and abilities around false news

Abstract

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between young people in Mexico and disinformation, while shedding light on their practices and perceptions around this phenomenon. I have chosen a qualitative perspective to delve into the ways that Mexican college students interact and deal with the growing problem of false news in the current media landscape. Thus, I conducted semi-structured interviews (N = 28) using an elicitation technique, during which participants were exposed to real samples of disinformation content to encourage a conversation around the type of false news that they come across in their daily lives. Results reveal nuances in the ways that college students prefer social media over traditional media, even though they report finding more disinformation in the former. They also show the impact that students' attitudes and habits have on their relationship with disinformation. Moreover, the study presents evidence that college students critically question disinformation, do not take it at face value, and are not prone to share it. However, findings also highlight differences related to the format in which the false content is presented. For example, TikTok videos were

more likely to effectively deceive the viewer, more so than images shared on Facebook. Students also believe that older people are more likely to believe in disinformation, potentially indicating a third-person effect of this content. Lastly, this exploration emphasizes the need to further examine the broader consequences of disinformation and believing in false content, such as a reduced interest in political information.

Keywords

Disinformation, fake news, Mexico, political interest, social media, TikTok, youth.

1. Introduction

Disinformation and its potential impact on people's lives and on democracies around the world have become widely debated and studied topics (Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Rossini *et al.*, 2021). Although the problem is not new, its recent pervasiveness in digital media has made disinformation an integral part of online public discourse (Seo & Faris, 2021).

Changes in the media landscape, such as the transformation of technological infrastructures and the redesign of the economy of political information, have been particularly important in the rise of this phenomenon (Tandoc *et al.*, 2019). These shifts favor disintermediated communication and greater access to digital communication (Seo & Faris, 2021). Moreover, public trust in institutions and in the media has been declining for decades (Madrid-Morales *et al.*, 2021). Disinformation content has mushroomed under these conditions, bringing about various social ills among citizens, such as confusion, cynicism, fragmentation, and apathy (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020).

Despite the global nature of this problem and the fact that emerging democracies are specifically vulnerable to it, research has focused mainly on its impact in the United States, which accounts for 60% of current studies, while other parts of the world, particularly Latin America, which is the focus in less than 6% of studies on the subject, are underrepresented (Seo & Faris, 2021). Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the investigation of disinformation in the Mexican context, through a qualitative exploration of the way that young audiences understand disinformation and how they behave in its presence.

In this work, I attempt to elucidate the practices and perceptions of college students from the state of Nuevo León, in northeastern Mexico, about disinformation, their ability to detect it, as well as their behaviors, motivations, and attitudes around this type of content and the manner in which it is shared. To achieve this goal, I have conducted 28 semi-structured online interviews with university students, aged 17 to 24, using an elicitation technique to guide the conversation with them. Participants saw two samples of disinformation content about international and national politics, taken from social media. Participants then shared their impressions about these samples. This qualitative approach, while scarce in studies on this topic, provides a nuanced, bottom-up understanding of audiences' attitudes, experiences, and interactions with disinformation.

2. New dynamics in information consumption

Social media has transcended its original function as a virtual space for interacting with family, friends, and strangers, to become a source for news as well (Tandoc *et al.*, 2019). By combining information of a personal nature with contents of public interest, these online platforms have come to reshape the essential ways in which many people experience and consume information (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). According to the Reuters Institute 2021 Digital News Report (Gutiérrez-Rentería, 2021), 67% of people in Mexico cite social networks as their main source for news, with Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp as their favorite tools.

Notably, in Mexico, 93.4% of people aged 18–24 use the Internet (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 2021), while 84.7% of the same age bracket use social media (Federal Institute of Telecommunications, 2019), making them the group with the most active online presence. Furthermore, according to a 2021 study (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2021), the proclivity to use these platforms grew astronomically during the pandemic. That work emphasizes the expansion of the social platform TikTok in this country, which in 2020 already had a burgeoning presence, especially among 14–20-year-olds.

3. Disinformation in the new media environment

The evolution from a traditional news cycle dominated by professional journalism towards a more complex cycle in which information flows from a large number of diverse sources (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018) has also meant a high circulation of disinformation in the media environment. Disinformation includes all “false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm or for economic gain” (European Commission, 2018, p. 11).

Certain features of social media platforms favor the organic spread of disinformation through individual users acting in two ways: through the deliberate sharing of the relevant

content with their contacts; or through several other interactions available to them with such content, e.g., through likes that in turn make the post in question more visible to other members of the user's network (Buchanan, 2020). Thus, human behavior is largely responsible for the spread of disinformation in the digital environment. In fact, there is evidence that rumors and false news tend to reach more people and spread faster than verified information (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018). How people interact with disinformation is therefore a relevant concern when studying this phenomenon.

4. Fake news and young people's consumption of information

Young people are the ones that most report using social media to get information while increasingly distancing themselves from conventional sources, such as television, print newspapers, and radio (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2021). Knowing their attitudes and perceptions vis á vis disinformation is therefore of great interest, given that such content is highly present on the digital platforms they prefer. Studies conducted in other regions, such as Spain and the United States, reveal that people aged 18 to 24, also known as generation Z, are aware of the existence and dangers of false news (De Vicente *et al.*, 2021) and even report feeling stressed in the face of an environment of abundant disinformation (Borah *et al.*, 2021). However, other works underscore that, while social media is where this young population reports finding the most disinformation and fake news, they still prefer acquiring information on these platforms (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2021; Pérez-Escoda & Pedrero Esteban, 2021).

For their part, De Vicente *et al.* (2021) argue that, even though it is common for young people to be criticized for their use of social media, individuals in this age group do not usually spread disinformation that reaches them; they even attempt to delete content they themselves shared if they find out that it is false. These findings raise new questions regarding the behaviors and attitudes that young people have towards this problem.

5. Strategies and behaviors in the face of disinformation

One proposed solution to the issue of increasing disinformation is to promote media literacy among citizens (De Vicente *et al.*, 2021), i.e., the knowledge and skills necessary to critically navigate the media environment, understand how information is produced, and even the role that their own beliefs and biases play in how they interpret news content they encounter (Hameleers, 2020). With greater competencies in media literacy, audiences will arguably be better able to critically evaluate their relationship with information, recognize false news, and take concrete actions to deal with disinformation (Carballo & Marroquín Parducci, 2020).

To a greater or lesser extent, these skills are already present in the public, especially with regards to disinformation. Previous studies (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2019; Flintham *et al.*, 2018; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019) have found that people do not accept disinformation uncritically, but instead generate strategies to fact-check the information they consume. Some of these strategies are: seeking confirmation in other sources, consulting with other people they trust, and analyzing formal aspects of the information they find online.

Although it has been established that most audiences possess these skills, Buchanan (2020) highlights that anti-disinformation initiatives that promote media literacy are based on the assumption that people who share false information do not do so deliberately. This assumption, Buchanan points out, ignores the fact that there are people who may seek to willingly share disinformation, be it because they agree with the intent of the story or its message, or because they want to explicitly state that they identify with a certain political group or movement.

Along the same lines, Ardévol-Abreu *et al.* (2020) establish that sharing disinformation can be done inadvertently or intentionally. In this sense, previous research has identified political motivations for sharing false information, linked to the level of political commitment of the individual (Madrid-Morales *et al.*, 2020; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2019). The evidence of these

different reasons for the deliberate sharing of disinformation calls into question the potential of media literacy as an effective tool to counteract the problem, since intentional motivations may move people to share disinformation even if they have the ability to recognize it as false.

6. Objectives and Research Questions

The main goal of this study is to elucidate the relationship that young people in Mexico –particularly college students– have with disinformation, providing insights regarding their practices and perceptions around this phenomenon. I have three specific objectives: 1) observe how students interact with disinformation in order to establish what aspects of the content and its context influence such interactions; 2) investigate how students' media consumption habits relate to their perceptions and practices around disinformation; and 3) explore the possible effects that disinformation has on their interest in consuming political information.

In light of these objectives and prior established literature on disinformation, this work will focus on the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the perceptions and practices of college students in Mexico regarding the disinformation phenomenon, their consumption, and their sharing of this type of content?

RQ2. How do their attitudes and behaviors regarding their consumption of political information in traditional and social media impact the relationship they have with disinformation and their perceptions about it?

7. Method

To address these research questions, I conducted 28 in-depth interviews with university students, ages 17 to 24, all residing in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. The interviews took place in April and May of 2022. Participants had to be current undergraduate university students who use social media, and recruitment took place through professors from several faculties. Each participant was compensated with an Amazon gift card worth 150 Mexican pesos (about 7 US dollars).

The resulting convenience sample consisted of 20 women and 8 men, with an average age of 20.8 years. The interviewees were majoring in several fields, mainly in medicine, chemistry, political science, and international relations. The interview format was chosen because it is a technique that favors knowing the perspective of the person being interviewed, allowing them to express their experiences in their own words and delve into their ideas, attitudes, and motivations (Berger, 2000). Thus, it is ideal to gain depth into the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors vis á vis disinformation, and into how relevant aspects of a country's political, social, and media contexts impact the way in which we process disinformation (Wenzel, 2019).

Despite the importance that inductive perspectives have when attempting to understand how audiences navigate the current media landscape (Berthelsen & Hameleers, 2021), qualitative studies on disinformation are scarce. According to an analysis by Seo and Faris (2021), only 14.3% of recent works on this topic have implemented interviews or focus groups; most of the work on this subject is usually done with a quantitative approach, through surveys or experiments. Such investigations may lack a bottom-up perspective, with "little analysis of how ordinary people think about the problem of fake news" (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, p. 2).

As a response to this gap in the literature, I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews for this work. A guide was designed in order to facilitate conversation with the subject (Table 1). The guide consisted of three parts: a section dedicated to questions about their consumption habits regarding political information, another section dedicated to questions after presenting them with samples, and, finally, a third section on their perceptions on disinformation. Prior to the interviews, pilot tests were carried out to verify that the questions were clear to participants and to test the dynamics of the samples.

Table 1: Interview Guide.

Interview stage	Main questions
1. Information and media consumption, and discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How much information do you consume? How about information on politics? What media outlets do you use for this purpose? ○ Do you use traditional media, such as radio, TV, print newspapers? ○ What social networks do you have? How do you use them? ○ How much political information do you share on social media? How often do you comment on political information on social media? ○ How much do you talk with acquaintances, family, and friends about political information?
2. Interactions and reactions to samples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have you seen this content (samples 1 and 2)? ○ What do you generally think about the content you just saw? ○ What strikes you about this content? ○ Do you think this information is true? ○ What elements do you consider when determining its accuracy? ○ How does this information make you feel? ○ Would you share this content?
3. Perceptions and opinions on disinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are your thoughts on the disinformation phenomenon in Mexico/in Nuevo León? ○ About which topics do you see disinformation? ○ In your opinion, what consequences does disinformation have? ○ Do you think there is a difference between disinformation that you find on social media and the news you find on media such as TV, newspapers, and radio? ○ What steps, if any, do you take to verify the information you receive? ○ Do you think there is a scenario where sharing disinformation deliberately is justified? Do you think sharing disinformation is justified if it promotes a political or ideological figure or movement with which you agree? ○ How much do you participate in political affairs, online and offline? ○ Does the presence of disinformation have an impact on your inclination to participate in political issues / get informed about them?

Source: Own elaboration.

An elicitation technique was implemented incorporating actual disinformation material into the discussion, to facilitate dialogue with participants. This strategy empowers interviewees, giving them the possibility to use their voices and diminishing the distance between researcher and participant (Nelson, 2019). In this study, participants saw two samples of false content that circulated on social media and reached virality. Both samples were verified by fact-checking sites that classified them as false information.

The first sample consists of a video obtained from TikTok with false claims about Russia's reaction to Mexico's position on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Clips from a Russian newscast in that language were manipulated in the video. According to an AFP fact-check post titled "The video of a Russian presenter is a montage and does not report on a Putin threat to Mexico" (AFP Mexico, 2022), the subtitles that supposedly translate the Russian into Spanish modify the message of the clip, to give the impression of Russian President Vladimir Putin reacting negatively to comments by Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard. The video

also shows, in text included within TikTok's features, the legend "Thank you 4T! Putin takes the message from the Mexican government of Marcelo Ebrard as a threat" accompanied by angry emojis, as well as the TikTok logo and the name of the TikTok account where the material was distributed. "4T" refers to "Fourth Transformation," the current Mexican government's motto.

For the second sample, participants were presented with an image, in this case obtained from WhatsApp, which shows a series of critical statements by Alfonso Romo, a former member of the federal cabinet, about Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. At the top, the image bears the logo of Proceso, a popular current affairs magazine. For the purposes of this study, the image was embedded in a Facebook post, supposedly a publication from a fictional user named Miguel Enriquez Farías (Figure 1). The fact-checking site El Sabueso clarified that Proceso had distanced itself from the image in a statement and that the alleged comments by Romo did not appear in any other media outlet (Redacción Animal Político, 2020). Based on the designed interview guide, participants shared their reactions to the samples seen, the credibility they perceived in the messages, and their willingness to share each of the materials on their own social networks.

Figure 1: Sample 2.



Sample 2 presented participants with a popular fake news image that circulated on social media and WhatsApp, as a part of a simulated Facebook post.

Source: Own elaboration.

The number of interviews was determined by theoretical saturation. To codify the data, using the Taguette qualitative research program, I followed the steps recommended by Braun and Clark (2004) for carrying out a thematic analysis: First, become familiar with the information, generate initial codes, collapse the codes into broader themes, and use direct quotes to build the narrative about the findings. The themes are explained in the next section.

8. Results

8.1. *Interaction of college students with disinformation*

8.1.1. Skills to identify disinformation

During the interviews, it was observed that participants have skills that allowed most of them to identify the presented samples as fake news. However, some of them believed one or both samples to be true, particularly sample 1, the TikTok video. Sample 2, the Facebook post, was the one most easily recognized as fake.

It is noteworthy that several of the participants that did identify the false content stated so immediately after being asked in general terms about their opinion on the content they had seen. "I don't really trust videos like these, because they resemble other videos on other topics too much, so the truth is I don't trust much of what they say" (Interview 15, personal communication, May 11, 2022). "If I had to choose whether it is true or false, I would say that, just seeing this image, without anything else, without having a source, I say that it is false" (Interview 11, personal communication, May 6, 2022). This quick reaction is indicative that they are aware of the disinformation phenomenon. In contrast, other participants referred to the possible falseness of the shown samples containing disinformation only after being asked about the samples' credibility.

Participants reported having various strategies to verify information they find, mainly searching for the content in question in other media outlets, especially those they trust, or directly in search engines, particularly Google. Two other strategies that they pointed out are asking trusted people who they consider to be informed, such as friends and family, as well as consulting the comments of other social media users to gauge the veracity of the post. "What I do here is to look at the comments, there are many opinions and there are people who think this way and that, I feel more informed when I am filled with a variety of opinions" (Interview 3, personal communication, April 7, 2022).

On the other hand, the vast majority of participants said they were unaware of fact-checking sites explicitly dedicated to verifying information of public interest. The three who said they had heard of these initiatives indicated that they do not use them to check the veracity of the information they consult.

8.1.2. Impact of the characteristics of disinformation content

Presenting two samples with different formats –a video and an image– made it possible to identify distinct characteristics that, according to the participants, alert or confuse them regarding the veracity of the messages shown.

The piece that caused the most mistrust was sample 2, the fictitious Facebook post that shares an image attributed to the magazine *Proceso*, in which a former federal cabinet official criticizes the Mexican President. This is what participants had to say about the way this information was presented:

First, participants pointed out the lack of additional evidence about what is said in the message, for instance, a link leading to a *Proceso* article from which the sample's quotes were taken.

Another aspect commonly pointed out was the lack of the blue checkmark that some social media platforms give to indicate that a poster's account is verified. According to interviewees, this mark indicates that the information may be more credible.

Additionally, participants repeatedly remarked on the sample's poor graphic quality, which does not resemble the format used in serious media when publishing information. "I would not share it because it does not have the link to the story itself. It is just an image that can lend itself to changing the narrative a little bit" (Interview 23, personal communication, May 24, 2022). The interviewees mentioned that it looked like a photo edited by an ordinary person who assembled a collage using the logo of *Proceso* and placing it next to

decontextualized quotes from Alfonso Romo. "It is very poorly edited, really. Romo's image is above that of Proceso, that is, partially covering their logo. I don't think that they would do that kind of work" (Interview 17, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

Another factor that was considered suspicious was the subject matter of this sample message, which mainly consisted of a former federal official's criticism of the President. For participants, this message constitutes a political attack of the kind that, in their perception, is usually linked to disinformation content that seeks to generate anger in the public and discredit political rivals.

Sample 1 (the TikTok video) also raised several participants' suspicions of being fake. The factors most influencing this perception were: the lack of knowledge of the original video's language (Russian), and the platform on which the content had been uploaded, namely TikTok. Regarding the language, participants stated that, since they did not know Russian, they could not be sure whether the subtitles had been manipulated to say something different from what the speaker in the video was actually saying. "I don't know Russian, so who can tell me if the translation is correct or not?" (Interview 7, personal communication, April 29, 2022). Regarding TikTok, interviewees pointed out that it was not a reliable platform to consult information of this nature and that it was a common place to find disinformation.

Finally, another aspect that several participants named as a red flag was the additional elements that were added to the video through TikTok's features, specifically a text with a message that criticized the "4T" accompanied by emojis that try to speak to the audience's fears. "It uses these emojis to scare people, to create more fear, more sensationalism" (Interview 19, personal communication, May 19, 2022). Particularly those participants who said they had a neutral opinion of the President pointed to the use of the term "4T" in a negative context as an indicator that political opponents to López Obrador had manipulated the video. "[I knew it was] very false, as soon as I saw 4T" (Interview 17, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

However, participants who believed that the content in sample 1 was true reported that the main aspects that tricked them into trusting its veracity were its format (video) and its use of clips from an authentic newscast to make the montage. The use of video made the content easier to understand because it is a format that they are used to consuming on social media, while the appearance of a newscast predisposed them to expect credible news, like the ones they usually see in content of that nature.

Likewise, another element that contributed to the confusion was that the content touched on a topic that was familiar to them: the war in Ukraine and Mexico's reaction to it, since this subject had been present in the media in recent weeks. In this sense, some who claimed to have a negative opinion towards the Mexican President pointed out that the information was credible because, in their eyes, it presented a reaction that corresponded with the "wrong" decisions that the President made. "I would have shared the video. The truth is that I would have shared it because, well, it manipulated me, showed me all the data on things I am looking for, that is, the language and my displeasure with the President" (Interview 4, communication staff, April 21, 2022).

Sample 2 was less credible among participants. Those who did say that it seemed authentic, however, also pointed to familiarity with the content, since the message refers to one of the President's most heard phrases, "the mafia in power," which his government promised to combat. Other characteristics mentioned were the inclusion of the Proceso logo, which denotes that this was the medium that supposedly published the information. Also mentioned was the brevity and simplicity of the text accompanied by the images: this made reading the information more attractive. "On one side, there are images that can help you make this connection, right? Between the people who say it or talk about it in the text" (Interview 18, personal communication, May 13, 2022).

8.1.3. Behaviors when sharing disinformation

Most interviewees assured me that they did not remember any instance in which they had unwittingly shared disinformation. However, they agreed that the ideal behavior in such a case would be to delete the disinformation once they realized the error. "I delete the post. I delete it from my profile. Because if I know it's wrong, why would I want someone else to continue seeing it, I'd better delete it" (Interview 4, personal communication, April 21, 2022).

They did point out that this deletion would depend on the platform on which they would have shared the false content. For example, due to the functionalities of Instagram, the stories uploaded there are automatically deleted after 24 hours, so it would not be so urgent to delete the post manually. Most interviewees agreed that it is not necessary to make any sort of clarification regarding the sharing of false information: just deleting the offending post would suffice. "As almost everything I upload is on Insta, if I check before the story's 24 hours are over, I'd delete it, but I wouldn't say 'ah, I was wrong,' I'd just delete it" (Interview 19, personal communication, May 19, 2022). Some noted that a clarification would be relevant only if someone else in their circle commented or reacted to the post. They also expressed that making such a clarification is easier in a more closed context, such as their WhatsApp chats, than in an open forum.

8.1.4. Refusal to share disinformation for political reasons

The vast majority of those interviewed –all except one– forcefully rejected the idea of knowingly sharing disinformation in order to benefit a political figure of their preference. In one of the questions during the interview, participants were asked to reflect on a hypothetical scenario in which they found false information that could help the cause of their political candidate or harm a rival. Interviewees had to answer whether it was justified to share said content, knowing that it is false, in order to benefit the politician they supported because they believed that, in the long run, this person would govern better.

The main reasons they cited for refusing to engage in this behavior were that they would be affecting other people's ability to make decisions based on truthful information and because it went against their values, for example, not lying and being fair to other people. "It would not be fair. Well, I think it wouldn't. Maybe it's what is being done a lot lately, but I don't think it is right to do those things" (Interview 26, personal communication, May 26, 2022). Another reason they gave was that, in the long run, the strategy of sharing false information could be counterproductive to their candidate's reputation, as well as their own, were said information proven to be false.

The exceptional case of the interviewee who indicated that he would share false news explained that he would not share information that could put other people's life or safety at risk, but only other types of messages, such as those pertaining to political gossip. "Maybe some little gossip or some differences or something like that" (Interview 20, personal communication, May 19, 2022). The young man, who is majoring in political science and said he was interested in joining the local political arena, argued that he takes his role as a member of the opposition very seriously, so sharing false information with these motivations would be somewhat of a task he would be willing to fulfill in order to contribute to the cause to which he is affiliated.

8.2. *Perceptions and attitudes around disinformation*

8.2.1. Diagnosis of disinformation in the participants' environment

Disinformation is an issue that the college students interviewed deem serious and highly prevalent in Mexican society. They consider that this content represents a problem mainly because it leads people to make decisions based on incorrect information and stokes widespread fear in them.

In several cases, interviewees mentioned the topic before being directly asked about it. This occurred when they talked about their information consumption habits, since the abundance of this type of content alerts them to the need to verify the information they find. Additionally, the young participants explained that, due to their status as college students, they tend to be cautious when consulting information to carry out their academic activities. In some of their classes, they have even received guidance on how to identify disinformation.

On the other hand, they lamented that most people in Mexico do not have the skills or critical thinking to identify false content. "Many people do believe it as it is, disinformation, and people go to that side, they are not aware of the subject" (Interview 22, personal communication, May 19, 2022). The topics about which they find more disinformation are politics, entertainment, and health. Regarding the issue of health in particular, they expressed concern about the high number of false news about the COVID-19 pandemic and especially the vaccines to combat it.

8.2.2. Disinformation as a problem of other generations

A recurring remark from participants is that disinformation is a problem that occurs especially in older generations. The main explanation they give for these generational differences is that, in contrast to their own experience, older people did not grow up with the Internet and social media, so they are more vulnerable to falling for false news. "I think that, perhaps, people who are older or who have difficulties using the media find it more complicated, because they do not understand the Internet well" (Interview 27, personal communication, May 26, 2022). This perception is linked to the experiences they have had with people close to them, mainly family members. It should be noted that this idea was also expressed by those who fell for the false content in the samples presented to them.

Likewise, interviewees assured that members of older generations use mainly Facebook, a site that in their view has more disinformation. Another explanation for this difference, according to them, is that adults are the ones sharing more disinformation because they tend to share more news in general, as they are more interested in those topics and do not have as many reservations about expressing their political opinions online.

Considering this issue, these young people say they try to help their older relatives, such as parents, uncles/aunts, and grandparents, so that they learn how to detect disinformation and not fall for it or share it. "It does have to do with the generations, I think, because I have always told my parents to do that, to search every time they see a story, to search a little more" (Interview 25, personal communication, May 25, 2022). Finally, it should be clarified that, despite this tendency to link disinformation with older generations, a minority of those interviewed said that this problem is not exclusive to older people, since colleagues and friends also tend to believe and share this type of content.

8.2.3. Motivations of disinformation creators

Interviewees identified the motives behind the creation of disinformation to be mainly political and economic. On the one hand, participants pointed out that this content is generated and spread to publicly discredit political rivals. According to the students, these initiatives to attack a public figure's reputation come from all kinds of political factions, although they mentioned more examples that target the current government, referring to the samples seen during the conversation. "I feel that lately governments are attacked all the time, I feel that it is quite simply a political attack" (Interview 11, personal communication, May 6, 2022).

Participants additionally stated that, since false information tends to be sensationalist and appeals to emotions, it can also have the purpose of distracting from more relevant and serious social issues. "Sometimes this thing of smoke screens also happens. They try to make a lot known about one thing in order to do something else without us noticing as much"

(Interview 1, personal communication, April 7, 2022). Although they disagree with this type of actions, they deem them to be highly common political strategies.

Furthermore, a recurring explanation was that those who upload false messages intend to attract attention on the platforms where they operate and which they monetize in order to obtain some form of economic benefit. In other words, according to participants, the need to gain more followers, have more views and likes, and be more relevant by landing a viral video on social media, are factors that influence some people to spread false messages. "There are people who, when they do it, especially on TikTok, I think it's because they want to be trending or to be seen" (Interview 14, personal communication, May 11, 2022).

8.2.4. Impact of disinformation on political interest

One of the consequences of disinformation, as cited by participants, is that it reduces their interest in learning about politics. For one, interviewees regret that disinformation has become a dirty war strategy when it comes to doing politics. "It generates more disinterest in the subject for the same reason. I feel that it is already something that's present a lot in politics. A lot of disinformation" (Interview 26, personal communication, May 26, 2022). In addition, they state that the high presence of false content is overwhelming and implies having to constantly verify information, which can lower interest in researching politics and public affairs. "It's tiring, isn't it? Trying to corroborate all the information you receive, and more so when it's about strong topics. So, I completely understand those who prefer to ignore them all, whether true or false" (Interview 27, personal communication, May 26, 2022).

Another aspect mentioned is that disinformation makes it difficult to talk with other people who fall for the deception of false news, so it is frustrating to try to discuss political issues and they therefore choose not to. "In the same Internet that you have for social media, you can go investigate, right? So that creates a lot of conflict for me and that is why I try to totally get away from the political issue" (Interview 22, personal communication, May 19, 2022).

However, some interviewees expressed a reverse impact of disinformation on their interest in politics, particularly among the political science majors: observing this content motivates them to get more involved and work towards making the correct information available to people. "You transform that same annoyance into motivation to encourage people not to consume that type of information, to check, to verify" (Interview 15, personal communication, May 11, 2022). One of the interviewees even pointed out that these harmful information dynamics had in part led him to create his own YouTube channel to comment on political issues. "I made the channel for the same reason, because there were no national news stories that were not so sensationalist" (Interview 19, personal communication, May 19, 2022).

8.3. Behaviors and attitudes towards traditional media and social media

8.3.1. Information Consumption Habits

Information consumption habits provide context to the relationship that the interviewed students have with disinformation. Convincingly, participants responded that the main channels through which they consume information –they were asked in particular about information on politics– are social media and the Internet. Interviewees mainly mentioned Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as search engines such as Google, as places where they consult or find political information.

There was one exception: one of the students said that she is mostly informed by radio and television rather than social networks. However, almost all students assured that they do not use traditional media such as television, radio, and print newspapers. Some of them even stated that they do not have a television set because they are from out of town, and that they had not read any print newspapers for several years. Others pointed out that they rarely use conventional media: they may watch some news on television or read a print newspaper when they visit relatives who use these media.

Despite this decisive abandonment of conventional media, interviewees explained that they follow social media accounts through which they receive information on public interest matters. Among these social media accounts, students mention those of locally established media outlets, such as Milenio, Telediario and El Norte, as well as regional media outlets from their cities of origin. Some even indicate following official accounts of international media, such as CNN. "On Instagram I do follow pages from El Norte, Milenio and ABC, I think. And additionally, some news from the United States, well, not news, but accounts" (Interview 5, personal communication, April 22, 2022). Although they do not watch entire newscasts, participants explained that they watch informative capsules on YouTube from this type of media outlets. In turn, they also explained that they follow some YouTubers and accounts of new digital sites that have a new way of presenting information, in a more visual and explanatory way.

8.3.2. Skepticism towards traditional media

This theme refers to the ambiguity that students show regarding established media in contrast to social media. Participants identify that disinformation is much more prevalent in social media than in more established outlets, such as television stations and newspapers.

College students are clear that the processes followed by established media to publish news make it difficult for them to fall for disinformation, because the stories go through editors tasked with detecting false information. This mechanism contrasts with the ease of publishing falsehoods on social media since they typically lack this type of filter. Likewise, they consider that traditional media value their credibility more, so they take more care of what they publish. "It is not convenient for a newscast to put false stories. Why? Because they know that sooner or later, if they do that, they will lose prestige, which is what generates money at the end of the day" (Interview 11, personal communication, May 26, 2022).

However, despite acknowledging that traditional media are much less likely to spread outright disinformation, participants maintain a skeptical stance towards them. This position stems from the perception that these media are heavily biased, aligning the information they present with each organization's particular agenda. "Before, these TV networks, these television stations, got more financing, so I feel that therefore, much more priority is given to news against the current government" (Interview 28, personal communication, May 26, 2022). Likewise, they consider that media tend to present information in a sensationalist tabloid format to attract attention and that, especially on television and radio, journalists often share their own opinions about the information they transmit, something that has an impact on public opinion.

8.3.3. Reluctance to share information and opinions

Another aspect that stands out regarding these students' habits of consuming political information in the current media landscape, is that many of them reported that they do not usually share the information they find on their networks, or their opinion about it, i.e., they only consult it. The explanations given for this behavior are diverse. On the one hand, they say that they feel overwhelmed by the large amount of information and opinions already circulating on the networks, so they do not want to add to the heap with one more opinion.

Another reiterated comment was that they do not like to share information that generates controversy or conflict, because they see how aggressive people get on social media and they try to avoid getting involved in such situations. "I don't share as much online because I know it's a touchy subject, right? And I think that not all of us think the same way, similar to talking about religion, money" (Interview 5, personal communication, April 22, 2022). From their point of view, participating by sharing information and opinions on political issues online can cause them future trouble: they might express ideas that could affect them adversely, e.g., when looking for a job, or even cause someone to try to do them harm.

They are also reluctant to share information due to the large amount of false content they find, so they choose not to share to avoid spreading disinformation. Another reason why they do not share their opinions on social media is that they feel that they are not as ready to share political information and ideas as, for example, older people who have more formed views on politics.

Although they share little information, they pointed out that there are topics where they do feel more inclined to share, in particular those that they consider important to publicize because they are related to people's safety or well-being. For example, they mentioned the issues of missing and murdered women in their communities, or relevant information about COVID-19. Additionally, they are more likely to share information through WhatsApp groups than on more public social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

9. Discussion

This study aims to contribute to our understanding of the relationship that young people –particularly Mexican college students– have with disinformation, and to elucidate their practices and perceptions around this phenomenon. To achieve this goal, a qualitative perspective was chosen to delve into how these young people conceive of and deal with this currently booming problem in the media landscape and in public discourse. The study focused on three specific objectives: looking into how college students interact with disinformation, how their media consumption habits impact such interactions, and how their perceptions on disinformation could influence their desire to be informed and participate in political issues.

An elicitation technique was used during semi-structured interviews by showing participants real disinformation content that circulated on social media in order to encourage conversations based on samples similar to those that participants encounter in their day-to-day lives. In regard to the first objective, results indicate that the interviewees are capable of identifying disinformation and have an idea of the characteristics that must be paid attention to in order to identify a false story, such as: the quality of the message and its format, the lack of hyperlinks to serious and verifiable sources, the appeal to emotions, and the inclusion of polarizing messages. Likewise, results show that students have incorporated strategies to verify news when consuming information, including searching for information in other sources, consulting with trusted people and reviewing comments on networks about the topic in question.

In spite of this mostly positive finding, the analysis revealed that some college students are vulnerable to believing disinformation and that the format in which they encounter this content influences their ability to assess its veracity. This became evident when comparing the reaction to the two samples, a TikTok video and an image posted on Facebook. The image was much more easily recognized as false, while the video managed to confuse more interviewees. This result is relevant, since social media platforms, and especially those preferred by young people such as TikTok and Instagram, have given priority to content in video format. In contrast, it is also worth noting that the young participants practically do not know about or use fact-checking sites, which are efforts developed by journalists explicitly to combat disinformation.

Another finding that can be interpreted positively is that, contrary to what previous studies have found (Madrid-Morales *et al.*, 2020; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2019), participants spoke out against consciously sharing disinformation for political motives. Although these results may be affected by a social desirability effect during the interview, students argued categorically against carrying out such an action, convinced that this behavior implies lying and therefore it is unethical and unfair to others, plus it may damage their own reputation. However, it is worth mentioning that there was one participant who did speak in favor of deliberately sharing disinformation to benefit a political candidate. As such, the potential for

this type of political motivation around disinformation, even if not abundant, should be further investigated.

In terms of the second objective of this work, I was interested in illuminating the relationship between the political information consumption habits of college students and their perceptions and interactions with disinformation. In agreement with previous works (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2021; Pérez-Escoda & Pedrero Esteban, 2021), results of this research indicate that, although they say they find more disinformation there, college students still significantly prefer social media over traditional channels. However, when inquiring about the content they consume on social media platforms, participants pointed out that, along with new digital media or influencers who have become opinion leaders, they also follow verified accounts of established media outlets they trust. Students are aware of the difference between the editorial processes that these media follow to publish information, compared to the lack of filters that prevails in other social media accounts. Furthermore, this awareness does not imply that they are uncritical of the content they consume in traditional media, since they identify that the media organizations' particular agendas can bias published content. Thus, college students are inserted in an information landscape where they initially distrust the information they find. On the positive side, this position is one of the principles promoted by media literacy, which calls for people to be critical about information; on the downside, however, this distrust also complicates participants' ability to feel confidently informed or to perceive a shared sense of reality that would allow them to discuss issues with others and make decisions about their community. According to the participants' statements, these difficulties also impact their willingness to share political information and their opinions, something that may have deeper implications for a democracy.

Students expressed concern about the disinformation phenomenon in their environment, both at the state and national levels, especially because this type of content leads to making decisions based on wrong information. Despite this concern, however, most of the interviewees linked the problem to older generations, which could be indicative of a third-person effect (Jang & Kim, 2018) that causes them to minimize the impact of disinformation on themselves by believing that it mainly affects others.

Moreover, addressing the third objective of this study, results also indicate that disinformation can and does impact participants' interest in consuming political information. Students expressed feeling overwhelmed by the disinformation they constantly encounter and the fact that it is used as a dirty war strategy in politics. Other scholars have warned that concern about disinformation may be overstated because it usually has minimal effects on public beliefs (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2022), which corresponds with how most students reacted with disinformation samples in this study. However, students reported that disinformation discourages them from acquiring political information; this emphasizes that disinformation can have an impact beyond whether or not it succeeds in deceiving those who see it. This finding coincides with previous works that establish a relationship between disinformation and political disaffection in the United States (Jang-Jones *et al.*, 2020) and in Mexico (Galarza Molina, 2022). Lastly, it should also be noted that a few participants expressed the opposite impact, i.e., that facing disinformation motivates them to more actively verify the false news they find and to guide others so that they do not fall for it, and even to participate by generating content that adds value in an environment riddled with false news. These different ramifications on political interest should be researched more in depth in future studies.

This study reveals nuances regarding how college students in Mexico perceive and consume social and traditional media, and how their attitudes and behaviors impact their relationship with disinformation. Moreover, it presents evidence about how this population interacts with disinformation, showing that this type of content is critically questioned and not taken at face value. However, the findings also point out that there are differences related to the format of the disinformation content being presented, and that college students

perceive that this problem is more prevalent among older people. Finally, this qualitative exploratory work provides lines of investigation for further studies to examine the consequences of disinformation beyond the credibility of false content, such as reducing interest in political discourse and, to a lesser extent, the willful and politically motivated sharing of disinformation.

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