

## What is the Main Source of Information for Generations Z, Y, X? A general Fake News Analysis on Different Media Mediums

**Trusculescu Laria-Maria**

West University of Timisoara, Romania  
laria.trusculescu97@e-uvt.ro

**Gherhes Vasile**

Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania  
vasile.gherhes@upt.ro

**Tiru Laurentiu-Gabriel**

West University of Timisoara, Romania  
laurentiu.tiru@e-uvt.ro

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### Abstract

*Current research shows a clear difference between generations and the main sources of information they access.*

*While for Generations Z and Y accessing social networks and various online platforms are the basis of information gathering, for Generation X, the main source of information is traditional media. Moreover, the level of fake news on social media and the speed with which it spreads is much higher than in traditional media. At the same time, the speed with which they are refuted can be just as high (we will verify this hypothesis in a future study).*

*The study aims to clarify, on one hand, which are the main sources of information for Generations X, Y, Z in Romania. On the other hand, to determine how much trust each of these Generations has in their sources of information and, how capable each of them is to identify fake news. These study objectives were followed in a survey conducted on 371 respondents, belonging to a diversity of ages and professional training.*

*The study concludes that, on one hand, the main source of information for Generation Z is satire sites and apps, such as: TikTok. On the other hand, the main sources for Generation X are traditional news, and for Generation Y a combination of the two. Also particularly surprising is that Gen Z are better able to differentiate fake news from true information, even though they are the ones who don't have a clear system of "analysing fake news" like the other generations have.*

*While news sources have evolved and grown online over time, such an analysis will be interesting to observe in these generations across Europe.*

**Keywords:** fake news, generations, sources, information, social media

## INTRODUCTION

Current research shows a clear difference between generations and the main sources of information they access. The specialized literature mentions the following news sources as being among the most used, depending on the generation to which people belong. "For Generation Z, the most common sources of information are social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, as well as YouTube and other online video platforms" (Jiang, 2018). This generation is the first in history to grow up with technology and the Internet at their fingertips, which has determined them to stop paying attention to traditional media. On one hand, according to another study conducted by Pew Research Center, "Millennials are more likely to get their news from social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as online news sources, such as CNN and MSNBC" (Elisa & Matsa, 2018). Unlike Generation Z, Millennials were born in the period when Facebook and Twitter were born, that's why their first option for information and communication, with others of their generation, are these. On the other hand, Millennials are preparing to take over the positions of power currently occupied by Generation X and Boomers. Furthermore, for both generations, social media slowly ends up being a platform for informing and debating new news. (Newman et al., 2019). "Members of Generation X are more likely to get their news from traditional sources, such as television news and newspapers, although they are also increasingly turning to online news sources" (Elisa & Matsa, 2018). Generation X was used to journalists, who had a reputation, they checked the sources before publishing. Now, the volume of information is so big on the internet, moreover anyone can write, as a result they are afraid to trust everything they read online. Thanks to the newspapers that moved online, Generation X and Baby Boomers are slowly moving towards online information (Elisa & Matsa, 2018).

Generational differences have long been a topic of interest for social scientists, especially now with the proliferation of digital media, it is essential to understand how different generations consume information and how it influences their attitudes and beliefs. "Studies have found that younger individuals tend to be more sceptical of information online, while older adults may be more likely to accept information at face value, which can make them more vulnerable to fake news" (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). This proves the connection between generations and their place of origin, as well as cultural differences. In other words, some studies confirm that young generations trust what they read on the Internet, while other studies support the opposite. That is why the current study aims to analyse the situation in Romania.

The generation that this study looks at are generation Z, born 1995-2012; generation Y (also known as Millennials), born 1980-1994, and generation X, born 1965-1979. Each generation has its unique set of experiences and values, which can shape their characters and behaviours (University of South Florida, 2014). As such, each generation also has different levels of exposure to fake news and different methods of recognizing and tackling them. The studies main aim is to clarify, on one hand, which are the main sources of information for Generations X, Y, Z in Romania. On the other hand, to determine how much trust each of these Generations has in their sources of information and, how capable each of them is to identify fake news. Furthermore, to determine what criteria people have in order to detect fake news and what they do once they find them.

**Research Method and Tools**

These study objectives were followed in a cross-sectional survey, which collected data from the sample of 371 individuals, at a single point in time, belonging to a diversity of ages and professional training. The survey was conducted online, and respondents were invited to participate via email or social media. A set of structured questions were carefully designed, to ensure that they were concise, and unbiased, to elicit specific information from the respondents. The survey consisted of closed-ended questions with predefined response options and open-ended questions which allowed us to get a better grasp on respondent’s opinions. To collect the data, we used Google Forms, that allowed us to distribute the survey quickly and efficiently, as such respondents were able to complete the survey at their convenience, and the platform automatically collected and stored the data.

**Research results and debates**

To understand the results, one should first understand the generations and differentiate them from one another. One of the most significant differences between generations is the way in which they consume media. According to a report by the Pew Research Centre, younger generations, such as Gen Y and Gen Z, are more likely to get their news from social media and online sources than older generations, such Gen X (Mitchell et al., 2021). Another significant difference is the way they consume entertainment media. According to a study by Nielsen, younger generations tend to consume entertainment media online: streaming services and video sharing platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch, than older generations (Balderston, 2020). Additionally, there are differences in the way generations consume advertising and marketing messages. According to a report by WorldStream, younger generations tend to be more sceptical of traditional advertising methods and more receptive to influencer marketing and social media advertising (Mary, 2022).

**Figure 1: How often do respondents use the sources for information**

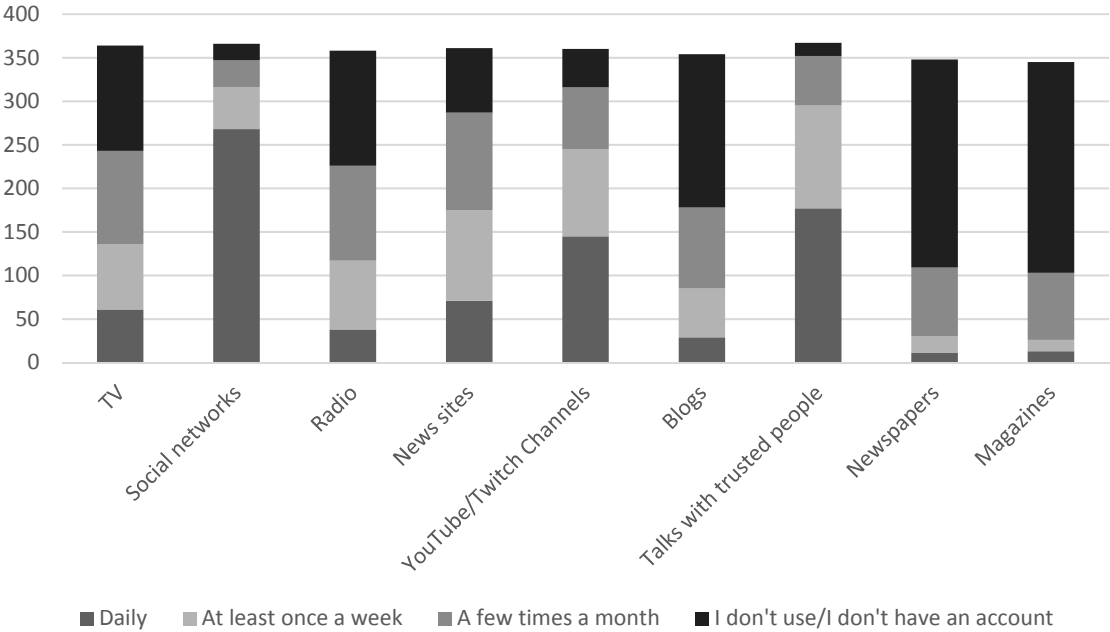


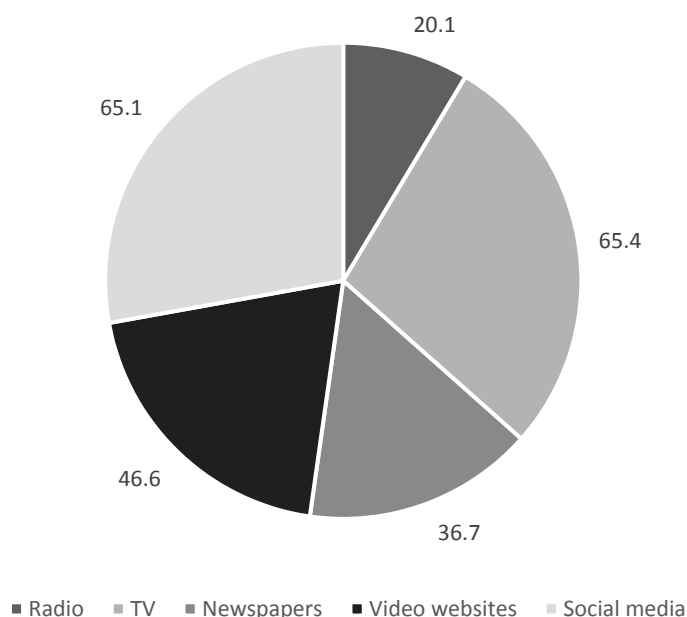
Figure 1 shows an overall look at the responses to question 2: different sources of information, and which one people prefer, from the survey. Amongst the nine options, as expected, social media is used

far more as a source for getting information, with a little over 72% of the respondents using different social media platforms on a daily basis. Particularly surprising, is how many people, close to 48%, prefer “talking with trusted people” such as friends or family, daily, to obtain new information. This shows on one hand, that today’s generation still finds human interaction highly important (whether live or online). On the other hand, it can show a lack of being able to have an opinion or make a decision on their own, especially since on third place as a source of information are streaming platforms, with 39%, such as YouTube and Twitch, that are known for their videos of explaining something or showing ones talent as a form of entertainment. Furthermore, traditional media has greatly decreased in popularity as a source of information. Magazines, Newspapers, Radio and TV are almost never used; with 65%, 64%, 35,6%, 32,6% of respondents respectively admitting that they “don’t use” them.

All these differences can have a significant impact on the way people perceive and respond to news and information, regardless of them being real or fake. The diverse information sources can have significant implications for their attitudes and beliefs. For example, the greater reliance of younger generations on social media for news can expose them to more biased and sensationalized content, which can influence their perception of reality (Vargo et al., 2018). Additionally, the greater consumption of online entertainment media by younger generations can shape their attitudes towards cultural and societal issues and affect their political and social engagement (Kim et al., 2013). Moreover, the different attitudes towards advertising and marketing messages can influence consumer behaviour and shape the way people perceive brands and products. The scepticism of younger generations towards traditional advertising methods can lead to a preference for more personalized and authentic marketing approaches, such as influencer marketing and user-generated content (Newman et al., 2019). This is one of the main reasons younger generations prefer to find information, ideas, and opinions on social platforms rather than in traditional media: social media can easily be tailored to them, their needs and their curios minds.

It is believed that fake news is more widespread through social networks than traditional media. According to a study conducted by Romania Insider found that "social media is the primary source of news for Romanians, with 48% of the population using it as their main source" (RomaniaInsider, 2019). This high reliance on social media as a source of news has greatly contributed to the spread of fake news in Romania. In addition, the algorithms used by social media platforms only contribute to the spread of false information. Furthermore, the viral nature of social networks makes it easier for fake news to spread rapidly, as such once a piece of fake news is shared on social media, it can quickly gain traction and reach a large audience before it is even debunked. This means that false information that generates high levels of engagement, such as likes and shares, is likely to be promoted more prominently on social media platforms and is creating a social bubble of similar opinions, making it very easy for individuals to get the impression that their opinion is shared by most people, thus it must be the truth and no further research is required.

**Figure 2: The media channels where fake news was most often found**



The main objective of the question from the survey was, to identify on which media channel people found the most fake news, as seen in Figure 2. From the answers given by all 371 respondents, five clear media channels spread the most fake news. Surprisingly “social media” is not the one that spreads the most fake news, but “television” with almost 66% of respondents agreeing. What is true is that “social media” is not far behind, at 65%. This might show that, even if some studies prove that people spread fake news far more often and easier true social media, the ability to just as easily “google it” and research the truth and the sources of the original information, makes it simpler to forget or to prove the fake news. Furthermore, on social media every post, picture, video etc. can instantly be modified, corrected, or completely removed, that is why a false information can always be transformed in a correct one. Whereas on TV, one cannot so easily verify the sources of the information received and it can also not be instantly corrected. A bit surprisingly, the least fake news, according to the respondents, can be found in audio media such as “radio” with just a little over 20%. It might give us an insight on how little auditory information people can store, meaning that if they do remember the information they might or may not verify it later.

Research shows that older people are more likely to spread fake news on social media than younger people. According to a study conducted by researchers at Princeton University and New York University, people over the age of 65 shared almost seven times as many articles from fake news websites as those aged 18 to 29 (Guess et al., 2020). This finding is consistent with other studies, such as one conducted by the Pew Research Center, which found that older people were more likely to share news stories that were later determined to be false (Brashier & Schacter, 2020).

**Figure 3: The most exposed generations to the phenomenon of fake news**

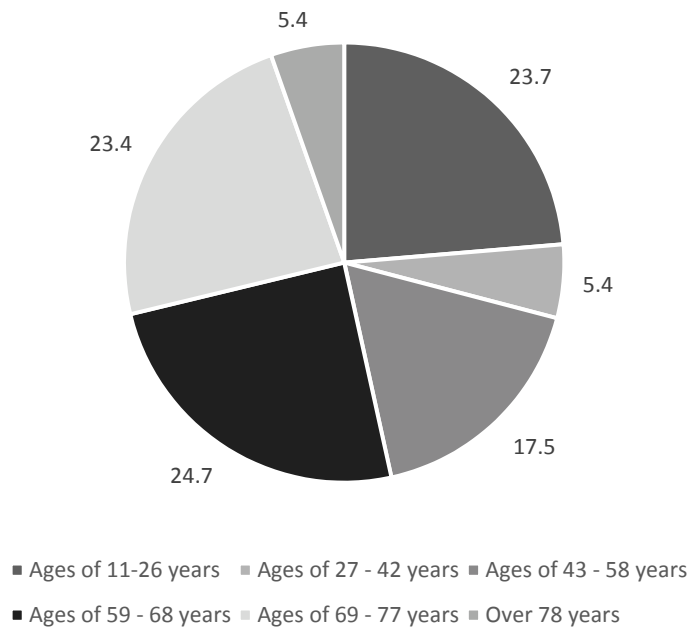


Figure 3 shows what age groups the respondents believe to be the most exposed to fake news. One can observe that the groups are in fact the different generations: Ages 11-26 are “generation Z”; ages 27-42 are “millennials” also known as generation Y; ages 43-58 are “generation X”; ages 59-68 and ages 69-77 are both “boomers” but the difference between the two age groups is significant due to the latter being drafted into war. Respondents strongly believe boomers and generation Z to be the most exposed to fake news, among all the generations, with almost 25% and 24% respectively. On one hand, it is not surprising, since generation Z is the first one to have technology and internet at their fingertips since they were born, moreover Figure 2 shows clearly that fake news is very prominent in social media. By having so much information at their disposal, generation Z must have a clearly predetermined way of testing a source and news or they can easily fall prey and share fake news. On the other hand, boomers were born and spend most of their lives in the traditional media era, when news were printed. What was true, and remains true even today, is the credibility that comes with the title of journalist. In other words, a journalist risks his name and reputation and that of the company he represents, i.e., his career, when he publishes something. Because of this, boomers don't have the eye trained to detect fake news, which nowadays you can easily find on TV and on the Internet. On the other hand, older people tend to have less digital literacy than younger people (Ngiam et al., 2022).

**Table 1: How to identify fake news and what people do once they find one**

<b>Q13. Below are some elements that can help identify whether a news/image/message is fake or not. To what extent do you agree or disagree with them:</b>						
<b>Elements and statements</b>	<b>To a very large extent</b>	<b>Largely</b>	<b>To an appropriate extent</b>	<b>To a small extent</b>	<b>To a very small extent</b>	<b>I do not know/ I do not answer</b>
Image content appears to be unnatural/unrealistic	39.9	29.6	19.7	3.8	3.2	3.8
Image contains cut corners or objects	31.3	28.6	23.5	8.1	3.5	5.1
Using the filter used in the image	25.9	27.2	27	11.3	3.5	5.1
Poor image quality or low resolution	23.5	23.7	28.8	15.1	5.1	3.8

The message/article makes a claim without any reference to the source	52	23.7	14.8	3.2	3	3.2
The message/article has many spelling mistakes	50.7	18.6	16.4	7.3	3	4
Exaggerated Article Title (Clickbait)	59	18.1	13.5	3.8	1.6	4
<b>Q14. Below are some statements that can help identify whether a news/image/message is fake or not. To what extent do you agree or disagree with them?</b>						
I assume what I'm reading must be true because it's published	10.8	36.1	8.4	24.3	17.3	3.2
I don't question the validity of what I read because everything on the internet is correct	4	56.9	4.3	17.8	12.1	4.9
I look at the URL to see if there is a click tracker	14.8	19.1	14.6	18.9	20.5	12.1
I look at the name of the publisher to see if it is a reputable source of information	20.5	12.4	22.9	15.9	23.2	5.1
I look for other signs of genuine news, such as the writer's name and publisher	23.5	8.9	25.6	13.7	23.5	4.9
I ask someone I trust if they think the news is real or fake	16.4	14	22.4	18.9	24.8	3.5
I question everything all the time because I'm skeptical of everything on the internet	17.8	12.7	19.4	19.7	25.9	4.6
I ignore most things I see because I realize most of the information is questionable	12.4	14.3	17.5	22.4	28.6	4.9
<b>Q15. The statements below are useful when you have come across any kind of message that may have the potential to be fake. To what extent have you taken the following actions when you find any kind of fake news</b>						
Do an image search on Google	27.8	7	24.8	11.1	26.1	3.2
Check the image metadata	9.2	17	15.1	23.2	25.9	9.7
Search the internet for the claims made in the image/post/article	37.2	7.8	23.7	4.3	24	3
Look for the same story in some trusted news sites	36.4	5.1	29.1	5.9	19.7	3.8
Check the credibility of the author by reading other news/article from him/her	22.1	9.4	22.4	12.9	28	5.1
Check by cross-referencing several references in the article	21	10.5	23.2	13.2	27.2	4.9
Check out the site's "about us" page	12.4	14	18.9	22.9	25.6	6.2
Check the facts in various trusted "fact" checking sites	23.5	7.5	24	13.7	25.6	5.7

Table 1 shows how respondents detect fake news and what they tend to do once they find one.

Research shows that Gen Z is more likely to fact-check and share accurate information on social media than other generations. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 64% of Gen Z respondents said they had fact-checked information they found on social media in the past year, compared to 55% of Millennials, 49% of Gen X, and 44% of Baby Boomers (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). Furthermore, a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that Gen Z is more likely to use social media for news consumption and that they are more likely to follow a diverse range of news sources (Newman et al., 2020).

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that Gen Z has grown up with easy access to information and the ability to fact-check quickly. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, Gen Z is the first generation to have grown up entirely in the digital age, with easy access to information

via the internet and social media (Dimock, 2019). This digital literacy and ability to fact-check quickly can make Gen Z more resistant to fake news and more likely to spread accurate information.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Gen Z is more socially and politically engaged than previous generations. According to a report by Tufts C.I.R.C.L.E., Gen Z is more likely to participate in social and political activities, such as protests and volunteer work, than Millennials or Gen X (Booth et al., 2023). This social and political engagement can make Gen Z more motivated.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that, on one hand, the main source of information for Generation Z is social media, such as: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. Moreover, young people choose to discuss whether information is fake or not with people they trust, such as family members, friends etc. Also particularly surprising is that Gen Z are better able to differentiate fake news from true information, even though they are the ones who don't have a clear system of "analysing fake news" like the other generations have. Furthermore, generation Z has a very fast reaction time when it comes to sharing information. In other words, even if they don't read all the information, they still share it. But at the same time, if they realise the news is fake, they share it just as quickly in hopes of informing people of the truth.

On the other hand, the main sources for Generation X are traditional news, and for Generation Y a combination of the two. Generation Y and X are slowly moving towards online information, on one hand because they don't have time to spend searching for news in detail, but at the same time, when they have doubts about a piece of information, they prefer to check it from several online sources. On the other hand, traditional media remains the main source of information for generation X, but since it has started to move online, they follow it (Lewis, 2019).

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