



National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

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Doctoral thesis

Social networks and social networks use among young people in Romania

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Summary:

We live in a time when technology is no longer just a tool, but a medium that profoundly shapes how we think, communicate, and relate to reality. The digital age has redefined the boundaries between personal and social life, bringing remarkable opportunities and subtle challenges. In this ever-expanding virtual space, information circulates at an unprecedented speed, favoring not only the rapid transmission of knowledge but also the emergence of information distortions — from unintentional errors to deliberate forms of manipulation, such as the phenomenon of fake news.

Through this doctoral thesis, I aim to contribute to the deepening of the specialized literature on the use of social networks among young people in Romania, with a focus on the perceptual, motivational, and behavioral dimensions associated with these platforms. The objectives of the research focus on: (1) investigating the level of awareness of Romanian students regarding the issue of disinformation in the digital environment and how it influences individual perceptions and behaviors; (2) analyzing the established social media repertoire – Facebook, Instagram, TikTok – according to variables such as frequency, purpose and perceptions of users belonging to different age categories; (3) exploring emerging social networks preferred by young people – such as Snapchat, Discord, Twitch and Threads – from the perspective of usage motivations, the transition from traditional platforms to innovative features that facilitate their integration into everyday communication practices.

The paper is divided into four chapters, each offering a distinct perspective on how young Romanians, aged between 15 and 30, interact with online social networks. The first chapter provides a broad analysis of young people's preferences regarding social platforms, highlighting both the rise and popularity of certain social networks and the gradual decline of others, such as Facebook and Twitter. The fundamental motivations that determine the use of social networks are explored: communication, self-expression, entertainment, information, education, career, cultural exchange, civic activism, online shopping, and access to health information.

The first chapter also addresses a series of risks associated with online interaction: disinformation (fake news), digital addiction, the FOMO phenomenon (fear of missing out), the impact on mental and physical health, as well as forms of digital violence, such as cyberbullying and trolling. Given the complexity of these motivations and risks, I have included an analysis of the use of social networks for educational purposes, their role in promoting civic activism and

youth involvement in public life, as well as the impact of the fake news phenomenon. The first chapter concludes with a review of the evolution of emerging social networks – Snapchat, Discord, and Threads – including a brief history, statistical data on the distribution of users by age, their innovative features, and users’ perceptions of these platforms.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I aim to define the phenomenon of fake news, highlighting at the same time the complexity of this concept and the nuances introduced by different authors. I found that, although there are numerous attempts to define it, the concept is difficult to operationalize, as fake news is not (entirely) false and is not (always) news (Bârgăoanu & Radu, 2018, p. 26).

Next, I analyze how the expansion of the fake news phenomenon was influenced by the emergence of the Internet and the accelerated development of digital technologies. I find that the large volume of information available online leads users to devote increasingly less time to consuming media content, sometimes only a few seconds. This behavior has favored the emergence and consolidation of the clickbait industry, supported by superficial information consumption.

In this section of the second chapter, I also discuss the tools used in disinformation campaigns, such as trolling, social media algorithms that promote popular content (often with the aim of disseminating polarizing political messages), filter bubbles that filter information according to user’s preferences, cyber propaganda, and computational propaganda.

I also address the European Union’s interventions in combating disinformation, highlighting a series of concrete measures: ”a Code of Practice on disinformation; an independent European network of fact-checkers; a secure European online platform on disinformation; improving media literacy in the field of mass media; supporting Member States to ensure electoral resilience; promoting voluntary online identification systems; promoting quality and diverse information; a strategic and coordinated communication policy” (European Commission, 2018b, p. 2). I also mention the legislative framework provided by the Digital Services Act, considered the most advanced at a global level in terms of regulating the digital space.

The second chapter also analyzes the issue of cognitive biases involved in the process of recognizing fake news. Given the diversity of these cognitive biases, I have chosen to refer only to the most frequently encountered ones, namely: confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance, and the Bandwagon effect.

The second chapter continues with research aiming to investigate the level of awareness of young students in Romania regarding the issue of disinformation in society and its impact on social actors. In addition, the research aims to assess the level of familiarity of young people with the concept of “lateral reading” and to analyze the importance of developing resilience to disinformation, as well as other information verification techniques. It will also investigate the ability of young students to overcome cognitive biases in the process of information verification, in this regard, I present the results of a study that suggests that social networks, news sites, and other media channels are constantly accompanied by false information and news, which spread quickly and easily through them. The vast majority of information is not accurate or verified and for this reason, there have been numerous cases of disinformation and propagation of conspiracy theories. First of all, social networks are a factor that amplifies the creation and spread of fake news, and the participants emphasized this aspect as such. Secondly, participants know information verification techniques, but certain cognitive errors such as conforming to the dominant opinion of the social group they belong to had a significant impact on their evaluation of information. Thirdly, participants know the motivations behind the creation and dissemination of fake news and what are its negative effects on societies in general and on individuals in particular.

In the third chapter of the thesis, I discuss the term affordances, a concept that refers to the opportunities for action made available to users by digital platforms. I analyze how social networks diversify their functions, by introducing options such as stories, live streaming, or marketplace, in an attempt to differentiate themselves and respond to the increasingly varied needs of the public. This perspective on the technological offer is complemented by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973), which seeks to explain the reasons why people choose to use a certain type of media according to specific needs, such as information, entertainment, expression of identity or social networking.

This dual approach, focusing on the functionalities offered by the platforms and on the motivations of the users, is essential for understanding how the social media repertoire of individuals has been configured over time. The specialized literature (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2020; Matassi et al., 2022; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) emphasizes that users have gradually integrated a wide range of social media forms into their communication repertoire, a process known as media repertoire. Matassi and his collaborators (2022) define social media repertoire as the result of a deliberate effort by users to routinely select only a few social networks, in an attempt to reduce the

complexity caused by the excessive proliferation of networks. Furthermore, they highlight the fact that both the composition of social repertoires and their size can vary according to socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, or educational status. Thus, the diversification of platform functionalities and user selection mechanisms influence each other, contributing to shaping a dynamic digital ecosystem, in which media consumption preferences and habits are constantly changing.

In the third chapter, I conduct research on the use of social networks and the perceptions of users from different age groups on the platforms Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The study investigates the participants' social media repertoire, perceptions towards users and non-users, as well as the attribution of characteristics and expectations depending on the platform used. The results show that social networks are integrated into daily practices, being perceived either as a means of relaxation, personal promotion, informal education, or as a form of wasting time.

In terms of convergence with the literature, it was confirmed that age significantly influences the use of social networks: young people (high school students and university students) use several platforms, while older people are mainly limited to Facebook. The study conducted in this chapter also presents some results that contradict the literature (Blank & Lutz, 2017; Feng et al., 2019, p. 1; Matassi et al., 2022, p. 139) regarding socioeconomic status and education level. More specifically, participants with high socioeconomic status do not frequently use all three platforms analyzed, although the literature claims that they tend to be more active on multiple social networks. Also, respondents with a higher educational level generally prefer one or two social networks, contrary to the hypothesis that a higher educational level is associated with a diversification of the use of social platforms.

The last chapter of this doctoral thesis addresses the topic of emerging social networks and explores the reasons for their use. Thus, we identified four main reasons: (1) emerging social networks offer the opportunity for users to become content creators; (2) emerging social networks are designed to provide an intuitive and easy-to-use interface; (3) emerging social networks are distinguished from traditional ones by their financial accessibility; (4) emerging social networks have a significant impact on the labor market.

Also, in the fourth chapter we discussed how emerging social networks have a positive impact on the educational field and how they play a significant role in the formation and consolidation of online communities, facilitating not only interactions but also creating a sense of

belonging and commitment among members (Lechner and Hummel, 2002; Li et al., 2015, Luo et al., 2021). This chapter also explores the negative aspects that social networks exert on users, with a focus on the psychological, social, and behavioral effects: (1) cyberbullying; (2) the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) phenomenon; (3) addiction and excessive time consumption; (4) manipulation and disinformation; (5) the impact on mental health and self-esteem; (6) data privacy and security.

In this chapter, I investigated the emerging social networks used by young people in Romania, analyzing the motivations for adoption and the associated perceptions. The study highlights the transition from established platforms to new ones, determined by the degree of innovation and user experience. Respondents prefer networks that offer dynamic and personalized interactions, abandoning platforms considered outdated, such as Facebook, which is more associated with older generations. Discord and Snapchat are appreciated for innovative functionalities, such as thematic servers and temporary messages, while Twitch offers a more interactive consumption experience than traditional video platforms. Perceptions vary depending on the individual experience and the community of belonging: Snapchat is valued for its ephemeral nature and limited communication; Discord, for the creation of communities and voice conversations; Twitch, for the authenticity of the relationship between creators and the audience. Threads is mentioned as an emerging alternative to Twitter, perceived as a cleaner space for text conversations.

The results of this research make relevant contributions both in the field of studies on digital disinformation and in social networks. The paper proposes theoretical perspectives and empirical analyses regarding the level of awareness of young Romanians (15-30 years old) towards disinformation, established and emerging social media repertoires, as well as the motivations underlying the transition to new platforms. These results can serve as a basis for the elaboration of public policies more adapted to current digital realities and for the development of educational programs aimed at supporting the formation of responsible and informed behavior among young social media users.

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