

# “Information operations do not worry me” – The Role of Credible Information on Digital Platforms

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**Abstract:** *The results of the qualitative, multidisciplinary, and explorative research show that young people use various digital platforms to shape their understanding of facts and fiction. This research asks: 1) To what degree do young people between 16-29 years old use digital platforms as sources of information or news? and 2) To what degree are young people between 16-29 years old aware of disinformation campaigns on social media platforms? Out of all the n=362 young, anonymous, and volunteer research participants, everyone used various digital platforms as a source for credible information and news. Fake news or information operations did not concern young people directly, and they did not perceive themselves as targets of information operations. However, the power of AI, machine learning, algorithms, advertising, bots, and influencers was discussed to some degree.*

**Keywords:** *Information, Social Media, The Internet, Value Framing, Information Operations, Influencers*

## Introduction

Young people under the age of 29 years old use various digital platforms, such as social media and Internet platforms, as sources for fun, information, and news, as well as to participate locally and globally to varying degrees (Bergström & Belfrage 2018; Pietilä 2022; Oser, Hooghe & Marien 2013; Meriläinen 2021, 2022). The user-centric design of the digital platforms enables a better experience and usability (Pietilä 2022) to connect and participate locally and globally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, information and communication technology (ICT)-savvy youths seemed to benefit considerably from digitality in comparison to their less ICT-savvy peers (Pietilä *et al.* 2021). Young people say they have ownership of digital platforms, so they can be active, consume, and create credible content and worlds in which they live (Meriläinen 2022). Digital platforms also have various negative impacts on youth and the world (Nilan *et al.* 2015; Parris *et al.* 2022; Markey & Daniels 2022; Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi 2003). Yet more knowledge of digital platforms is needed in relation to information operations among young people. While young people use various digital platforms, do they consider themselves targets of information operations and fake news?

Shallcross (2017) highlighted the need for research on social media and information operations. The same can be said of various digital platforms. The usage of digital platforms as sources of news and information raises questions. In their own minds, are young people prone to information operations on digital platforms, such as social media and the Internet?

This qualitative research is explorative and illustrative; if youth use various digital platforms as sources for fun, belonging, news, and information, what possibilities does this create for information operations and divisions? How can these be used as breeding grounds for small and large-scale information operations by local and international hostile actors? The research relies on empirical data. The qualitative empirical data were gathered by the author from n=362 voluntary and anonymous co-researchers between the ages of 16 and 29 years in n=52 explorative research workshops held between February 2021 and May 2023 in n=8 vocational schools located in Western, Central, and Eastern Finland. The Finnish Youth Act (2016) defines young people as those under 29 years old. Much research has been done related to information operations, but there is a gap in the research regarding the views gained directly from young people regarding the connection between digital platforms and information operations. Moreover, the novelty of the research stems from the fact that the young people themselves produced the qualitative empirical research data. Thus, the answers to the research questions are based on the data derived directly from the young people.

The research questions are:

1. To what degree do young people between 16-29 years olds use digital platforms as sources of information or news?
2. To what degree are young people between 16-29 years olds aware of disinformation campaigns on social media platforms?

During this explorative empirical research, n=362 young vocational school students were invited to be anonymous and volunteer research participants. The results of this study are drawn from empirical data via qualitative content analysis; see the in depth look at the data gathering on Meriläinen (2022, 2021). Explorative research can be defined as a study with the intention of generating evidence that is needed to decide whether to proceed with the next phase of the research (Hallingberg *et al.* 2018). The explorative research method was chosen to develop multidisciplinary research protocols to conduct research with the youth, based on limited power relations between the adult researcher from the university and the young participants.

Framing, human-computer interaction (HCI), and information operations theory are essential to this research. Framing is based on values and beliefs that guide every actor's behavior, thinking, and communication, thus creating various understandings and archetypes. Values and beliefs are connected to how each actor creates a conscious or unconscious understanding of information, themselves, and others, through framing. Albarracín & Wyer (2000) studied the relationships among behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, while Schoenfeld (1983) discussed the connection between beliefs and cognitive performance. Weber & Crocker (1983) discussed cognitive changes regarding stereotypes along with the resulting archetypes and their formation in relation to changes in cognitive processes. They say that stereotypes (archetypes) can be resistant to change; however, they can change if actors gain more exposure, for example, by meeting people from a group they hold stereotypes about (Weber & Crocker 1983). These meetings can take place on online and offline platforms and can change the personal framing processes of issues, actors, and events.

## **Related works**

### **Value framing and information**

The theoretical choice of combining the fields of communication and political sciences with ICT has been made to create a new outlook on digital platforms in relation to information operations and youth. Personal value framing connects values and beliefs to the truthful information one senses and how one decodes it in one's thinking (Brewer & Gross 2005; Shen & Edwards 2005; Schemer, Wirth & Matthes 2012; Slothuus 2010). Framing affects how people, such as youth, view realities (Brewer & Gross 2005) and the credibility of digital platforms as sources of truth and information. Framing is a powerful tool aimed at other actors, such as people, governments, and organizations, and how they view issues, events, and other actors (Lewin 1947; Bachrach & Baratz 1962; Cohen 1963; Entman 1993; Kilburn 2009; Lippmann 1922; McCombs 1997; Stone & McCombs 1981). With their chosen forms of communication, actors, such as content creators and influencers on digital platforms, can influence others by placing emphasis on values and beliefs in information or even particular digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or Wikipedia, which means that the salience of an actor's values and the consequent frames are transferred as salient to other actors, who then adopt the salience of frames by including them in their own thinking. This process is called the transfer of salience in the communication context (McCombs & Reynolds 2002), where personally relevant information and archetypes are shared. These can be used to direct young people to use digital platforms and to consume information from these platforms as truths.

### **Information and information operations**

Information operations utilize information as a tool to achieve certain endgames. As information is generally regarded as a soft power, it may be most effectively implemented in times other than force-on-force military conflict, where, depending on its intent and objectives, information can be used to inform, persuade, threaten, or confuse audiences (Iasiello 2017). Yet, information is nothing but the opposite of soft power. Information is used to create various realities and influence states, nations, and individuals online and offline (Chochowski 2022) and is a tool in information operations. In relation to Madden (2000), information does present facts that actors accept as truths if the content aligns with their personal value framing. In some cases, people are forced to accept information as truth, for example, through various forms of power. Moreover, information and how it is perceived and accepted are linked to actors' credibility and the platforms where communication occurs. For example, various digital platforms, such as social media apps, may be credible platforms for various young people (Meriläinen 2021, 2022), but not for adults. In addition, access to digital platforms creates a downward adjustment of established power differentials at all levels of society (Crawford 1999), where various actors can influence others.

Digital platforms are fertile soil for fake news (Van Der Linden, Roozenbeek & Compton 2020). Although much debated, fake news can be defined as news that contains incorrect or false information and lacks reporting of the incorrectness of the information (Wang 2020). Information operations have been discussed in relation to fake news, elections, and social movements (Darraj, Sample & Cowley 2017; Davey, Saltman & Birdwell 2018; Briant 2022). Various definitions of information operations have been proposed. Discussions of information operations have ranged from defense dialogues to digital platforms. These operations combine online and offline actions and are always participatory in nature when people partake in shaping and spreading them and the information they use. Furthermore,

information operations are often discussed in the context of military and national defense (Turan 2018; Thomas 1998; Cox 2006) in social media environments. Yet, as Crawford (1999) says, information operations and warfare are too important to be left to the military.

In information operations, various types of information, including disinformation and misinformation, are disseminated through various forms of communication and platforms, both online and offline. Disinformation is false information that is deliberately intended to mislead and make untrue facts. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information where facts are wrong (APA 2023). These can be combined and called fake news. Information operations are often discussed in the context of military and national defense (Turan 2018; Thomas 1998; Cox 2006) in digital environments. Weedon, Nuland & Stamos (2017) define them as actions taken by organized actors, such as governments or non-state actors, to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome. Information operations can use a combination of methods, for example, disinformation, false news, or networks of fake accounts aimed at manipulating public opinion (Weedon, Nuland & Stamos 2017). Starbird *et al.* (2019) argue that online information operations are participatory in nature, where messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers. Much like strategic communication offline and online, Starbird, Arif & Wilson (2019) assert that strategic information operations are efforts by individuals and groups, including state and non-state actors, to manipulate and change public opinion. These operations are a global phenomenon with political, social, psychological, educational, and cybersecurity dimensions (Starbird, Arif & Wilson 2019). While young people are active online, how, if at all, do they regard information?

### **Archetypes and us vs. them**

Various actors online, friend or foe, create archetypes of actors, such as young people, to be used in information operations to divide people in us vs. them realities. Much like strategic communication, which uses framing offline and online, Starbird, Arif & Wilson (2019) assert that strategic information operations are efforts by individuals and groups, including state and non-state actors, to manipulate and change public opinion, while others associate them with elections (Darraj, Sample & Cowley 2017; Davey, Saltman & Birdwell 2018). These operations are a global phenomenon with political, social, psychological, educational, and cybersecurity dimensions (Starbird *et al.* 2019), and use archetypes as part of these operations. Actors create and are consciously or unconsciously aware of these archetypes in their heads, similar to Jung's teachings (Jung 1968; Walters 1994). By definition, an archetype is a distinctive example of a person and the characteristics, issues, actors, and events connected to that person. Archetypes are created by written and unwritten languages, visions, symbols, and sounds alone or within a larger group. These can be created on digital platforms by using memes and online discourses. These create causal relationships and various multilevel vectors that subsequently guide thinking and actions in society at the personal and institutional levels. Archetypes do not give a permanent reality to people but demonstrate the frame(s) found in the empirical data (Meriläinen, Hiljanen & Rautiainen 2023). We know that young people are not a homogenous group, but that each young individual is his or her own person, with his or her own identity, preferences, dreams, and histories. Yet individuals can define the vectors of thinking present in society at large and can create trust in information. Can these cognitive beliefs and archetypes create and sustain power relations and societies within one society, which can, at worst, feed into disbelief and dispersion?

## Empirical research

Authors such as Pietilä *et al.* (2021) and Lazar, Feng & Hochheiser (2010) discuss the different ways to apply interviews and open discussion with young people in the realms of human-computer interaction (HCI) and multidisciplinary research. Young vocational school students were invited to participate as voluntary and anonymous research partners in research workshops. N=362 young vocational school students between the ages of 16 and 29 participated in n=52 research workshops in n=8 municipalities in Western, Central, and Eastern Finland. N=2 workshops were held online via TEAMS due to COVID-19 forcing the schools to suspend teaching (and research) at the facilities. N=50 workshops were held face-to-face in vocational schools. On average, the workshops lasted 92 minutes, in a range between 35 and 270 minutes. Young participants produced the empirical data for this research either in written or spoken form. For the sake of the young people's anonymity, their names, fields of study, and the names of the participating municipalities are not stated here. In this age of digital platforms, which can come along with bullying, harassment, and violence, there is a possibility that the young participants could be identified using open-source information. A research permit was granted by each school in which the students studied. For more information on research ethics and methods, please see Meriläinen (2021) and (2022).

The resulting qualitative data was coded based on the content of the data and analyzed via qualitative content analysis to formulate an understanding of how young vocational secondary school students regard information, actors, various digital platforms, and their perceptions of information operations. The qualitative content analysis was done by the author of this research and is based on Finnish-language empirical knowledge gained from the workshops. To answer the research questions, some direct quotes are presented. This research method has previously been used in various studies relating to communication, youth, social media, participation, and power relations research (Kamler 2013; Meriläinen 2021, 2022; Middaugh, Bowyer & Kahne 2017).

## Results and Discussion

The research questions for this research were:

1. To what degree do young people between 16-29 years old use digital platforms as sources of information or news?
2. To what degree are young people between 16-29 years old aware of disinformation campaigns on social media platforms?

Out of all the n=362 young participants, everyone said that they use various digital platforms such as social media and the Internet as sources of information and news. For example:

Social media creates new hobbies for young people. Social media supports creativity and interaction. The majority of young people use social media to connect with their peers, whom they also meet in real life. All digital platforms are therefore used as an extension of existing social relationships and information gathering. I think that this has changed and developed a lot since most adults were our age.

From **Table 1**, it is clear that Google was the most popular platform for information. Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and various message boards followed. Additionally, specific content providers on numerous social media platforms and memes were credited as

trustworthy sources, while websites for various ideologies were cited once or twice as credible sources.

<b>Trusted information and news platforms online</b>	<b>N= young participants</b>
Google	352
Online without specifying where	143
Instagram	103
TikTok	84
Snapchat	78
Facebook	46
YouTubers and influencers	43
YouTube	41
Family member / friend	29
Gaming and related platforms (etc. Twitch)	20
Memes	15
Wikipedia	14
Politicians' social media platforms	12
WhatsApp	9
Netflix	9
Reddit	9
Discord	9
Ylilauta.org (Finnish 4Chan)	6
Pinterest	7
Ampparit.com (News collection forum in Finnish)	7
Twitter	7
Vauva.fi (Finnish discussion forum)	3
Podcasts	3
BBC news	3
Spotify	2
Tumblr	2
Seiska.fi (A Finnish Gossip magazine online)	2
Suomi24.fi (Finnish discussion forum)	2
Nazi-theme websites	2
Duodecim (terveyskirjasto.fi) (Finnish health and healthcare related website)	1
Terveystieto.fi (Finnish healthcare related website)	1
Tilannehuone.fi (an open online service that brings together different types of snapshots of current rescue alarms in Finland)	1
MV-Lehti (Right-wing online magazine in Finland)	1
4Chan	1

Demi.fi (Finnish youth-related discussion forum – closed)	1
FaceTime	1

**Table 1:** Sources of trusted information and news

The empirical data offers confirmation to previous research results that young people use various social media platforms such as Instagram, Slack, Reddit, TikTok, and Snapchat and various Internet sites to participate and find information (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2021; Meriläinen 2022; Gray 2018). They specifically sought information from digital platforms on broad social themes, such as national defense and the war in Ukraine, as well as civil movements such as racial injustices and feminism. Examples include the following:

“I respect traditional values such as God and the Defense Forces. I read the Bible and follow the social media channels of the Finnish Defense Forces”.

"I get information about the war in Ukraine from memes".

“You know Putin is messed up because he attacked Ukraine. Finland will be next, just saw a TikTok about it. It wasn’t fake news because Putin is crazy”.

Moreover, digital platforms have become spaces for young people to express their various opinions and hate speech (Sazali *et al.* 2022; Meriläinen 2022). This was also reflected in the empirical data. For example:

“I can say all sorts of hateful things to feminists on 4chan and 8chan. It is great!”

Various digital platforms were often discussed as one entity. Only after being asked directly, young participants specified which digital platform they used. These quotes reflect the thinking of the young participants:

"Why do you ask? I get my news from my phone [showing a phone]—see!”

"You get your reality and information live on social media as a whole. You click, see memes, and move around on your socials".

None of the respondents said they used traditional news media, such as paper newspapers, as their primary sources of information and news. No one mentioned radio as a source of any kind of entertainment, news, or information, while only a few noted podcasts as a source for information and news. The participants also used various digital platforms to participate locally and globally. Different digital platforms are used in various forms of activism and education (Sunio, Peckson & Ugay 2021; Banchik 2021; Kayyali 2022; Meriläinen 2014; Wilkins, Livingstone & Levine 2019). The digital platforms have created an opportunity to highlight new agendas by the political right and left, empowered minorities, and women, as well as solutions to human rights violations, while creating power relations between actors (Garcia, Fernández & Jackson 2020).

Information operations did not concern young people directly because they trusted their ability to distinguish between credible and real information from misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Especially trusted sources were various influencers:

“I am a right-winger, and I believe in climate change and the Great Replacement Theory (GRT). I call myself a green Nazi who follows all social media. I don't think GRT is a conspiracy theory or information operations from Russia or China, and many influencers are talking about [theory] online”.

Several Finnish and international influencers were sources of information and news. The influencer archetype was attractive, loud, active on various digital platforms, and produced entertaining and reliable content. These were reliable sources for participants. Influencers were regarded as being a new generation of politicians who are on the side of the youth, while traditional media, such as newspapers and TV news, were not. The possible deception by influencers, or them being used as useful idiots, may never be detected. Once you have found a reliable source, it may be hard to let the source go. Thus, young participants relied on a certain archetype of themselves as “us” aligned with the trusted influencers, while adults presented the archetype of “them”, the ones fundamentally against the youth. For example:

“This influencer is loud and attacks Extension Rebellion online. I love his content because it is entertaining. I don't even care if he lies. I still consume and believe the content!”

The roles of artificial intelligence (AI), algorithms, ads, and bots were discussed to some degree. AI was seen by some participants as a threat, even though digital platforms were part of everyday life. AI and algorithms were seen as a means of personal and political control and coercion by those in power, which kept people under control and consuming even harmful and fake news from various digital platforms. People were seen to have no other choice but to consume forced, false, and outdated information because artificial intelligence and algorithms keep "people under control by force", as said by one young participant. Some other examples follow:

“I'm interested in the climate crisis and other global issues, but the algorithm and artificial intelligence make me consume crap and buy cheap clothes through their feed. I feel like I can't resist the temptation. Maybe I should”.

“You cannot avoid fake news online. That's what all these digital platforms are for. To spread harmful information”.

Some participants argued that digital platforms, various AI-based apps, and filters were the causes of bullying, harassment, violence, and mental and physical health crises among young people. The deception goes beyond consuming false information. It forces you to become something you are not by using AI technology and filters to alter your looks and behavior to better fit the current (Western) standards of beauty and behavior. Razmetaeva, Barabash & Lukianov (2022) and Langford (2020) discuss digitality, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and their relation to digital accountability. Indeed, who bears the responsibility for human rights violations and the protection of them in cases of bullying, harassment, and violence? This topic must be addressed in more detail in later studies. One participant noted:

“On Instagram and TikTok, you can make yourself look prettier, slimmer, and sexier than you are in real life. This causes young people to have severe mental health issues because who you are forced to pretend to be online does not match who you are offline”.

Meanwhile, other young participants laughed at entertaining content and filters on pictures on digital platforms, which they identified as fake news and disinformation, thus the information



that was purposely false. They said they could never fall prey to fake news, imagery, or information operations while trusting influencers on digital platforms without verifying their motives or backgrounds. For example:

“Social media is our world. Why would anyone use it for information operations? I don't think anyone is interested in that”.

“I follow these leftist influencers. They seem trustworthy to me because they speak credibly to me and my values. I don't think they have any bad intentions or could be part of any large information operations”.

Indeed, no one wondered if, at any point, any content creator may have ulterior motives or even work for a hostile entity, an actor, or a state. Moreover, only a couple of young participants raised the issue of who codes, designs, or owns digital platforms and the content uploaded to the platforms. For example, the power and control of Meta and various states in relation to spreading misinformation or disinformation, enabling bullying, violence, harassment, and doxing were mentioned only a handful of times. In this line, Zalnieriute and Milan (2019) and Mizan and Ishtiaque Ahmed (2019) call attention and obligations to Internet architecture on private actors, such as corporations. This issue must be further researched.

Referring to the usage of digital platforms, similar results were found in the earlier research (Meriläinen 2021), which coincides with Granholm (2016), who argued that young people use digital platforms to be active and as part of their everyday lives. Credibility and trust were related to the person's own feelings and the usability of the platforms. User-centric design (Pietilä 2022) and relatable framing of communication hold an enormous advantage in reaching young people. This opens the door for future research in HCI and information operations.

Young participants found credible information across the digital platforms, verifying the chosen bits of information on additional platforms. They clicked the content headline or a picture or meme on Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook, and then moved on to Snapchat or YouTube to see more related content. Some said they verified information specifically from Wikipedia, YouTube, or certain influencers:

“We go to Instagram and TikTok first. Then we verify the information from YouTube and influencers, including friends. Wikipedia is also quite good”.

“Everyone scrolls through various social media in the morning. You don't need to look for that information elsewhere. Grandmas read newspapers, not us”.

Information was also deemed credible and reliable if it was on a digital platform regarded as reliable. The power of both content creators and various digital platforms was apparent among young people. Therefore, it is important to appear credible as a communicator as well as to communicate on a platform that is deemed credible by the receiver, in this case, young people. Umeogu (2012) defines credibility as a situation where message believability is reliant on the credibility of the sender in the minds and eyes of the receivers, while also noting the importance of charisma. Meanwhile, Hallahan (2000 p. 470) states that the credibility of the message sender is one of the most important features that a communicator has: "Sources perceived as attractive, trustworthy, expert, dynamic, and powerful are more

engaging and effective than those that do not feature these characteristics". Some participants noted:

"They [influencers] speak to us in a language that we understand on a platform that we use every day. There the trust comes".

"You just cannot look away; that is why I trust the influencer".

Especially social media influencers—for example, YouTubers, those on Instagram, and TikTok—have vast power over young people. They are seen as idols, entertaining, and credible in the world, where grownups are trying to diminish and downplay the viability and smartness of young people. Influencers appear to have a lifestyle the participants enjoy watching; they communicate in ways that are understandable and relatable to young people. This may mean communication styles ranging from entertaining to serious and everything in between. This enables extensive and versatile information operations if the content is created to appeal to young people from various backgrounds and political ideologies. As said by young participants, the more adults critique young people and their usage of memes and digital platforms as sources for news, information, and entertainment, the more it bolsters the feeling that you are under attack. This is where the power of influencers on digital platforms lies. They can connect with young people in ways that parents and teachers cannot:

"Adults know nothing about our [online] world".

"The more they [adults] critique us, the more we rely on digital platforms".

When a young person feels that a content creator and influencer communicate directly to them in a language that they can understand and relate to, that message can transfer to them as knowledge.

"I know this YouTuber is lying, but I continue to watch his content because it is so entertaining".

Based on the empirical data, the transfer of information and agendas (McCombs & Reynolds 2002; Robers *et al.* 2002) from various influencers and digital platforms to young people's minds was evident. All consumers of media have biases toward truths that align with their values and beliefs. Young participants said they accepted the information and news from influencers and digital platforms as truth if they believed it to be true and credible. The same applies to fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017); it is accepted if it feels right personally. This connects to personal value framing. Value framing (Brewer & Gross 2005; Shen & Edwards 2005; Meriläinen 2014, 2022; Schemer, Wirth & Matthes 2012; Slothuus 2010) shapes consumers' understanding of everything in their lives, including how various phenomena are understood, such as truths and mistruths, and their relations to the realities people shape in their heads. Value framing connects values and beliefs to the information one senses and how it is decoded in one's thinking. What is credible and truthful information is that which aligns with the values and beliefs a person has. A value frame may be conceived as the main substantive theme of a morality play, wherein the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' are pitted against each other (Ball-Rokeach *et al.* 1990). Additionally, repetition may play a role in accepting information as true. For example, if a claim is true, repetition may increase acceptance of it, even if the claim is untrue (Unkelbach & Speckmann 2021). Thus,

exposure to the same communication on digital platforms can take shape as a reality for young people, even though it is not.

False or misleading information has always played a role in human societies throughout the ages (Taylor 2003). However, digital platforms have amplified the spread of various news and information, which is mistruth to others, and which represents truth to others. Biases towards certain truths can be used in information operations. Young people are easy targets for these if you can reach them, for example, through influencers or other relatable content creators. As Skurnik *et al.* (2005) say, specifically, age may play a factor in accepting mistruths since these mistruths may be framed as appealing to young people, more so than so-called official information coming from traditional authorities or governments. McCombs & Valenzuela (2014) argue that media reporting transfers to prominent public opinion, emphasizing the transfer of salience from media to public. This also occurs on digital platforms and at individual levels among young people. The effects of framing occur when the way in which issues, actors, and events are characterized by others has an influence on how they are understood by others, such as youth and the media (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007; Meriläinen 2014, 2019, 2022; Brewer & Gross 2005).

Media literacy education can at best offer useful lenses for teaching youth to be more critical of digital platforms. The concept of critical media literacy can help mask biases, hidden agendas, and the economic structures of media representation and information (Friesem 2019). Moreover, Elmore and Coleman (2019) state that studying political memes from digital platforms through critical media literacy can at best give the youth tools to evaluate visual, written, and spoken rhetorical appeals. The authors call for more media literacy research on content from various digital platforms—such as Snapshots, YouTube, video games, memes, tweets, and protest signs—to teach young people to be critical consumers of political media and informed participants in democracies. Singh and Sharma (2022) argued that digital platforms are indeed the main contributors to spreading fake images, which are manipulated images altered through software or by other means to change the information they convey. Yet, value framing may also guide young people towards so-called better mistruths, such as satire. Satire and fake news are not the same, since they have different purposes (Singh & Sharma 2022). Fake news is intentionally bad, while satire is a form of social good but is used to ridicule or made fun of something.

The empirical results correlate with the theoretical framework that people believe information to be true based on their personal value framing and biases. Trusted information must also come from trusted sources (Brewer & Gross 2005; Shen & Edwards 2005; Schemer, Wirth & Matthes 2012; Slothuus 2010; Meriläinen 2022 2014). Moreover, according to Mejova, Kalimeri & Morales (2020), in the online world, different narratives, news, and actors from fields ranging from politics to business are competing for clicks. Previously, young people argued that anything goes online as long as the content is engaging and it can get clicks (Meriläinen 2022). Yet, while the young participants look for entertaining content across the online media spectrum, bullying, harassment, and violence are pervasive concerns.

Social and political divisions can be used effectively in information operations. Various social and political movements from diverse ideological backgrounds utilize various digital platforms as a tool for scaling movement endeavors (Mundt, Ross & Burnett 2018). The authors discuss the possibilities and risks of using digital platforms with movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement. There was no long-term and substantial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion when the performative nature of the white influencer's

activities were shown over time, while black influencers remained ignored, underpaid, and undervalued (Wellman 2022; Mundt, Ross & Burnett 2018). Moreover, information operations do not choose political or social sides but have, for example, utilized social media in promoting various causes, from #blacklivesmatter to #bluelivesmatter (Briant 2022). Starbird, Arif & Wilson (2019) argued that online information operations are participatory in nature, where messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers during social and political movements. In addition, Briant (2022) stated that during the U.S. 2016 elections, Russia conducted various information operations by creating clandestine accounts, while others may have infiltrated social and political movements, such as the #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter movements. Thus, information operations do not need to create new divisions or movements, but, rather, they can utilize existing divisions and discourses in their operative tactics, which can have lasting effects on democratic societies. Young people who are part of these movements may, in turn, be caught in the divisions, which in turn will be stringent once the information operation tactics amplify.

Those young people who were active in social and political causes said that they cannot be influenced by outside sources or information operations because they can distinguish between what is true and what is not. They say they only trust credible sources. Issues such as confirmation bias were never brought up by young people. For example:

“I am just a person. Why would anyone try to influence me? I am not special. Information operations are targeted towards adults, not young people”.

“Perhaps boomers are so dumb that they believe everything from fake news media to populists such as Trump or other politicians. No one shady can influence me”.

“You know anyone over 40 is an ancient being. They are targeted by Russia or China. We follow influencers who speak to us and are not part of any information operations”.

Based on the empirical data, faith in one’s ability to utilize critical media literacy is strong. It may not be naïveté, but it does speak of a lack of online critical media literacy. There is nothing inherently wrong with finding alternative, non-traditional sources of information and news on digital platforms. However, critical consumption and usage must be strengthened in the coming years. These young people may be native digital platform users, but at least some of them lack the ability to distinguish themselves as possible targets of information operations. Here lies the possibility for those operations. The participant explains that they are native Internet and social media user, while claiming that people over 40 years old are not, thus influencing the older generations. However, no one wondered if, at any point, any content creator may have ulterior motives or may even work for a hostile entity, actor, or state. They do not trust so-called traditional sources, such as adults and journalists, because they feel that the latter have abandoned them. Yet, in some instances, such as during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, the government, officials, and various agencies seemed to enjoy greater public trust than science and journalists. One participant noted:

“I do find my news and information online, not in the news media. However, I also trust what the prime minister and the president said about the war in Ukraine. It is a serious matter; therefore, it is good to listen to what they have to say”.

However, while relying heavily on digital platforms and influencers, some young participants were nonetheless critical of various digital platforms. The young participants use various digital platforms as trusted sources for information, while also saying these platforms should not be trusted. As Eleferenko (2023) says, while youth consume memes, hashtags, historical narratives, and humor, these can also be used in information operations. Some participants said:

“You can't trust anything you find online. Anyone can post anything and claim it to be true information. In reality, they just post opinions, not truths that can be verified”.

“I don't know who makes these memes and why. But they are funny while being sources for information and news. Perhaps even fake news”.

For example, pages like Reddit or Wikipedia were not trusted by some participants since anyone could add and edit the content. Especially Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat were considered dangerous because nothing is real or to be trusted because of fake news, deep fakes, opinions framed as truthful information, and other negative effects, such as bullying and hate speech.

Here is a clear dichotomy. As earlier research (Meriläinen 2022) argued, young people noted that both traditional print and social media can be used as propaganda either by the state or by the editorial and "owning classes". This critique did not explicitly expand to influencers on digital platforms. Online influencers were seen as free of outside money, or "the owning class". While information operations are sociotechnical phenomena that rely on a variety of actors and structures to successfully disseminate problematic kinds of information (Arif & Wilson 2019), the reality of misinformation and disinformation was not fundamental for the young participants. Yet the role of algorithms was discussed by a handful of participants. They reflected on the power of artificial intelligence, influencers, algorithms, and coders in society and the spread of lies online. For these young people, algorithms were stronger than their own will to not consume the content online. Most commonly, the algorithms on Instagram, TikTok, Google, and YouTube raised questions among young participants because they began to question their beliefs and consumption of fast fashion and the fast lifestyle lived, supposedly, by influencers:

“We are native social media users. But no one teaches or guides us to use them. Although I would not trust any adult to teach me anything regarding the internet or social media”.

“I would like to have formal education on digital platforms and media literacy. It would be nice. But not from teachers or politicians”.

Young participants said that they receive no n on how to distinguish truth from untruth on digital platforms. Some called for more media literacy and information operation know-how and training somewhere, but not in school, because they do not trust teachers. Where? This is still an open question that must be addressed in later studies.

Although in the large minority, some young participants noticed they were being directly influenced on particular social media, such as Instagram or TikTok, by known influencers and unknown actors, such as AI or bots. They despised these unknown actors and their motives. Those belonging to this minority stated that algorithms, AI, or bots were unknown to them, yet they made them consume information and various goods, such as podcasts and

content online. This content then provided trusted information for young participants. Yet, they did not have the means to further elaborate on how they are influenced or to so-called fight these powerful actors. Here is what some of them said:

"As a source of information, we use Snapchat, Instagram, and Pinterest. Also, videos on YouTube and pictures from all over [the] Internet. We are not even looking for anything; the algorithm brings up information for us. Then we consume that content. If something pops up that we have not particularly wanted or searched for, we will click on it and consume it. Most likely, it will be true for us".

"Yeah, we use social media for many hours every day. Understand that social media has that advertising power. Social media platforms are programmed so that your life only exists on social media".

"The power of programming is strong".

"About Google and Facebook, AI is constantly taking information about us. They use this information to target ads and to control us, for example, by keeping us hooked on information on social media. They make us stay".

## **Conclusions**

Various digital platforms are essential to young people as sources for information, belonging, news, entertainment, satire, friendships, consumerism, and participation in social and political causes. Digital platforms are the bearers of both truth and lies, while influencers appear to be the truth-tellers for young people. Young participants connect their online and offline lives and activities by consuming content online, which they then share offline among friends and family. Young participants trusted their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. They regard their critical media literacy as strong while showcasing a lack of critical media literacy online. Only a couple of participants feared the power of AI, advertising, algorithms, bots, and influencers. These seem to be a fact of modern life, something that young people cannot or do not care to change. No one discussed the potential power of media companies, such as Meta or state-owned apps, like TikTok. The deception of various actors may never be detected. Much more multidisciplinary research is needed on the various topics discussed in this paper.

Young participants were not aware of information operations on digital platforms, but at times they were able to distinguish something that was not true for them personally. The evaluation of truth was done based on personal value framing. Therefore, personal biases guided the evaluation of fact from fiction. Various participants cited official sources with information from digital platforms, such as the United Nations documents, next to memes they found online, and justified their political viewpoints based on those documents. Accordingly, they shared their vivid ideologies on various digital platforms, believing their own truths. It is evident that digital services may open opportunities for various youths to participate in framing and re-framing their environments and the policies that affect them. Digital platforms may feel more 'owned' by young people from diverse backgrounds. Yet simultaneously, they can be used as tools for information operations by various actors, such as groups, states, or corporations. Indeed, digital platforms can be platforms to disseminate misinformation, create power relations, and promote political polarization (Gil de Zúñiga & Chen 2019; Meriläinen, Hiljanen & Rautiainen 2023).

Based on the empirical data, influencers on various digital platforms with the usage of AI, algorithms, bots, ads, and entertainment have a strong influence on young people. These actors may work independently or for someone else. They may receive funding and directives from unknown actors or states. Young people look for truth, information, and role models on digital platforms. They trust information tailored to match their values and beliefs. Here are the vast possibilities for actors wanting to conduct small- or large-scale information operations: with the help of user-centric research coupled with algorithms, AI, and bots, at best, various actors can create entertaining content that corresponds with the biases, values, and beliefs of young people from various backgrounds. This has enormous potential for influencing societies via information operations that are not regarded as such or appear as traditional warfare. At worst, these threaten democratic values for decades.

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