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# DISINFORMATION IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE CONTEXT OF FIRST-TIME VOTERS' ADVERTISING LITERACY

## Ľudmila ČÁBYOVÁ – Denis JAVOŘÍK

**ABSTRACT:**

The authors of this research study investigated the ability of first-time voters to comprehend, identify and evaluate political advertising along with their ability to understand and identify disinformation in political advertising. Two groups were compared: one that received media education as a compulsory subject in school and one that did not. This study also showcases the positive impact of media education on first-time voters, since it revealed a significant difference in advertising literacy levels between these groups. The results of the study show that there were notable improvements in defining and identifying political advertising and disinformation among media-educated students. Both groups of students were able to define the goals of disinformation in political advertising and most consider them unethical. The highest score in both groups was achieved in verifying media sources and news. This study highlights the paramount importance of advertising literacy for first-time voters since it gives them the tools to discern political advertising and enables them to make well-informed decisions during the electoral process. It also emphasises the importance of media education.

# 1 Introduction

Most of the current research on the topic we are interested in is primarily focused on media literacy. Media literacy is the ability to "evaluate, analyse, decode, and create electronic and print media" (Bielčiková, 2021, p. 6). Advertising is a natural part of media content, and therefore, it has historically been an integral part of media literacy research (Petranová, 2014). For quite some time, we have been observing an accelerated pace of development and diffusion of innovations, not only in technologies themselves but also in marketing communication, which is one of the key factors influencing habits and rituals in media usage, as well as changes in consumer behaviour in society (Teguh et al., 2023). According to Mukhsinov and Ergashxodjayeva (2022), it has become essential for commercial companies to conduct their marketing communication activities primarily in digital and online environments. The development of new technologies and media not only expands the media space with new channels and ways of utilising them, but also improves the accessibility and availability of these channels for both consumers and other entities (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Therefore, it follows that the more media channels are accessible and the easier they are to use, the greater the number of brands that try to take advantage of their advertising space (Wuisan & Handra, 2023). With all that in mind, the market today is saturated with advertising, and for this reason, in some cases, advertisers resort to manipulating consumers through disinformation (Naderer & Opree, 2021). The same applies to political parties, which try to win over voters in elections. To succeed, some political parties may also resort to disinformation. Disinformation is defined as "the intentional creation and dissemination of false and/or misleading information" (Hameleers, 2023, p. 1). Despite their occurrence being observable across various areas, disinformation is particularly characteristic for political marketing (Nenadić, 2019). Even though young people and teenagers generally have better predispositions for working with social networking sites and media content, according to Bringula et al. (2022), they are equally affected by disinformation, facing similar challenges to older individuals in dealing with them.

In this study, we examine the level of advertising literacy of first-time voters related to disinformation in political marketing, their ability to understand what a political advertisement is and how to identify it, but also on the ethical aspects of disinformation use in advertising. Given the close connection, we also explored the way in which first-time voters choose the sources of information from which they draw and how they evaluate each source.

# 2 Theoretical Background to Political Advertising, Disinformation and Advertising Literacy

According to Zebib, political communication represents "the use of multiple communication techniques by different figures (politicians, media, and citizens) who try to influence others either through instrumentalization or through dialogue. It includes the production, distribution and reception of messages that could have a direct or indirect influence on politics" (2022, p. 89). Karwacka et al. (2022) describe political communication as an important part of the entire political system in the social sphere. According to the authors, it involves two-way communication between different political figures. Without political communication, the transfer of important information necessary for the functioning of the political market, and therefore for the functioning of a democratic state (such as communication between ministries), is not possible.

Political advertising remains a significant expense for candidates in political campaigns and is one of the key promotional aspects in political communication (Fossen et al., 2022). Political advertising can be defined as "all activities conducted during the political campaign process aimed at promoting political candidates or sharing political content with the electorate" (Yilmaz, 2019, p. 9). Several publications delve into the essence of political advertising, analysing its objectives, the effectiveness of its various forms, and trends in its use in political campaigns

(see, e.g., Stan & Epuran, 2019; Dommet, 2019). According to these authors, most of the current political advertising happens through social media platforms.

In the Slovak Republic, Facebook remains the most widely used social networking site. According to data from the Go4insight agency in 2022, at least 77% of the Slovak population uses this social medium at least once a month. Following Facebook are platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Go4insight, 2022). Social media operate on algorithms whose task is to evaluate content so that relevant results are displayed to the user (Lamot, 2022). Facebook categorises posts based on what a particular profile is or has been interested in, what its interests are, how long it viewed the content, whether it interacted with the content, and so on. Based on the data that Facebook collects about users (which they voluntarily provide), it can ensure highly specific targeting to specific audiences. Other factors influencing content display include the content added by connected profiles (Thorson et al., 2021). Targeting specific audiences represents an extremely effective way to implement political advertising. As mentioned, in the battle where multiple political entities compete for the same pool of voters, it is crucial to deliver the right message to the right voter at the right time (Way, 2016). Social media, of course, have their drawbacks alongside many positives. According to Juswil et al. (2022), social networking has been used to spread hateful political communication, false information, and propaganda in political campaigns. This is because regulation of social media has largely been absent. It is also one of the reasons why disinformation in political marketing has seen a rapid success in recent times.

Disinformation does not have to be only in textual form; it can also include spoken word, photographs, advertisements, sound recordings, documents, or maps (Strömbäck et al., 2022). Fallis also states that not all disinformation is necessarily a lie. Disinformation can also be a fact presented with a purposeful distortion, which may elicit a different reaction than if presented accurately (Fallis, 2015). Therefore, we consider disinformation to be a type of information which aim is to gain any advantage in a manner that is unfair, using deceptive or manipulative methods. In political marketing, disinformation can be particularly utilised in marketing communication during pre-election campaigns (Guess et al., 2019). A significant advantage of disinformation is that it often yields better results in a short time. Such information is generally quickly prepared for execution.

The best way to combat disinformation is either in its regulation, or through education of consumers (Guilbeault, 2018; Adjin-Tettey, 2022). There are two main ways of educating about advertising literacy. One is through projects and marketing campaigns; the other is through the implementation of media education. Vrabec defines media education as "practical teaching aimed at building media competence, understood as a critical and discerning attitude towards the media with the goal of creating balanced citizens capable of making their own judgments based on available information" (2008, p. 4). The need to introduce mandatory media education in both primary and secondary schools has been emphasised for years.

The goal of most projects is to raise awareness and strengthen media literacy, which is a key factor in defence against disinformation. The issue of media literacy has been studied by researchers for decades. In international measurements of media literacy levels, Slovakia ranked 23rd out of 41 European countries. Compared to 2022, it improved by one place, but its score is lower compared to the last measurement. Given that, Slovakia is grouped with countries such as Italy, Hungary, and Ukraine (Lessenski, 2023). Slovakia is thus in the bottom half, and there was not an improvement in its position due to an increase in score, but rather due to the decline of other countries. An important aspect of media literacy is advertising literacy. Čábyová and Hudáková define advertising literacy as a "set of knowledge, abilities, and skills enabling one to identify and comprehend advertised messages. It is the ability to uncover the intention of the advertising message and better resist it" (2022, pp. 147-148). In a scenario where a voter can change the future of their country with their single vote, it is extremely important for them to understand the content and context of such advertising and be able to critically assess and identify of what and how a political candidate is trying to persuade them.

Advertising literacy can be divided into three dimensions. According to Hudders et al. (2015), its levels consist of cognitive, affective, and moral advertising literacy. The cognitive aspect focuses on one's ability to understand and identify advertisements, their purpose and intent, but also their ability to identify the advertiser.

Affective level is about attitudes towards advertisements and their formats, while the moral aspect defines the ethical perspective. This approach was also used in our examination of first-time voters advertising literacy.

In this study we focused on first-time voters of Generation Z. Generation Z is the most technologically adaptable generation, especially regarding the use of social media, web, and digital technologies, as this generation was the first to grow up with them (Mahapatra et al., 2022). There are multiple reasons why we chose this generation for our research. Firstly, in the Slovak Republic, Generation Z comprises approximately 1.1 million inhabitants, which is 21.5% of the total population of the country (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej repuliky, n.d.). In the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 2023, there was a higher interest among Generation Z to vote (compared to previous elections), with as many as 70 % of them declaring their participation (Rusnáková, 2023). Considering that most people of this generation obtain their information through social media, political parties displayed extraordinary activity to persuade them to vote for them in the elections.

Secondly, according to the results of the study by Pérez-Escoda et al. (2021), Generation Z is the most exposed to the influence of disinformation, primarily due to their habit of primarily consuming media content through social media. The authors of the mentioned study state that the collected data indicates a moderate ability of the Spanish Generation Z to understand disinformation, but respondents were unable to correctly identify the tools and procedures that would allow them to recognise this issue in different news formats. Similar conclusions were reached by Orhan (2023), who acknowledges a greater ability of this generation to grasp technologies but warns that Generation Z is equally prone to believing disinformation. According to researchers from the University of Cambridge (2023), young adults perform worse than older generations in identifying fake headlines. They have demonstrated that the more leisure time young adults spend on the Internet, the less Generation Z can distinguish real news from disinformation. According to the results, only 11% of all respondents belonging to Generation Z were able to achieve high scores (more than 16 out of 20 headlines). Respondents also frequently labelled ordinary content as disinformation.

Similar research conducted in collaboration between scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Ohlheiser (2022) has shown that despite Generation Z's strong belief in their ability to identify and recognise disinformation, they are equally vulnerable to it. The research also confirmed the findings of the University of Cambridge, as up to 62% of respondents stated that they encounter disinformation every week, yet they do not mention adequate ways to identify it.

# 3 Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to identify the level of advertising literacy of first-time voters. To gather primary sources of information, a qualitative approach was applied. According to Barrett and Twycross (2018) and Agius (2013), this approach allows us to understand experiences of the targeted group and provides us with a better insight into minds of similar people.

In this context, our research method was a narrative essay. Essays (mostly as a variation of interviews) are used in qualitative research to obtain information on a person's opinions, motivation, and subjective experiences (Busetto et al., 2020). To achieve the receipt of accurate data, a pre-prepared structure was presented to the respondents, allowing them to write more cohesively. Since this research was conducted during students' learning hours, and having time efficiency in mind, we did not choose individual interviews or a group discussion. Choosing an essay, rather than a discussion removes the interactive part; however, considering the nature of this topic, with this decision we also removed the possibility of influencing one's knowledge of advertising and disinformation.

To evaluate the gathered data, the coding program MaxQDA was used. Coding is a process of reading through the gathered information and highlighting a specific part that reflects the purpose of the code in the coding scheme (Allsop et al., 2022). MaxQDA (n.d.) is qualitative data analysis software that uses coding to evaluate qualitative data, while also providing multiple quantitative tools, thus creating a possibility for a mixed method approach.

The topic of the essay focused on advertising literacy and disinformation in the context of political advertising. Provided structure for the students purposely targeted various aspects of advertising literacy. We investigated respondents' knowledge about political advertising and disinformation, as well as their ability to identify it. We also examined what sources respondents use to obtain information, which is closely related to the issue of spreading disinformation. We also explored respondents' opinions from an ethical perspective, such as how they perceive the use of disinformation in political battles and what impact they believe it has on society.

The research sample consisted of 38 respondents (35 of whom are active voters). The sample comprised 12 women and 25 men. One respondent declared a non-binary gender identity. Most students (87%) come from central Slovakia. Half of the respondents, 19 in total, did not have a media education course included in their curriculum, while the other half had this subject as a mandatory part of their study plan. The essence of this subject is to teach students the basic functioning of the media and the media market, as well as advertising and the advertising market. Given that the students are from the same school, the same regional representation, and had to go through the same admission process for the selected secondary school, with all being final-year students and the only difference being whether they completed the selected subject or not, we decided to measure these groups not only together but also separately. The aim was to identify the impact of this subject on the quality of the respondents' answers and thus on their advertising literacy, specifically through the method of comparing individual responses (and their categorisation). Since there is no other factor that could influence these results, we can determine a causal relationship between the variables. The answers provided by the respondents were used to answer specific research questions:

RQ1: What do first-time voters believe political advertising is and can they identify it?

RQ2: Can first-time voters correctly describe and identify disinformation?

RQ3: What sources do first-time voters use to gather information and do they check them?

RQ4: What is first-time voters' level of advertising literacy and what (if any) influence does media education have on the result?

To evaluate answers of our respondents, we consulted the works of Petranová (2014) and Čábyová and Hudáková (2022), which both reflected on levels of media (and advertising) literacy of their respective respondents. However, the major difference is that we had to create a different scale of attributing points to answers. Since there is a difference between the quality of each answer, we either attributed 2 points (for a complex answer), 1 point (for a partially correct answer, or an answer that was not as thorough in explaining the views of the respondent) or 0 points (for a wrong answer).

The result of the evaluation consisted of adding up the points for their answers and counting an arithmetic median. We also evaluated an average for each question separately and the difference between the two groups of students, effectively quantifying the difference of media education and its impact on the respondents. Based on Čábyová and Hudáková's and Petranová's methodology, we divided the respondents into three categories based on their score. For a response to be classified into the appropriate category, it had to meet the individual requirements set by the authors, which stem from the research outlined in the second part of this study and are essential for fulfilling the essence of the respective category. As an example, if a respondent was to achieve the full score in identifying disinformation, they had to accurately name all the necessary parameters. If they named only some, they were classified into the medium category and awarded 1 point. If a respondent proceeded incorrectly in identifying disinformation (based on incorrect factors), we assigned a weight of 0 to the response. Respondents could score a maximum of 14 points for the questions. Respondents achieved an advanced level of advertising literacy if they gained at least 12 out of 14 total points. We defined the medium level within the range of 6 to 11 points. Respondents who scored less than 5 points in total were classified as having a basic level of advertising literacy.

# 4 Results and Discussion

**Defining and Identifying Political Advertising (RQ1)**

According to our data, first-time voters are most likely to identify advertisements within social media environments. At the same time, respondents are not able to precisely define what political advertising is, but their answers show at least a partial awareness of some of the characteristic features of political advertising.

Respondents correctly identified that advertising represents a paid form of promotion in various formats, aimed at informing, persuading, reminding, and thus influencing our behaviour: "It is a paid form of communication where politicians want to persuade people about something. They want to influence us, and to reach as many people as possible, they pay for advertisements. It comes in various formats, such as print, social networks, TV, radio, etc." (Female, A39). All respondents whose answers we classified as comprehensive in defining what political advertising means are female. At the same time, as showcased in Figure 1, all respondents who comprehensively defined political advertising were able to accurately identify disinformation in advertising materials, precisely name the individual parameters of the advertisement, and thoroughly verify all the sources they drew from.
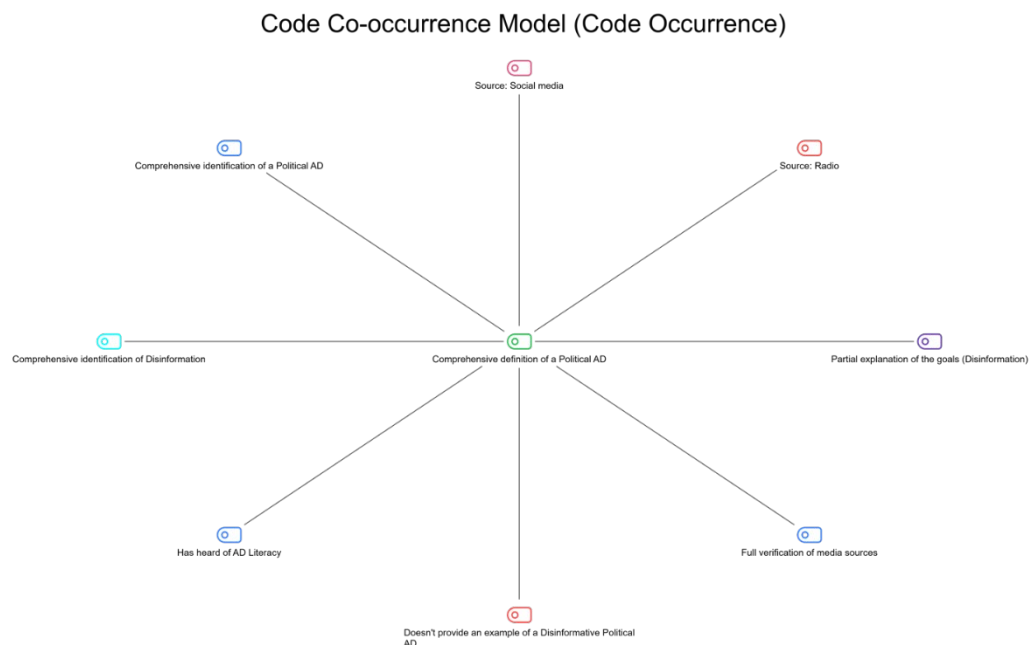


*Figure 1. Co-occurrence of codes for respondents who comprehensively defined a political advertisement*
*Source: MaxQDA, 2024*

A common occurrence was that respondents (who did not achieve full points) did not realise that there is a specific advertiser behind the advertisement with the aim of promoting the content to a selected target audience, using a paid method of promotion: "An advertisement that aims to influence a large number of people to believe that one political party is better than another, even if no party is directly mentioned, just using the right colours or a major scandal" (Male, A2). In such a response, for example, it may not be clear that a "major scandal" is not merely the processing of news content or its organic sharing on social media. Consistent with several other answers is the identification of "interruption" of the content that the respondent primarily wanted to watch: "I recognise an advertisement when the movie stops, or I turn on a video and it's not about what I clicked on and I have to watch it because it can't be skipped" (Male, A22). The most common shortcoming of these partially correct answers is that

respondents do not mention the specific label of political advertising, which is a key identifying parameter. For example, the respondent's answer: "They want to attract with an image, text. Catching attention in the headline image. They put it very much in front of us, e.g., with very bold text" (Female, A15), can be evaluated as essentially true and reflecting advertising practices, but such a text could be applicable to any other visual content as well. Therefore, while it is true that the respondent might notice an advertisement through these parameters, it will never be the primary way to identify an advertisement.

Most of the answers in last category characterise advertising as something unsolicited, aiming to spread negative emotions in social affairs: "It uses current events in the state to promote its views, offensively reacting to sensitive topics" (Male, A24). Respondents often confused the fact that the content of a political message is not automatically an advertisement: "Information that directly or indirectly favours (or supports) a political movement" (Male, A35). In such a case, any news with a positive spin about a political entity (e.g., budget approval, programme evaluation release, etc.) would be considered an advertisement. Some respondents stated that political advertising is political propaganda: "Propaganda of a political party to highlight itself and gain voters 'to its side'" (Male, A1), which are two different concepts. Based on our evaluation, as showcased in Figure 2, respondents that were unable to correctly define political advertising were also unable to identify disinformation; they consider them ethical, and they also do not verify their sources of information.
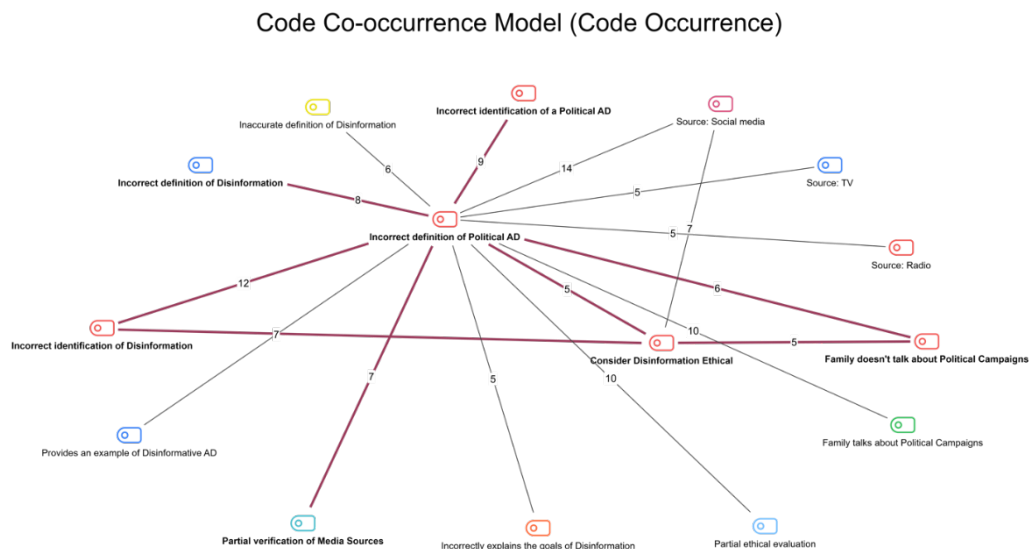


*Figure 2. Co-occurrence of codes for respondents who incorrectly defined a political advertisement*
*Source: MaxQDA, 2024; own processing, 2024*

**Disinformation in Political Advertising (RQ2)**

According to the research mentioned in the second part of the study, the majority of respondents indicate encountering the term "disinformation", but few can define what this term actually means (see Stromback, 2022). The results of our research indicate similar results. A total of eight respondents were able to precisely describe disinformation according to the mentioned definitions. Based on the respondents' answers, it can be stated that there is a pattern among the individual responses: "Deliberate lying/misleading to evoke fear and convince us." (Female, A17). "Deliberate manipulation of people. Intentional spreading of false information. The goal is to evoke fear and influence us." (Female, A39). They all state that disinformation represents deliberate manipulation aimed at eliciting a reaction from the respondent, most commonly to provoke hatred or fear. "False information spread by a person/group to convince the public and change how they see a particular thing/person/group, often for financial or political gain." (Male, A18). Respondents were also able to frame that disinformation can fundamentally

undermine the functioning of state institutions: "False information about a certain thing, event. It serves to undermine executive authorities and deter. Many people who only consume disinformation believe it to be true and act accordingly." (Male, A19). According to the respondents, disinformation may not always be directed against someone (some interest group, politicians, etc.), but may also be created with the aim of positive promotion of various candidates. "Intentional spreading of incorrect, erroneous, half-truthful information with the purpose of denigrating opponents, inventing positive things about oneself, etc." (Male, A35).

Even though respondents mostly correctly (or partially correctly) defined what disinformation means, their ability to identify disinformation significantly decreases. Up to 47% of respondents provided incorrect ways of identifying disinformation in the text, while almost a third of respondents defined disinformation completely inaccurately. These responses lack the naming of multiple factors based on which we could consider a given promotional text as disinformation. While most respondents indicate that it involves deceptive information, their characterisation ends there. Not every lie can automatically be considered disinformation. "Information that is not true but is still spread." (Male, A2). "False information presented as true." (Female, A8). "Promotion, dissemination of information without a scientific basis." (Male, A24).

The greatest difference in responses, however, is observed amongst respondents who define disinformation based on their disagreement with the mainstream media. "Something that the mainstream disagrees with." (Male, A30). These are respondents who also achieved the lowest total score of advertising literacy. They consider every political party's propaganda as advertising and believe that "everything is advertising" today. They also state that they do not verify their sources because they trust them. Some consider disinformation as an ethical way of conducting advertising communication because they characterise it as just "[…] a normal tool" (Male, A31). We can assume that such responses stem from a long-term societal problem of facing disinformation, or the absence of regulation and implementation of media education in schools.

A total of 32 respondents were able to identify the reasons why political figures use disinformation. Their responses included various perspectives on how disinformation can be exploited in political battles, mentioning their primary goal: achieving a higher electoral outcome. "Their goal is to deceive voters so that they do not vote for another party and so that their party gets more votes – a bigger contribution." (Male, A22). They also mention that, in their opinion, disinformation can be used to obscure another event so that it receives less media attention. "Their goal is always preferences, or discrediting opponents, or, in Slovak terms, diverting attention from their own affairs." (Male, A4). On the other hand, respondents also state that political figures want to build a positive image in front of the public and thus influence them better to "adopt their worldview". A quarter of respondents explicitly stated that the goal of using disinformation is to achieve higher electoral gains, while approximately the same number cited smearing their opponents as a reason. Only six responses either could not characterise why political figures use disinformation or did not sufficiently explain their positions.

Nearly 82% of all respondents cited potential ethical threats and adverse impacts on society. Amongst the most common reasons were further division and polarisation of society. "The threat certainly comes from people who spread disinformation through any form of communication. They create problems where they don't need to be, spread hatred where it doesn't need to be." (Female, A11). Moreover, according to one respondent's opinion, such aggression in society is also transferred to the family environment, identifying parents as the source of its dissemination. "Yes, children learn aggression from their parents, people are divided into two sides, fighting against each other, cursing at each other." (Female, A13). It can also be stated that respondents consider further fragmentation of society as a potential threat for increased spread of hatred, either towards people with opposing views or targeted at specific minorities: "Disinformation spreads easily, people believe wrong information, and then hatred is formed against minorities." (Other, A7). A total of 7 respondents either could not express themselves or consider disinformation as a legitimate and effective tool in political communication: "I don't see a problem in that, let everyone watch what they want." (Female, A17).

**Media Sources and Their Evaluation (RQ3)**

A total of 16 respondents thoroughly verify each information from multiple sources. From their responses, it is evident that respondents prefer online sources that are accessible and easy to use. They consider the Startitup portal to be the most accessible medium. In their answers, they often emphasise that they consider most important, when the content of newscast itself is more critical and goes into more depth. "[...] they write about sharp topics, do not ask stupid and irrelevant questions (they do journalism). They ask politicians political questions directly, on serious topics." (Male, A35). We add that a key parameter in the process is not just the selection of the medium itself but the ability to critically assess its content. Reading a media outlet considered conspiratorial (thus assuming a low likelihood of critically assessing political content by the media) does not automatically predispose the respondent to becoming a conspirator. "I use all available sources. I get a comprehensive view of things from the entire spectrum of opinions, all portals, and try to get closer to the absolute truth of the matter, which is never black and white. There are dozens of them: e-report, news, main news, Štandard; I also follow foreign news." (Male, A33). A total of 19 respondents partially (or selectively) verify news sources. This indicates that almost 95% of all respondents either completely or partially verify the sources they draw from. The biggest difference between the two categories (complex or partial verification) is that the latter only verify certain selected news, often based on their gut feeling, that the news may not be presented correctly. "Based on a feeling whether the website has something to gain by presenting this information as it is, whether sources are provided, whether alternatives are presented." (Male, A18). "When something doesn't seem right to me, I check the author, look for articles on the same topic from multiple authors, and compare what they write about; I don't have specific sources." (Male, A2). Respondents most commonly mention easily accessible news formats, media profiles on social networking sites, or websites of media outlets targeting the "young generation" as their favourite sources. Based on the collected data, it can be concluded that respondents prefer online versions of news outlets that have expanded their presence from original printed formats to websites and apps. Television and TV news in the form of evening news remain relevant amongst respondents as well.

**Level of Advertising Literacy (RQ4)**

Based on our evaluation, 1 respondent achieved an advanced level of advertising literacy, 21 respondents were classified as having a medium level, and 16 respondents achieved a basic level of advertising literacy. The average level of advertising literacy achieved by first-time voters in the context of disinformation in political advertising was based on the sum of the averages of individual questions, i.e., the average total score achieved. The highest average was achieved by respondents in the question regarding verifying news information from selected sources (and the selection of these sources), while the lowest average was achieved in naming the method they would use to identify disinformation in various advertising formats. The averages can be seen in the table below.

*Table 1. Average of received points per question and average level of advertising literacy*

| Question | Average (out of 2) |
|---|---|
| Definition of political advertising | 0.68 |
| Identification of political advertising | 0.84 |
| Definition of disinformation | 0.89 |
| Identification of disinformation | 0.63 |
| Sources and their evaluation | 1.32 |
| Identification of disinformation goals | 1.00 |
| Ethical aspect of disinformation use | 1.00 |
| **Average achieved number of all points:** | **6.37 out of 14** |
| **Level of Advertising Literacy:** | **medium** |

*Source: own processing, 2024*

**Impact of Media Education (RQ4)**

The group familiar with the subject of media education achieved a moderate level of advertising literacy according to our measurement, with an average score of 7.42 points. The group educated without taking the subject achieved a basic level of advertising literacy focused on disinformation in political advertising communication with an average score of 5.32 points. Our study focuses on a very specific area of advertising literacy combined with the issue of disinformation, so with these set rules, it can be assumed that the results of the study would be approximately in the medium to basic range of advertising literacy.

The subject of media communication deals with a wider range of various types of information, where advertising and disinformation are just a small part of it. Moreover, the subject is taught only in the final, fourth year of high school education. The gathering of the data was scheduled to December 11, 2023, just 3 months after the start of academic year.

The largest differences between groups in the achieved number of points are observed in dealing with news information and verifying individual sources (a difference of 0.53 points, representing almost a 27% increase in the group with media education). Moreover, the media-educated group achieved higher scores in questions related to the definition and identification of advertising (both increases by 0.42 points).

From the information provided, it is evident that implementing media education in the form of a compulsory subject in schools can raise advertising literacy. Through the evaluation of individual responses, we observe differences in their ability to formulate their opinions on the issue and attitudes critically and comprehensively, even though it constitutes only a minimal part of the curriculum for the subject. Table 2 shows the difference between each group.

*Table 2. Change in achieved points between groups according to a specific question*

| Question | Average of the group with media education | Average of the group without media education | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Definition of political advertising | 0.89 | 0.47 | 0.42 |
| Identification of political advertising | 1.05 | 0.63 | 0.42 |
| Definition of disinformation | 0.95 | 0.84 | 0.11 |
| Identification of disinformation | 0.74 | 0.53 | 0.21 |
| Sources and their evaluation | 1.58 | 1.05 | 0.53 |
| Identification of disinformation goals | 1.05 | 0.95 | 0.11 |
| Ethical aspect of disinformation use | 1.16 | 0.84 | 0.32 |
| **Average achieved score** | **7.42** | **5.32** | **2.10** |
| **Level of advertising literacy** | **medium** | **basic** | **1 level difference** |

*Source: own processing, 2024*

# 5 Conclusion

The study reveals that first-time voters generally identify political advertisements most accurately within social media environments. However, many struggle to precisely define political advertising, often confusing it with unsolicited communication or propaganda. The most accurate definitions, which came predominantly from female respondents, described political advertising as a paid form of promotion aimed at influencing behaviour. These respondents were also more accurate in identifying the specific characteristics of political advertisements. In contrast, many respondents failed to recognise the role of an advertiser and often perceived advertisements as unsolicited interruptions or as offensive reactions to sensitive topics.

Regarding disinformation, the study found that while most first-time voters were familiar with the term, fewer could accurately define it, and the ability to correctly identify disinformation was notably low. Nearly half of the respondents struggled to identify disinformation, often failing to distinguish it from general information. Incorrect definitions typically lacked the nuanced factors necessary to recognise disinformation, which involves the intentional creation and dissemination of misleading information. Despite these challenges, both groups acknowledged the ethical issues associated with disinformation in political advertising, with many considering it unethical.

Similar patterns can be found across multiple studies. Firstly, our results fairly match those of Čábyová and Hudáková (2022); however, the authors of the study focused on different aspects of advertising literacy. Also, a part of their sample consisted of 17-year-olds, which are very close to the age of our respondents. Similarities can also be found in the research of Ofcom (2022) which conducted research on the same target group, where respondents also claimed to be confident in their abilities to spot disinformation, however, they were unable to do so in practice. According to their research, more than a fifth of their respondents identified a fake profile as a genuine one. In our research, we also identified the same issue. Our respondents were mostly able to partially define disinformation, as their ways of identifying it are based on incorrect criteria.

From the responses, it is also evident that first-time voters lack consensus on their understanding of disinformation, and they do not know how they would approach their identification, opening up ample room for potential manipulation by political figures. It is therefore extremely important not to forget about educating younger generations about advertising and advertising literacy, as they represent the future of society.

The data reveals a marked difference in advertising literacy between students who received media education and those who did not. Specifically, the group familiar with media education scored an average of 7.42 points, which categorises them at a medium level of advertising literacy, while the group without such education averaged 5.32 points, falling into the basic advertising literacy category. This demonstrates a clear educational benefit, particularly in understanding and evaluating news sources, as well as defining and identifying political advertising and disinformation. The data further revealed that students exposed to media education demonstrated better critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the implications that disinformation has on society. Overall, our findings suggest that a structured approach to media education can significantly bolster advertising literacy amongst young voters, equipping them with the necessary tools to critically evaluate political messages. This, in turn, can lead to a more informed electorate, better prepared to make thoughtful decisions in the democratic process.

We also acknowledge certain limitations regarding this research. The main limitation is the intentional selection of the sample. This involves respondents who study information science and multimedia, which may imply a higher interest in the examined issues. This means that research conducted at another school might yield worse results in terms of advertising literacy. The second limitation is the number of respondents. Given that this is qualitative research, and thus not all first-time voters were proportionally represented, the results cannot be generalised to the whole population.

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