

DISINFORMATION AND MEDIA TRUST IN THE SOUTH OF EUROPE. A MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL

DESINFORMACIÓN Y CONFIANZA EN LOS MEDIOS EN EL SUR DE EUROPA. UN MODELO DE MEDIACIÓN MODERADA

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Abstract: Our study explores how the type of news source acts as an intermediary in the connection between people's concerns about disinformation and their overall trust in the media. Additionally, we examine how a person's ideology influences their choice of news sources and, ultimately, their trust in news in general. To do so, we examine data from the Digital News Report 2022 (N= 10,106) for five news markets: France (N= 2059), Greece (N= 2004), Italy (N= 2004), Portugal (N= 2011), and Spain (N= 2028). The results confirm that ideology plays a moderating role in the relationships between «disinformation concern», «trust in media», and «type of media source». Increased concern about disinformation significantly decreases trust in the news. Individuals who are concerned about disinformation have higher consumption of traditional media (press, radio, and television). This research presents a moderated model that explains how these various factors interact to shape media trust.

Keywords: Disinformation; Trust, News; Legacy Media; Digital Media; Mediated moderation model.

Resumen: Nuestro estudio explora cómo el tipo de fuente de noticias actúa como factor mediador en la relación entre la preocupación de las personas por la desinformación y su confianza general en los medios de comunicación. Además, examinamos cómo la ideología de una persona influye en su elección de fuentes de noticias y, en última instancia, en su confianza en las noticias en general. Para ello, examinamos los datos del Digital News Report 2022 (N= 10.106) para cinco mercados de noticias: Francia (N= 2059), Grecia (N= 2004), Italia (N= 2004), Portugal (N= 2011) y España (N= 2028). Los resultados confirman que la ideología desempeña un papel moderador en las relaciones entre «preocupación por la desinformación», «confianza en los medios» y «tipo de fuente mediática». Una mayor preocupación por la desinformación disminuye significativamente la confianza en las noticias. Además, los individuos altamente preocupados por la desinformación tienden a aumentar su consumo de medios de comunicación tradicionales. Esta investigación presenta un modelo moderado que explica cómo interactúan estos diversos factores para conformar la confianza en los medios de comunicación.

Palabras clave: desinformación; confianza; noticias; medios tradicionales; medios digitales; modelo de mediación moderada.

1. Introduction

Trust is a crucial element in maintaining social cohesion among members of a society (Hawley, 2012). It extends beyond interpersonal interactions to include goods, services, and institutions, and its formation is influenced by both the expectations of the sender and the behaviour of the receiver (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984).

Regarding the media, trust is a fundamental component that shapes the bond between citizens and the media (Fawzi *et al.*, 2021). In recent decades, it has been a central theme in academic research, generating an abundant literature (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1988; Stamm & Dube, 1994; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). This research is related to credibility studies, a concept with a long history in communication (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), and closely linked to trust. Despite the abundance of research, there is no agreement on the definition of trust, its level of operation, or how to measure it (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The lack of precision in both concept and methodology is exacerbated by the overuse of one-dimensional quantitative techniques, resulting in an incomplete understanding of this phenomenon (Garusi & Splendore, 2023).

Nevertheless, at the broadest conceptual level, there is significant consensus that news media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees) where citizens, however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020:142).

The significance of trust in news, both academically and professionally, is due to its influence on people's relationship with news (Moran & Nechushtai, 2022), which in turn affects their news consumption (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Schranz *et al.*, 2018).

Taking these factors into consideration, our study is dedicated to probing the determinants of trust in news, with a particular emphasis on the impact of disinformation concern on shaping news consumption patterns. To do so, we used a quantitative methodology based on the Digital News Report survey (Newman *et al.*, 2023) and statistical analysis (Hayes, 2022). Specifically, we delve into the mediation role played by the type of news source in the relationship between disinformation concern and media trust. Moreover, we scrutinize how ideology moderates the link between individuals' selection of media sources and their overarching trust in news. This research culminates in

a model of moderated mediation elucidating how these diverse influences shape media trust.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Media trust

Media credibility and trustworthiness hinge on a range of factors, including the accuracy of information dissemination, impartiality, independence from external actors, and a commitment to upholding audience interests (Lee, 2010). These elements play a crucial role in establishing media outlets as reliable sources of information and fostering public trust. Although there is no universal definition of trust in news media, in this research we conceptualize it as «the individual's willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society (i.e. democratic media functions)» (Fawzi *et al.*, 2021, p. 156). Therefore, it is established through a cognitive and relational process in which individuals evaluate the qualities of an information source, the content of its messages, or the media system as a whole (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012; Medina *et al.*, 2023; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). The asset being referred to is fragile and intangible, and is highly relational in nature. It is sensitive to social, economic, cultural, and technological changes (Serrano-Puche *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, it is important to consider the political and cultural context in which this relationship develops, as well as the expectations that citizens have towards media institutions. These factors can influence their perceptions and attitudes towards media institutions (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Criticism of the media has intensified in most Western democracies in recent years from various quarters. Changes in the levels of credibility and trust inspired by journalistic activity can be observed in many countries (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2018). For instance, trust indices in traditional media have shown a negative trend in Spain in recent years (Serrano-Puche, 2017; Vara-Miguel, 2018; Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2022). According to Edelman (2023), only 38% of the population considers the media to be a trustworthy institution. The Digital News Report (Amoedo *et al.*, 2023) reports a slightly lower percentage of 33%. This media skepticism among citizens is fuelled by the perception that the media does not meet professional standards, such as incomplete coverage, lack of fairness, or inaccuracies. Additionally, the belief that journalists would sacrifice accuracy for personal or commercial gain contributes to this

skepticism (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Skepticism towards the media can stem from a constructive view, associated with citizens' legitimate expectations of fulfilling a social function (Quiring *et al.*, 2019). However, it can also result in cynicism, which is associated with populist or anti-establishment attitudes (Markov & Min, 2023; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

The lack of trust is a global and systemic phenomenon that affects a wide range of institutions, including multinational companies, political parties, NGOs, religious institutions, and corporations from various sectors (Edelman, 2023; Pérez-Latre, 2022). In essence, there is a widespread lack of trust in conventional institutions, which seem unable to offer solutions to social, economic, environmental, or public health issues (Perry, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022; Sapienza, 2021).

Returning to the media, the transformation experienced in the communication ecosystem due to the irruption of digital platforms and technologies implies a challenge for traditional media. This new ecosystem is characterized by the hybridization of classic and digital media logics (Chadwick, 2013), the blurring of traditional boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), and the ability of citizens to choose sources and content (Van-Aelst *et al.*, 2017). This leads to competition among different agents to capture the time and attention of users (Webster, 2014).

2.2. Disinformation and media trust

The phenomenon of disinformation has garnered significant attention in recent years, drawing scrutiny from both academics and the public. This focus has yielded a deeper understanding of the concept itself, along with its causes and consequences (Ha *et al.*, 2019; High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation [HLEG], 2018). This attention is nourished by concern for the threat it poses to democratic institutions (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), as well as by the realization that it is an increasingly complex phenomenon due to the diversity of actors involved and the modes of dissemination with which it emerges. In this sense, and following Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p. 20), it is important to conceptually distinguish «Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country» (disinformation) from «Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm» (misinformation).

In any case, the rise of all this «problematic information» (Jack, 2017) also poses a challenge to the media, as it increases citizens' uncertainty about the reliability of content circulating in the public sphere, which can lead to less

trust in the media (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Hameleers, Brosius, and De-Vreese (2022) concluded, based on a survey in 10 European countries, that users with stronger perceptions of disinformation are more likely to consume news in social networks and alternative non-mainstream media. Additionally, research by Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) shows that those who trust the media less are more likely to believe online disinformation. Conversely, citizens in countries with high levels of media trust and low levels of polarization and populist communication are more resilient to disinformation (Humprecht *et al.*, 2020). Ultimately, structural tensions in the media environment are related to the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions, which paves the way for disinformation as a disruptive element in the public sphere, as recent history has shown (Magallón-Rosa, 2022).

The perception that news stories contain false information can lead to distrust of the media. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

- H1: People who are more concerned about disinformation tend to trust the media less.

The rise of the new hybrid media system, in which digital and new media outlets have challenged the dominance of traditional media, has affected the level of trust that individuals have in the media (Chadwick, 2013; Fawzi *et al.* 2021). The availability of a greater number of news sources has enabled citizens to question the accuracy of news outlets with which they disagree (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). Today, individuals have access to a wider range of media sources, enabling them to choose from a greater variety of stories. Some sources may offer stories that align with their existing beliefs, which can be perceived as more reliable (Hameleers *et al.*, 2022).

When citizens distrust the mainstream media, they tend to withdraw from it and turn towards alternative sources (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). One reason for distrust of the news media and increased use of alternative outlets could be the perception that the information reported in the mainstream media is false or even deliberately misleading. Thus, perceptions of misinformation and disinformation are both associated with reduced trust in the news media. They are also associated with reduced consumption of traditional TV news, but not with reduced consumption of newspapers and (mainstream) online news (Ren *et al.*, 2024). However, those with stronger perceptions of misinformation and disinformation are more likely to consume news from social media and alternative, non-mainstream outlets. This pattern is stronger for those with higher perceptions of disinformation (Hameleers *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, our second hypothesis would be:

H2: Individuals highly concerned about disinformation tend to increase their consumption of legacy media sources (traditional press, radio, or television).

Several studies have shown a correlation between an individual's preferred media source (traditional or online) and media trustworthiness (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). This correlation is based on different communicative phenomena. Information overload and the fear of disinformation, as well as the overabundance of sources, make it easier for users to be more selective about the news sources they use (Holton & Chyi, 2012; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). When choosing a media source, audiences tend to favour sources they trust over those they distrust when evaluating their value (Vara-Miguel, 2022). Therefore, one could assume that the relationship between users' disinformation concern and their experienced media trust could be somehow influenced by the type of media source they choose.

In order to examine the impact of users' choice of news source on the relationship between disinformation concern and media trust, we employed mediation analysis. This widely used method transcends the limitations of mere correlation, delving into the underlying mechanisms that drive relationships among certain variables. Its name comes from the fact that it examines how an independent variable influences a dependent variable through a mediator variable. Therefore, this approach helps identify whether the effect of one variable on another is direct or if there are other variables which influence the behaviour of the latter (Igartua & Hayes, 2021). Thus, moving beyond simple correlations and shedding light on these connections, this method can provide deeper insights into the nature of relationships and lead to more effective interventions. In our study, the mediation analysis allowed us to assess the mediating role of the type of news source in the association between disinformation concern and media trust. Specifically, we analysed whether the mediator variable M (type of news source) mediated the direct relationship between disinformation concern (our independent variable Y) and media trust (our dependent variable X). This approach allowed us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the causal connections among X, Y, and M.

H3: The effect of disinformation concern (X) on media trust (Y) will be mediated by the type of media source (M) chosen.

2.3. Disinformation, ideology and media trust

When examining the repercussions of disinformation, ideology emerges as a significant factor. This is chiefly due to ideological disparities. There exists a substantial body of literature indicating that individuals situated at the extremes of the ideological spectrum are more inclined towards disinformation, both because they favour it and because disinformation sources target them (Freelon *et al.*, 2022). Studies suggest that extremist individuals embrace disinformation as it reinforces their extreme viewpoints, sparing them the discomfort of engaging with factual information that may challenge their political beliefs (Harper & Sykes, 2023). This phenomenon is logical, considering that the most radical voters are typically the most politically engaged and are more tolerant of biased information (Benkler *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, ideology influences trust in the media, given that journalism is viewed as integral to the institutional framework of liberal democracies. Consequently, individuals' trust in the media is significantly shaped by their trust in political institutions. Hanitzsch *et al.* (2018) refer to this as the «trust nexus», a connection that tends to strengthen in politically polarized environments. Skepticism towards journalistic institutions and media platforms is often fuelled by anti-establishment sentiments (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2018), which also correlate with the consumption of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Uscinski *et al.*, 2021). Scholarly research often cites partisan tribalism and ideological extremism as explanatory factors for this association. In several Western democracies, public polarization has increased, closely aligning with partisan and ideological identities, while animosity towards political opponents has intensified (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Kalmoe & Mason, 2019). Meanwhile, political elites are becoming increasingly polarised and framing their appeals along partisan and ideological lines. This statement reinforces the importance of left-right identities in politics and highlights the relevance of ideology when analysing media trust (Levendusky, 2010).

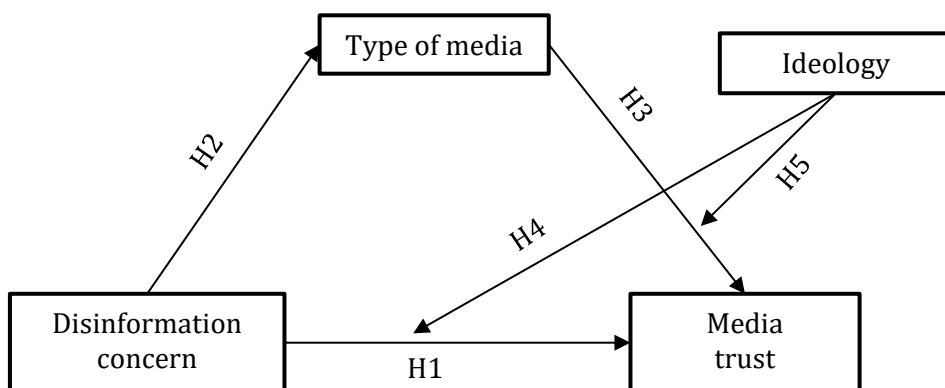
Drawing from the hypothesis suggesting that disinformation will negatively affect trust in news, this effect will be more pronounced among individuals with more extreme political ideologies. Those positioned at the far ends of the ideological spectrum are inclined to embrace misinformation aligning with their existing beliefs, thereby diminishing their trust in news diverging from their worldview. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses to study the relationship between disinformation concern (X), media trust (Y), preferred media type (M) and ideology (W):

H4: The ideology (W) of the respondents will serve as a moderating variable in the association between disinformation concern (X) and media trust (Y).

H5: The ideology (W) of the respondents will serve as a moderating variable in the association between preferred type of media (M) and media trust (Y)

The depicted figure in Figure 1 illustrates the proposed connections within a causal framework among disinformation concern (X), media trust (Y), type of news source (M), and ideology (W). The model's *paths* (*a*, *b*, and *c'*) represent the direct impacts of one variable on another. To calculate the indirect effect of X on Y, we multiplied *paths* *a* and *b*.

Figure 1. Model of moderated mediation. PROCESS Model 15



Source: Own elaboration based on Hayes (2022)

3. Methodology

In this section, we describe the data and methods used to test our hypotheses and answer the research questions on news trust in the media in five European countries: France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. We use data from the Digital News Report survey (Newman *et al.*, 2023), a large-scale study focused on news consumption and attitudes toward news, conducted annually by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and fielded by YouGov. The

selected countries belong to the Polarised Pluralist or Mediterranean model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This justifies the choice of the sample and guarantees a certain homogeneity. The total sample (N= 10106) integrates news consumption from five countries: France (N= 2059), Greece (N= 2004), Italy (N= 2004), Portugal (N= 2011), and Spain (N= 2028). Samples were collected from panels in various countries. Participants were asked to complete the survey while adhering to predefined quotas for age, gender, and region. The collected samples were then weighted according to census data to ensure alignment with the demographics of the national population. Conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, fieldwork was carried out via an online questionnaire from late January to early February 2022. The gathered data underwent weighting adjustments based on predetermined targets derived from census and industry-recognized data, including variables such as age, gender, region, newspaper readership, and social grade, to accurately mirror the demographics of each country's population. The sample consisted of adults (18+ years) with internet access, with over 2,000 respondents in each country (see Table 1). It is important to note that the data were collected from an online panel, and therefore respondents were not randomly sampled.

Table 1. Sample size and internet penetration (2022)

Country	Sample Size	Internet Penetration
France	2059	92.2%
Greece	2004	78.5%
Italy	2004	90.8%
Portugal	2011	88.1%
Spain	2028	93.0%

Source: Internet World Stats

3.1. Dependent variable: media trust

The dependent variable in this study is «media trust». In the questionnaire, participants were asked the following question: «We are now going to ask you about trust in the news. First, we will ask you about how much you trust the news as a whole within your country. Then we will ask you about how much you trust the news that you choose to consume: «I think you can trust most news most of the time». The options comprised five response categories based on level of agreement: «strongly disagree», «tend to disagree», «neither agree nor disagree», «tend to agree» and «strongly agree». (*Mean (M)* = 3, *Standard Deviation (SD)* = 1,06).

The method used to assess media trust aligns with established methodologies from prior studies, such as the *Digital News Report 2017* in Australia (Watkins *et al.*, 2017), *Edelman's Global Trust Barometer* (2018–2024), the *Pew Research Center survey on modern news consumers* (2016–2024), and the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (2012–2021). These studies employed a multi-point scale to measure participants' trust in the news media. Williams (2012) introduced the term 'media trust' as an analytical approach, distinguishing it from interpersonal and institutional trust, and linking it to audience engagement with various news outlets. Therefore, most trust frameworks in journalism studies consider media trust as a general sentiment rather than something specific to certain situations or individual outlets (Engelke *et al.*, 2019). This methodology is widely accepted and enables comparisons of trust and distrust levels across different types of news media and countries.

3.2. Independent variables

3.2.1. Disinformation concern

In order to analyse disinformation concern, we used the following questions from the survey: «Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet». The options comprised five response categories based on level of agreement, codified from 1 to 5 as follows: «strongly disagree» (1), «tend to disagree» (2), «neither agree nor disagree» (3), «tend to agree» (4) and «strongly agree» (5). ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.98$).

3.2.2. Political alignment

This variable ranges from 1 to 7 and corresponds to the following survey question: «Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered 'left wing' whilst conservative parties would be considered 'right wing'). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?»: «Very left-wing», «Fairly left-wing», «Slightly left-of-centre», «Centre», «Slightly right-of-centre», «Fairly right-wing», «Very right-wing» and «Don't know». ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.21$).

3.2.3. Type of source

To gauge the main outlet for news among respondents, we used the following question: «Which source of news would you say is your main source of news,

considering the sources you used in the past week?». The respondents had 11 alternatives, which were recoded into four categories, ranging from 1 to 4 as follows: 1 (television news bulletins or programmes, 24-hour news television channels, radio news programmes and bulletins and printed newspapers and magazines), 2 (digital editions and websites of traditional news sources), 3 (digital-born outlets), and 4 (social media). ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.19$).

3.3. Control variables

The control variables of our research were age [which was recoded into six categories: 1 (18 to 24), 2 (25 to 34), 3 (35 to 44), 4 (45 to 54), 5 (55 to 64) and 6 (65 or above)], education level [which was also recoded to simplify the original ten educational alternatives into five categories: 1 (Primary school or less), 2 (completed Secondary school or Bac-A levels), 3 (completed professional qualification), 4 (completed bachelor's degree), and 5 (postgraduate, be it master's or doctoral degree)], gender [male (1) or female (2)], and household income [1 (less than 15,000 €/year), 2 (15,000-35,000 €/year), and 3 (more than 35,000 €/year)]. As *Vara et al.* (2023) state, these control variables have been consistently identified as the most important when addressing variance in media trust perceptions.

3.4. Data analysis

The statistical procedures involved in this study consisted of the following steps: first, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the variables we were analysing in the study, followed by a correlation analysis across the variables. Once this step was completed, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using IBM SPSS macro PROCESS (Model 15; Hayes, 2015). The PROCESS macro is commonly used in the social sciences to analyse complex models that include both mediating and moderating variables, and remains the preferred tool for analysing advanced models that describe moderated mediation processes (Hayes, 2015). Using PROCESS, model coefficients can be estimated while also finding t- and p-values, standard errors and confidence intervals using OLS regressions. This allowed us to find direct and indirect effects of mediation among our chosen variables, which resulted in the proposed model of moderated mediation. In our case, inferences about conditional and indirect effects in the statistical analyses were made using percentile bootstrap confidence intervals ($n = 10,000$ samples; 95% lower and upper percentiles), which were found to be significantly different from zero and therefore relevant to our study (Hayes, 2018; Hayes and Scharkow, 2013).

Table 2: Frequencies (%). Control variables, pooled and by countries

Variable	Categories	POOLED	FR	IT	SP	PT	GR
	N	10106	2059	2004	2028	2011	2004
Gender	Male	48%	48%	46%	48%	47%	50%
	Female	52%	52%	54%	52%	53%	50%
Household Income	Low	27%	34%	20%	27%	20%	31%
	Medium	51%	43%	57%	48%	53%	53%
	High	23%	23%	23%	25%	27%	16%
Education	Primary or less	5%	7%	2%	8%	6%	2%
	Secondary	51%	51%	73%	41%	60%	28%
	Prof. qualification	13%	18%	6%	19%	6%	17%
	Graduated. Bach.	18%	8%	6%	21%	20%	36%
	Postgraduate	13%	15%	13%	11%	7%	17%
Age	18-24	8%	8%	6%	7%	9%	10%
	25-34	14%	15%	13%	15%	14%	14%
	35-44	18%	16%	18%	19%	18%	18%
	45-54	19%	17%	21%	19%	20%	19%
	55-64	26%	20%	24%	26%	28%	32%
	65+	15%	24%	19%	14%	10%	8%

Source: Own elaboration based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (2023).

3.4.1. Descriptive statistics

The overall trend in four of the countries analysed shows a balance in the number of respondents claiming to trust most of the news versus those saying the contrary (35.4% v. 31.3% on average). Portugal stands out as a clear outlier in this question, with a vast majority of Portuguese respondents (61.5%) claiming to trust most news most of the time, which explains the wide difference in the mean level of trust in news across countries [$F(4, 10101) = 165, p < .001, \eta^2 = .61$]. The post-hoc analysis using Tukey's USD test confirms this difference, showing that the mean level of trust in news was significantly

higher in Portugal ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1$) than in France ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.04$), Greece ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1$), Italy ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.97$) and Spain ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.11$).

Table 3: Media trust. Frequencies, means and standard deviations.

	POOLED	FR	IT	SP	PT	GR
Strongly disagree	9,7	13	6,9	3,8	11,4	13,2
Tend to disagree	22,4	24,9	21,3	15	25,3	25,6
Neither agree nor disagree	30,6	33,3	35,4	19,7	36,9	27,5
Tend to agree	32,7	26,5	33,4	50,7	24	29,3
Strongly agree	4,6	2,4	2,9	10,8	2,4	4,3
Means	3,00	2,80	3,04	3,50	2,81	2,86
SD	1,06	1,04	0,97	1,00	1,00	1,11

Source: Own elaboration based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (2023).

Table 4 presents data on main sources of news, ideology and disinformation concern for the five countries analysed in this study. Generally, media consumption shows a clear distinction in the media diet of respondents. On the one hand, France, Italy and Portugal show a similar pattern, with a clear dominance of traditional media. The distribution of news consumption across these three countries shows traditional news sources as the primary news sources ($M = 59.57$, $SD = 2.55$). On the other hand, Greece and Spain show a higher prevalence of social media ($M = 40.5$, $SD = 8.2$) and less reliance on traditional news sources. The ANOVA shows the mean level of main source for news vary from country to country [$F(4, 9648) = 128.36$, $p = <.001$, $\eta^2 = .51$]. The post-hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD test showed that the mean level of main source was significantly higher in Greece ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.23$) and Spain ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.11$), which shows consistent prevalence of social media over traditional sources in both markets than in France ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.11$), Italy ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.11$) and Portugal ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.17$).

Regarding ideology, significant differences can be found in the scores among the countries included in the analysis. Descriptive statistics revealed the following mean ideology scores for each country: France ($M = 5.1646$), Greece ($M = 4.6816$), Italy ($M = 4.7854$), Portugal ($M = 4.5027$), and Spain ($M = 4.0641$).

An ANOVA test was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in ideology scores between the countries. The results indicated a significant difference among the countries ($F(4, 10101) = 69.409, p < 0.001$), suggesting that at least one country's ideology mean significantly differed from the others. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test revealed significant differences between the ideology scores of all pairs of countries ($p < 0.05$), except for the comparison between Italy and Greece ($p = 0.559$).

A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to determine the effect of nationality (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) on fear for disinformation among participants. The results indicate a significant effect, [$F(4, 10101) = 85.75, p = <.001$] $\eta^2 = .03$]. Post-hoc analyses using Tuckey's HSD test indicated that fear for disinformation was significantly higher in Portugal ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.93$) than in all other countries ($p <.001$). Fear for disinformation was also significantly higher in Spain ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.07$) than in France ($M = 3.4, SD = 0.96$), Italy ($M = 3.55, SD = 0.92$) and Greece ($M = 3.6, SD = 0.92$).

3.4.2. Correlation analysis

Table 4 shows the correlation analysis of the main variables. The analysis showed that all key variables had a statistically significant relationship with each other, although the sign varied. The correlation matrix revealed a significant positive relationship between type of news source and ideology ($r = 0.043, p < 0.001$). There were also negative relationships between type of news source and disinformation concern ($r = 0.027, p = 0.009$) and media trust ($r = -0.183, p < 0.001$). A negative sign indicates an inverse relationship between news source type and disinformation concern and media trust. In this case, this means that respondents whose main news source was non-digital (i.e., printed media, television or radio) showed higher levels of disinformation concern and lower levels of trust in the news overall.

Table 4: Frequencies (%). Independent variables. Pooled and by countries.

		POOLED	FR	IT	PT	GR	SP
Main source	Traditional news sources	52	56.70	59.1	62.9	32.3	48.7
	Digital edition traditional	15.6	14.10	14.5	12.6	16.8	20
	Digital-born outlets	8.8	7.4	9.2	4.4	17.6	5.3
	Social media	19.2	13.6	13.9	17.8	29.4	21.3
	Mean	1.95	1.76	1.77	1.77	2.46	1.99
	SD	1.19	1.11	1.11	1.17	1.23	1.21
Ideology	Very left-wing	3.9	5.00	2.8	5.1	3.7	3.1
	Fairly left-wing	17.7	17.14	13	20.4	9.9	28.1
	Slightly left-of-centre	14.5	7.14	17.6	14.4	17.4	16.2
	Centre	16.6	12.04	14.3	16.5	24.9	15.6
	Slightly right-of-centre	12	6.95	16.7	10.4	14.5	11.5
	Fairly right-wing	11.5	15.69	13.5	9.3	7.4	11.3
	Very right-wing	4	9.57	2.2	3.5	2	2.8
	Mean	4.64	5.16	4.79	4.50	4.68	4.06
	SD	2.21	2.38	2.11	2.28	2.07	2.05
Disinformation concern	Strongly disagree	9.7	13	6.9	3.8	11.4	13.2
	Tend to disagree	22.4	24.9	21.3	15	25.3	25.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	30.6	33.3	35.4	19.7	36.9	27.5
	Tend to agree	32.7	26.5	33.4	50.7	24	29.3
	Strongly agree	4.6	2.4	2.9	10.8	2.4	4.3
	Mean	3.00	2.80	3.04	3.50	2.81	2.86
	SD	1.06	1.04	0.97	1.00	1.00	1.11en

Source: Own elaboration based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (2023).

The analysis of the correlations by country (see Table 3) shows a significant relationship between type of source and trust in all countries [France ($r = -0.140$, $p < 0.001$), Greece ($r = -0.195$, $p < 0.001$), Italy ($r = -0.144$, $p < 0.001$), Portugal ($r = -0.119$, $p < 0.001$) and Spain ($r = -0.190$, $p < 0.001$)].

The relationship between the two variables is the same as in the pooled data, with digital media showing lower levels of trust. The main source of news has a significant positive correlation in Greece ($r = 0.045$, $p = 0.047$) and Portugal ($r = 0.148$, $p < 0.001$), implying that right-wing respondents prefer online media as their preferred source of news. Similarly, the Portuguese data shows a negative significant correlation between preferred news source and disinformation concern ($r = -0.047$, $p = 0.038$), behaving in the same way as the pooled data. Similarly, there was a significant relationship between ideology and disinformation concern in France ($r = -0.046$, $p = 0.036$), Portugal ($r = -0.047$, $p = 0.034$), and Spain ($r = -0.074$, $p = 0.001$). The correlation between ideology and overall trust in news was significant in France ($r = -0.052$, $p = 0.019$), Greece ($r = 0.103$, $p < 0.001$), Italy ($r = -0.091$, $p < 0.001$) and Portugal ($r = -0.100$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, disinformation concern also showed a significant negative relationship in France ($r = -0.075$, $p = 0.001$) and Greece ($r = -0.082$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5: Spearman correlation analysis of key variables

POOLED	1	2	3	4
Type of source (1)	1.000	,043**	-,027**	-,183**
Ideology (2)	,043**	1.000	-,060**	-,042**
Disinformation concern (3)	-,027**	-,060**	1.000	0.016
Trust (4)	-,183**	-,042**	0.016	1.000
France				
Type of source (1)	1.000	-0.006	-0.034	-,140**
Ideology (2)	-0.006	1.000	-,046*	-,052*
Disinformation concern (3)	-0.034	-,046*	1.000	-,075**
Trust (4)	-,140**	-,052*	-,075**	1.000
Greece				
Type of source (1)	1.000	,045*	0.009	-,195**
Ideology (2)	,045*	1.000	0.029	-,103**
Disinformation concern (3)	0.009	0.029	1.000	-,082**
Trust (4)	-,195**	-,103**	-,082**	1.000
Italy				
Type of source (1)	1.000	0.025	-0.008	-,144**
Ideology (2)	0.025	1.000	-0.029	-,091**
Disinformation concern (3)	-0.008	-0.029	1.000	-0.030
Trust (4)	-,144**	-,091**	-0.030	1.000
Portugal				
Type of source (1)	1.000	,148**	-,047*	-,119**
Ideology (2)	,148**	1.000	-,047*	-,100**
Disinformation concern (3)	-,047*	-,047*	1.000	0.038
Trust (4)	-,119**	-,100**	0.038	1.000

Spain				
Type of source (1)	1.000	0.031	-0.042	-,190**
Ideology (2)	0.031	1.000	-,074**	-0.030
Disinformation concern (3)	-0.042	-,074**	1.000	0.032
Trust (4)	-,190**	-0.030	0.032	1.000

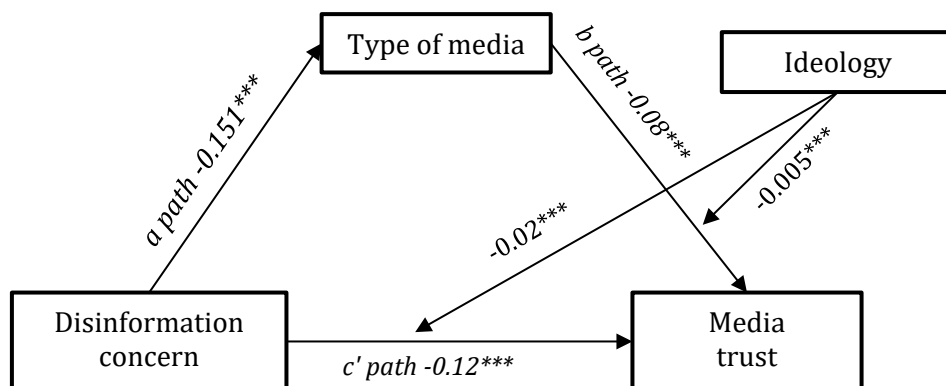
Source: Own elaboration based on Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (2023).

3.4.3. Moderated mediation analysis

The complete model consisted of two regression sub-models. In the first regression, the influence of disinformation concern on type of news source was analysed. The pooled results across the five countries of our analysis proved the *a path* of our model was statistically significant, thus demonstrating a negative relationship between disinformation concern and type of news source ($b = -0.151$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, we can assume that disinformation concern has a significant effect on our mediator variable (type of news source).

Our second regression model was more complex and involved all four variables and their relationships. On the one hand, we tested the significance of the relationship of our independent variable, disinformation concern, on our dependent variable, media trust. In other words, the *c' path* of our model. On the other hand, we also tested the *b path* of our model, the relationship between our mediator variable and the dependent variable and the influence of our moderator variable. Our results suggest that disinformation concern exerts a statistically significant effect on trust on news ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$). The same happens with the relationship between type of news source and media trust ($b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the interaction terms in both cases are also statistically significant. The interaction term for the *c' path* is ($b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.005$, $p < 0.001$), while the interaction term of the *b path* is ($b = 0.005$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$).

The analysis revealed that the indirect effect of disinformation concern on trust in the media, mediated by type of news source, is not constant but depends on ideology. At low levels, the indirect effect is positive and significant ($b = 0.0100$, $SE = 0.003$, $CI = 0.005, 0.015$), however, as ideology increases, this is, right-leaning respondents (e.g., to 8), this indirect effect weakens and becomes negative and significant ($b = -0.005$, $SE = 0.002$, $CI = 0.003, 0.008$), indicating a reversal of the effect.

Figure 2: Model of moderated mediation. PROCESS Model 15

Source: Own elaboration based on Hayes (2022)

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study investigates how the type of news source (M) used by audiences mediates the relationship between disinformation concern (Y) and the overall media trust (X). Furthermore, we also analyse how «ideology» exerts different types of moderating effects: a direct effect (*c' path*) between our independent variable (X) and our dependent variable (Y), and on the indirect effect generated from the relationship between our independent variable (X) and the mediator variable (M). From the validation of the statistically significant model, we propose the following conclusions.

Firstly, the data reveal that people who are more concerned about disinformation tend to trust the media less (H1). Through the *c' path* of the proposed model, we validate the relationship between «disinformation concern» and «media trust». Our results indicate that heightened disinformation concern significantly decreases trust in the news.

The relationship between journalism and accuracy can have several consequences. First, when journalistic accuracy is compromised, it can contribute to expanded skepticism and cynicism among audiences (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). This in turn can fuel anti-establishment attitudes often associated with populism (Markov & Min, 2023; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). The implications of this phenomenon are significant for democracy, as it highlights the ongoing struggle for attention within the media landscape. Trust issues

affect both individuals and society. Consequently, the tensions within the media structure create an environment fertile for the spread of disinformation that can disrupt the public sphere. One of the consequences of this disruption is the growing consumption of alternative media by certain audiences. These alternative media platforms vary in nature and present different ideological resources that can influence perceptions of democracy and the overall governance system.

Secondly, the data confirmed a significant relationship between «disinformation concern» and «type of media». Therefore, those individuals highly concerned about disinformation tend to increase their consumption of legacy media sources (traditional press, radio, or television) (H2). Through the *a path* of the proposed model, we validate the relationship. Concern about this phenomenon significantly influenced the selection of news sources, showing a negative relationship.

Academic literature shows that perceptions of disinformation are related to reduced trust in the news media (Hameleers *et al.*, 2022). This indicates that individuals perceive legacy media coverage and their journalistic practices as more reliable. Resorting to traditional sources presents an alternative to counteract the impacts of incomplete, absent, and inaccurate information. Greater trust in legacy media is attributed to the presence of established journalistic standards and practices (e.g. fact-checking). Audiences may attribute to the press, radio, or television more objectivity, rigour, and credibility in news coverage.

Thirdly, our research supports that those individuals who use online sources of information, such as social networks, show higher levels of distrust compared to those who consume traditional media (press, radio and television) (H3). The rise of the new hybrid media system has led to growing distrust of online media due to concerns about possible reporting bias, inaccuracy, and loss of interest. This suggests that online media may contribute to extended disinformation concerns due to the prevalence of fake news and misinformation. These findings align with other investigations into disinformation, such as Zimmermann and Kohring (2020).

Fourth, ideology within the political spectrum (left, centre and right) moderates the relationship between «disinformation concern» and «media trust» (H4). Additionally, it also causes this moderating effect between the variables «type of media» and «media trust» (H5). Consequently, among left-leaning respondents, a rise in disinformation concern is associated with a preference for consuming online media or social networks. This trend leads to an increase in media trust among left-leaning users. Academic literature

suggests that people polarised along the political spectrum are more susceptible to disinformation, which explains the spread of alternative sources that reinforce their pre-established ideas (Freelon *et al.*, 2022; Harper y Sykes, 2023).

On the other hand, when ideology glides towards more right-leaning positions, the indirect effect becomes negative. We can therefore assume that for these users, the mediator variable behaves differently. Consequently, we do not observe such an enhanced effect between type of media source and trust for right leaning media users. These findings highlight the importance of considering moderators when analysing mediation, as the influence of one variable on another can be contingent on other factors in the system.

It is important to highlight some inherent limitations of our study. First, we analysed data from an online survey, which, while representative, cannot be extrapolated to the entire population of the five countries. In addition, we must consider the limitations of the variable «media trust». As Vara-Miguel *et al.* (2023) point out in a preliminary study on moderated mediation, the use of a single question to measure this phenomenon does not allow us to identify its multidimensional nature. Similarly, asking about trust also assumes every user understands this issue in the same fashion, which can indeed be understood from many different perspectives. Even if every user understood trust in the same way, a single question may fall short as to capture all the intricacies behind users' level of trust. Another aspect to consider is that the political ideology variable is measured at three levels (left, centre and right). This could result in responses biased towards the political centre and not reflect the ideological complexity of the audiences or the political conditions of the five countries. Despite these limitations, our study contributes to the field by emphasising the moderating effect of this variable, an aspect that has not been widely explored in previous studies.

It is important to acknowledge that the sample used in this study is derived from an online survey. While Internet penetration is higher in the selected countries, it is worth noting that the sample may not represent the entire population. Additionally, surveys relying on recall, like the one used in this study, may not always provide a completely accurate picture of individuals' actual news consumption and media usage. However, despite these limitations, conducting a survey remains a practical and reasonable option for addressing our hypotheses and research questions.

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