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Gendered disinformation and online narratives: Instances from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye on youth perspectives

Aslı Çelik

Independent Researcher, Ordu, 52300, Türkiye; asli.asli293@gmail.com

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Abstract: Disinformation can be defined as false information deliberately initiated to cause harm to a person, social group, organization, or country. Gendered disinformation then attacks or undermines people based on gender or weaponizes gendered narratives for political, social, or economic objectives. Gendered disinformation comes in different forms, such as harmful social media posts and graphics, sexual fabrications, and other forms of conspiracy theories. It is used in various situations and at different places. This research discussed the instances of gendered disinformation and harmful online narratives that are recognizable and visible. It sheds light on the potential direct and indirect impact on youth experiences. In this study, the young participants (aged 18–30) focused on the instances of the existing online narratives of gendered discrimination from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye. The research provided an initial analysis of what “gendered information and harmful online narratives” look like and some recommendations from youth perspectives on countering the issues. The study concluded that there is a need for more research, further harmonization of legal frameworks, and strengthened capacity to detect gendered disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech.

Keywords: gender equality; online harassment; disinformation; youth; gendered narratives

1. Introduction

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information intended to deceive and mislead the audiences, either to cause harm or for political, personal, or financial gain (UK Government Communication Service, 2019). Disinformation has the deliberate intent to misinform and an objective to harm. To put forward a conceptual framework for describing the concept which is spreading of wrong, false, and fake information, Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, in a 2017 report for the Council of Europe, introduced the term disinformation as:

- Disinformation is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.
- Information disorder has been defined as a mix of ‘misinformation,’ ‘disinformation,’ and ‘misinformation,’ which respectively reflect increasing levels of harm and involve different content (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Indeed, disinformation is designed to meet people’s demands for compelling and evocative content (Thakur and Hankerson, 2022). Inaccurate and misleading information can have dire consequences, whether the source of the information made an honest mistake (misinformation) or intended to deceive (disinformation) (Fallis, 2009). Inaccurate information (or misinformation) can mislead people, whether it results from an honest mistake, negligence, unconscious bias, or (as in the case of disinformation) intentional deception (Fallis, 2009). Disinformation and information

fabrication is nothing new, of course. The advent of new information technologies and the rise of social media platforms are making it easier and faster for the public to produce and disseminate information intended to deceive.

However, it is fair to state that disinformation does not affect everyone equally. The term “gendered disinformation” can refer to a situation aimed at creating a toxic and abusive online environment to fabricate the gendered norms to become common parlance. The concept of gendered disinformation means any false and manipulated information that is intended to cause harm to women or people of diverse genders and sexualities (Internet Governance Forum (IGF), 2021). While compiling the term “gendered disinformation,” Judsan et al. (2020) refer to information activities (creating, sharing, and disseminating content) that:

- a) Attacks or undermines people based on their gender.
- b) Weaponizes gendered narratives to promote political, social, or economic objectives.

Gendered disinformation appears in various forms and contents, such as harmful social media posts and graphics, sexual fabrications, and other forms of conspiracy theories. It is used in different situations and at different places. Those who are being targeted through various forms of gendered disinformation can feel the impact of gendered disinformation in their daily lives; for instance, gendered disinformation and online narratives are used to establish gendered stereotypes. Regarding the definition of ‘gendered disinformation,’ studies conducted in different countries (e.g., for Brazil, see Azmina; InternetLab, 2020; for Germany and Russia, see Wilfore, 2021) are showing that the attacks against women are often connected with stereotypes linked to their sexual identity/affect orientation, while the attacks against men aim at their ideas, opinions and past activities in public life (Curzi, 2021). As Judson (2021) defines it, “[g]endered disinformation is manipulated information that weaponizes gendered stereotypes for political, economic or social ends.” Gendered disinformation and online narratives highlight the significance of ongoing societal prejudices and common parlance. Likewise, the gendered disinformation and online narratives emphasize the evidence of online portrayals that promote gendered stereotypes and hate speech and provide inaccurate depictions. Manipulative online narratives play a significant role in influencing the perceptions and attitudes of the public and promoting gendered stereotypes online.

Additionally, youth experiences with gendered information and online narratives seek to clarify the existing knowledge of the cultural norms, stigma, and processes that contribute to the formation of gendered stereotypes. While observing and examining the youth experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, we can gain insights into the impact of online narratives on societal perceptions by examining the gendered stereotypes and those effectively shattered by gendered disinformation. As younger generations are more actively engaged with social media platforms and other forms of media, the existing gendered disinformation and online narratives show us the enduring gendered stereotypes and wrongful online depictions of sexual identities that persist.

Looking at the current literature, the research literature on disinformation and gendered disinformation is vast. In contrast, the research on youth perspectives on gendered disinformation and online narratives, the impact of the portrayals on young

audiences, youth’s reactions to such representations, and recommendations from youth perspectives are rare and limited. Hanckel and Chandra (2021) study the social media insights from the sexuality and gender diversity of young people during COVID-19 and reimagine the ways online platforms can respond to their needs. Although there are various studies and research papers that concentrate on gendered disinformation, there are very few studies explicitly regarding youth perspectives and recommendations on combating the issue. For instance, Sawansukha and Tushir (2023) explore the media’s role in breaking the stereotypes among youth. Sawansukha and Tushir (2023) study to comprehend how social media and media platforms reporting can influence the attitudes and perspectives of the public.

This research reviews the instances of gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech that are recognizable and visible. This study tried to shed light on the potential direct and indirect impact on youth experiences by seeking out the explicit common parlance of gendered disinformation. In this study, the young participants (aged 18–30) focus on the instances of the existing online narratives of gendered discrimination from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye. This study aims to point out the recognizable and visible gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech that youth come across online daily by grouping the common parlance. This study highlights suggestions for combating gendered misinformation from the youth perspective. The research provides initial analysis and relatable answers to the questions;

- What “gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech” look like,
- Recommendations from youth perspectives on how to counter the issues internally or globally.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research group

The research was conducted with 50 participants aged 18–30 from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye (**Table 1**) 10 participants from each country joined the study. The participants were selected voluntarily, making the group rather heterogeneous.

Table 1. The information about the research group.

Country	Number of Participants	Average Age of Participants	The Role of Participants
Belgium	10	22	5-Activist 3-Student 2-Youth Worker
Germany	10	25	4-Youth Leader 5-Student 1-Activist
Greece	10	24	3-Teacher 3-Project Coordinator 4-Student
Latvia	10	23	1-Activist 9-Student

Table 1. (Continued).

Country	Number of Participants	Average Age of Participants	The Role of Participants
Spain	10	25	1-Accountant 1-Lawyer 5-Student 3-Youth Worker
Türkiye	10	29	3-Teacher 3-Youth Worker 2-Student 2-P.H.D Student

2.2. Data collection and data analysis

The online questionnaire (**Table 2**) collected information and online instances about gender discrimination from 50 participants in Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye, aiming to detect youth perspectives. It was designed as a combination of a 6-point Likert scale and open-ended questions, comprising five items in total. The first item was used for quantitative analysis, while the other four items were open-ended for qualitative analysis of the responses. This questionnaire provides an overview of youth perspectives on gender discrimination, hate speech, and online culture. The online questionnaire was created on Google Forms and distributed through the Erasmus+ projects’ WhatsApp chat group. The research included countries (Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye) as the participants from these countries had participated in the Erasmus+ projects focused mainly on gender studies. Thus, the participants in the research were more or less familiar with gender-related issues. Additionally, the participants were given brief information about the gendered disinformation in the first section of the questionnaire. The informed consent procedure and voluntary participation were reported. The explicit ethical paragraph with a recognizable heading in the main section was present with the explicit statement of anonymous data collection. The initials of the researchers were used to ensure the preserve their confidentiality.

Table 2. Online questionnaire items.

How often do you encounter gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech?
O Never; O Rarely; O Sometimes; O Generally; O Often; O Always
On which social media and/or online platform (s) do you encounter gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech?
Please provide us with one existing example of gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech in your country or region. Please type the text below.
What are the key trends, threats, or challenges to the online narratives in your country, region, or globally regarding the impacts on youth?
What are your recommendations and suggestions to combat the gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. What do “gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech” look like from youth experiences?

Gendered disinformation to discredit, intimidate, and silence those who are targeted. Gendered disinformation uses online narratives on gender roles, gender equality, and sexual orientation to manipulate, polarize common parlance, and

spread fear. The questionnaire results provide an initial analysis of what “gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech” look like and the familiar motifs from youth experiences such as:

3.1.1. Belgium

a) A sexualized disinformation campaign

D.P., 25, Activist: “Someone destroyed a monument dedicated to the first openly transgender person in my city a few days ago. Politicians from the “right” wing use this situation as anti-propaganda in their online election campaigns.”

3.1.2. Germany

b) Harmful online narratives and gendered disinformation

D.A., 30, Youth worker: “Drag queens are offensive to young people, that they are predatory to kids in the USA. That youngsters with struggles in defining their gender are not taken seriously. That hate speech and homophobia are almost non-existent in European countries.”

R.B., 25, Student: “Equating homosexuality with pedophilia, misinformation about trans folks wanting to harm children, and myths surrounding conversion therapy.”

3.1.3. Greece

c) Spreading online hate speech

d) Media Distortion

E, P., 21, Student: “When a man posts a photo of him wearing skirts or more feminine clothes, he receives hate comments.”

G, T., 30, Project coordinator: “Civilians murdered a transgender person, and it was a hate crime, but the media and the police tried to distort the reality and presented it as an accident and implied that it was the murdered person’s fault.”

3.1.4. Latvia

e) Social media’s effect in imposing changes regarding the gendered disinformation

f) Media misleads the public by using gendered language

A, R, R., 19, Student: “The Latvian education ministry removed materials from the new Latvian education program “Skola 2030” about basic sex/gender/sexuality education because people on Twitter accused it of “children indoctrination.” If I recall correctly, the accountable person was also fired.”

M, A, E., 24, Student: “The national news occasionally has written about gender stuff and has used pretty negative language. The website that I read and have noticed using weird language sometimes is LSM.lv.”

3.1.5. Spain

g) Social fabricating myths, lies, and disinformation related to anti-gender discourse

E, R, R., 29, Youth worker: “One common form of disinformation and hate speech has been the spread of harmful myths about gender-affirming healthcare and transgender individuals.”

A, R, M., 24, Lawyer: “If we wanna take our sons and daughters to conversion therapies, we should be allowed to.” As if it was an illness to cure. Or: “What do you have between your legs? That is what you are.”

3.1.6. Türkiye

- h) Social labeling, ridiculing, and harassing
- i) Manipulative online narratives

Ç, Ç., 27, English teacher: “I sometimes encounter harmful comments on Instagram. Alternatively, people label some behavior as gay, which is not related to it. (For example, if a man uses a fork and knife while he is eating or he uses skincare products, etc.)”

S, H., 29, P.H.D student: “For example, this morning, I read a text in a Telegram channel about the “danger” of an increase of lesbians in same-sex schools.”

Considering the results deduced from the questionnaire, the given responses based on youth experiences are grouped and analyzed according to specific themes and patterns of what “gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech” look like. 20% of the research participants (12 participants) mentioned political and governmental intervention in discrediting and manipulating the public in terms of spreading gendered disinformation on purpose. Although 95% of the participants (57 participants) provided instances of gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech, only 5% of the participants (3 participants: 2 participants from Spain and 1 participant from Türkiye) declared that they did not encounter any examples related to the topics. Reviewing the religion/faith-based responses associated with the anti-gender discourse, 15% of the participants (9 participants: 3 participants from Latvia, 2 participants from Spain, and 4 participants from Türkiye) provided explicit instances.

3.2. On which platform and how often do the youth encounter gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye?

6 participants (2 participants from Germany, 2 from Spain, and 2 from Türkiye) stated that they rarely encountered mentioned online narratives targeted (**Figure 1**) based on their own experiences on the social media platforms. Although only 2% of the research group (1 participant from Spain) declared that the online narratives were “always” visible and explicit on social media platforms, 3 participants from Spain (5% of the research group) stated that they “never” encountered gendered disinformation in the virtual environment. According to the statistics deduced from the questionnaire, the young participants from Germany and Greece asserted approximately the same responses regarding their frequency of facing up to gendered disinformation and common parlance online. Likewise, the participants from Belgium and Latvia declared more or less the same reactions related to their frequency of coming up with manipulative online narratives.

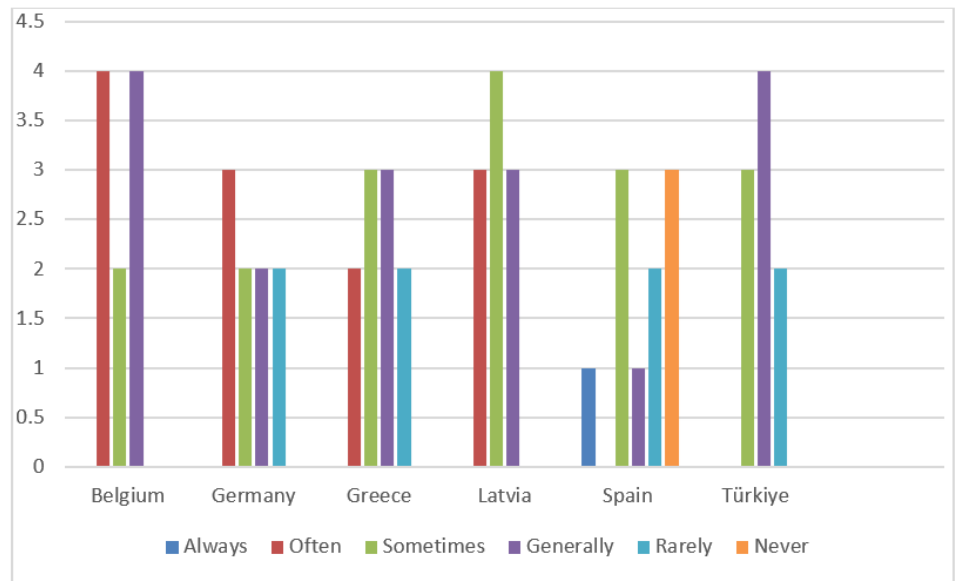


Figure 1. The frequency with which youth encounter gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech.

Looking at the responses regarding social media or online platform (s) that the participants encountered, gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech, 40% of participants mentioned three common social media platforms: Facebook, X, and Instagram. At least one participant from Belgium, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye put forward that they come across online harassment and hate speech. It was reviewed that the research group provided various responses regarding social media and online platform (s) questions (**Figure 2**). Thus, it can be proclaimed that the young participants encountered gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech on the most commonly used and trendy social and online media platform (s) based on their own experiences.

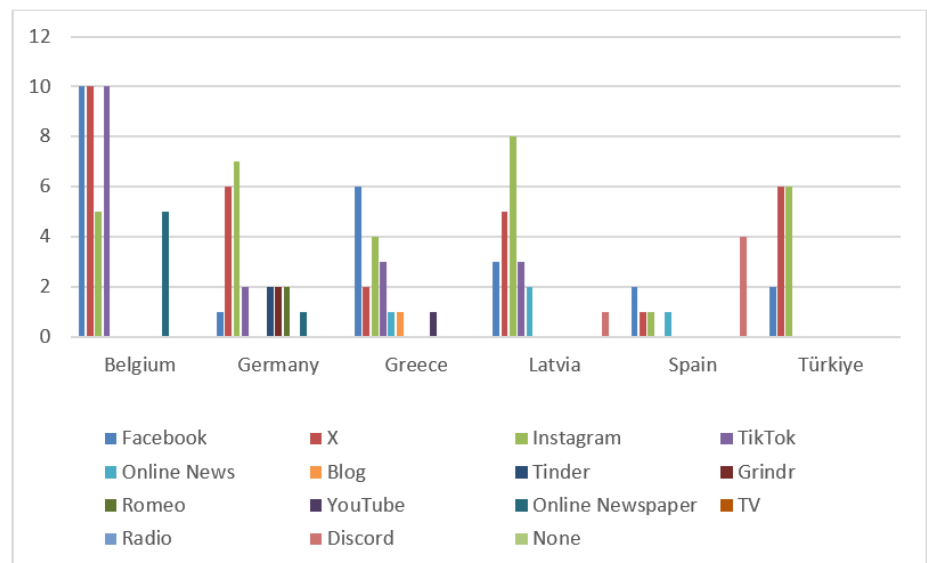


Figure 2. The social media and/or online platform (s) the youth encounter gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech.

3.3. Youth-based recommendations and suggestions to combat gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech.

The participants provided the challenges of the gendered disinformation and online narratives in their country, region, or globally by referring to the impacts on youth. K.R.O., from Latvia (25; Activist), stated that “Misinformation, lack of education, malicious intent of conservative or narrow-minded people” were the main concerns for the community to deal with if we wanted to combat the disinformation effectively. M.A.E., from Latvia (24; Student), claimed that “A big concern is fearmongering online (writing only about negative things like LGBT+ people being wrong or hurt) and not a lot of louder narratives presenting being LGBT+ as a positive thing (like winning marriage freedom, easier transitioning, other human rights).” Ç.Ç., from Türkiye (27; English Teacher) and R.B., from Germany (25; Youth Worker), informed the hazardous effects of the gendered disinformation on youth by stating that “They may lose their job or be lynched by the society” and “Ubiquitous hatred silencing younger queers and pushing them back into the closet.” A.M., from Latvia (22; Student), underlined the complexity of the language barriers and the lack of information provided through online platforms; “Maybe the language barriers? Latvia is a Latvian-speaking country, and very little information is provided in the mother tongue; youth mostly read information in English. On the other side, the speaking part of the youth gain information from the speaking part of the internet, which is related to Russian problems overall”. Statistics revealed that the majority of the participants declared that the essential sources of the challenges based upon the lack of education, training, and awareness campaigns regarding the gendered disinformation and hate speech by looking at the responses given by A.R.R., from Latvia (19; Student) and S.R., Spain (29; Youth Leader); “People just lack empathy and education everywhere - online and in person. Even if there are more supportive places/events/organizations getting set up, the general population feels no stress when expressing hatred or even physical violence against the community” and “Awareness of the complexity of the recent new concept about genders.” Political-based “anti-gender discourse” and online election campaigns spreading the gendered disinformation were among the common themes the participants from different countries submitted in the questionnaire such as A.R.R., from Latvia (19; Student) “...I believe it is highly because of the lack of a supportive narrative from the governing institutions”; A.R.M., from Spain (24; Lawyer), “The more the far-right parties grow, the more visible this online hate speech becomes among ordinary citizens,” and Z.K., from Latvia (20; Students) “... , but like, in general, I see much hate against our president (Edgar Rinkevich), and in most TikTok videos I see there is hate in comments because he is openly gay”. Furthermore, the participants discussed the manipulative news/media resources, online harassment, and mental health/psychological issues as the challenges and impacts of the disinformation on youth such as G.T., from Greece (30; Project Coordinator) “Media follow a stereotype that the personality of LGBTQIA+ people is entertaining and extra. LGBTQIA+ people are falsely represented as entertainers”; Ç.Ç., from Türkiye (30; Teacher) “In my country, we saw many examples on the news of people who were killed or were made to commit suicide just because they

are transgender. Two friends were trans women, I vividly remember. Hande and Didem. People killed Hande and burned her. Just because she is transgender and Didem killed herself because of all the pressure she underwent” and S.H., from Türkiye (29; P.H.D Student), “When non-binary individuals share their narratives, they might face sexual harassment on social media. So, many prefer to resort to alternative spaces and talk to people who trust them. The previous week, one of my friends wanted to tell me he was bisexual. Before coming out, he looked around to be sure nobody heard him and, with a low voice, said: ‘I am bisexual.’ I can feel how much he tolerates pressure for living in a hetero-normative society”. In the last part of the research, the recommendations and suggestions of the young participants were taken into consideration to review the youth’s opinions and solutions for tackling gendered disinformation. The participants discussed how to deal with gendered disinformation and online hate speech by breaking down the common parlance. There were primary and common suggestions: 1) education, 2) positive online visibility on platforms, and 3) moderation of the legal frameworks. Most participants wanted to counter gendered disinformation and manipulative online narratives and create more positive ones. Suggestions from our respondents included:

3.3.1. Belgium

R.B., 25, Student: “Educate!”

A.M., 22, Student: “Train your critical thinking skills, find your community to support you and your beliefs, and spread the correct and useful information in the easiest way possible!”

3.3.2. Germany

D.A., 30, Youth Worker: “Online campaigns principally from an organization that daily works with the LGBTQIA+ community/specialists on human rights, more specifically on LGBTQIA+/training for youth workers on the subject of media literacy focusing on the theme of the LGBTQIA+.”

M.G., 23, Student: “Educate! Educate! Educate!”

İ.C., 21, Student: “I recommend having sex education in schools, and part of it is the politically correct vocabulary to talk about non-mainstream sexualities.”

3.3.3. Greece

A.M., 28, Teacher: “More advertisements for the LGBTQIA+ community are on TV and social media.”

G.T., 20, Student: “Teach people in elementary school about the existence of gendered disinformation and its effects on the community. Schools should make a class that starts from the last grade in elementary school and continues into high school.”

3.3.4. Latvia

M.A.E., 24, Student: “Educate people more because fearmongering comes from a lack of education or malicious intent.”

A.R.R., 19, Student: “Quality Education (formal, non-formal, and informal)! Also, implementing laws such as the Civil Union, Istanbul Convention, etc., would give the general population a sense of responsibility in the eyes of the law. The

institutions should take the cases of hatred, violence, manipulative content shared online, and disinformation more seriously and combat them.”

3.3.5. Spain

S.P., 23, Student: “Using an inclusive language online.”

P., 26, Accountant: “Local workshops in schools.”

E., 22, Student: “Money. To education. Now. That is the key!”

A.M., 28, Teacher: “I believe that people should be taught to respect others, even if they are different, from a very young age. This is something for which both schools and families are responsible. Also, governments should take measures to ensure that such phenomena can be dealt with online.”

3.3.6. Türkiye

Ç.Ç., 30, Teacher: “I think the only way to overcome this hate is to talk about it more through social media platforms, especially to the people who know nothing. Online communication is the key to life.”

F.S.Ş., 25, Student: “My recommendation would be to provide online training to individuals to develop a sense of empathy and to eliminate misconceptions in society by including gender-related content in the formal education curriculum.”

Y.K., 30, Teacher: “Unless the cultural and religious codes that shape society and have become state policy change, I do not think we can change or progress in combating gendered disinformation or eliminating manipulative narratives online.”

S.H., 29. P.H.D Student: “Education is a pivotal factor in combating gender disinformation. Social media can make a helpful opportunity for activists to increase people’s awareness. I recommend the methods of education which attract people, for example, through art products. In addition, activists can ask famous people to work on these issues in their accounts.”

4. Discussion

Positioning the youth at the center of the decision-making process and making their way to leading the change in society is the fundamental key to ensuring sustainable and progressive improvements in all matters. Thus, this study’s overarching goals were to investigate how gendered disinformation and online narratives look and the youth’s recommendations for combating these issues. The themes that emerged from the research dovetail nicely with those goals. The participants revealed that political “anti-gender discourse,” media distortion, and fabrication of gendered disinformation played a crucial part in challenging preconceived notions. The results indicate that education should be pivotal in raising awareness and arousing and leading individuals’ curiosity to learn more accurate information. This is apparent in the emerging motif regarding participants’ responses that legal frameworks should be moderated to create more positive visibility through online platforms, influence perceptions, and nurture a deeper understanding. While reviewing the parallel studies and research, an experimental study examining the social media insights from sexuality and gender-diverse young people has offered the same key recommendation for social media platforms: “Clear moderation policies that explain what is acceptable and unacceptable on platforms. These should

be developed with young people, including LGBTQIA+ young individuals” (Hanckel and Chandra, 2021). Pinal et al. (2023) aimed to examine the role of the media in challenging young adults’ preconceived beliefs about the LGBTQIA+ population and found that “...as representation improves and depends less on assumptions, viewers’ biases can be more easily dispelled”. Thus, moderating effective changes in the current legal frameworks to shape the online narratives of the public and create positive online visibility has a significant role, as the young participants of this research highly recommended it. The most common motif deduced from the participants’ responses on how to deal with the gendered disinformation is “education.” In their study, Citron and Norton (2011) assert that there are four ways a person can react to hate speech: inaction, deletion, developing initiatives to educate social media users, or counter-speech. In parallel with the previous research, the young participants of this research group (at least three participants from each country) have suggested using any form of education (formal, non-formal, and informal), training, and workshops so that misconceptions about gender-related content can be eliminated or diminished in online narratives. Youth require changes in the legal frameworks and regulations, especially in education, to combat gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech by improving their online visibility on platforms positively.

5. Conclusion

The participants from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Spain, and Türkiye have shown us what “gendered disinformation, harmful online narratives, and hate speech” look like from youth-based experiences and suggested recommendations on how to deal with the issue effectively. The youth are demanding changes in the legal frameworks and requiring a more effective education system to improve society and become more accepting of gender and sexual diversity through online platforms. For this reason, young participants suggest that all institutions such as governments, schools, and organizations, including those of social media and online platforms, should offer online and offsite training and workshops to society to eliminate the gendered disinformation, manipulative online narratives, and hate speech and continue to advocate for the community through social media practices.

The project’s findings belong to a small sample group, so they cannot be generalized. This is the limitation of this research. It is suggested that the findings be discussed in another. A qualitative or mixed-methods study should involve larger sample groups. Consideration of volunteer bias (self-selection bias) is essential, as the results may not represent the population as a whole.

The study concluded that there is a need for more research, further harmonization of legal frameworks, moderating changes in educational systems, and strengthened capacity to detect and combat gendered disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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