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THE ROLE OF ATTITUDES IN SHAPING SOCIAL PERCEPTION IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS

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Contemporary society faces a series of crises, ranging from economic and political to social and environmental ones. In this turbulent context, the way we perceive and interpret social reality becomes essential for our adaptation and for making responsible decisions. Crisis situations, whether natural, economic, or political, have a significant impact not only on concrete reality but also on how we perceive and interpret the world around us. Pre-existing attitudes play a crucial role in this reconfiguration of social perception, influencing how we process information, interpret events, and relate to others. Combating prejudices, promoting dialogue, and transparent communication are essential for balanced social perception and building a climate of social cohesion in difficult times.

Social perception is a complex process influenced by a series of factors, among which pre-existing attitudes are included. In the context of crisis, it is essential to be aware of how attitudes can distort our perception of reality and to take concrete measures to inform ourselves from reliable sources, to engage in dialogue with those who have different opinions, and to promote transparent communication. Only through joint efforts to combat prejudices and promote tolerance and mutual understanding we can build a more united and resilient society in the face of crises.

Keywords: a*ttitudes, social perception, crisis, conflict, values, norms.*

ROLUL ATITUDINILOR ÎN FORMAREA PERCEPȚIEI SOCIALE ÎN CONTEXTUL SITUAȚIEI DE CRIZĂ

Societatea contemporană se confruntă cu o serie de crize, de la cele economice și politice la cele sociale și de mediu. În acest context turbulent, modul în care percepem și interpretăm realitatea socială devine esențial pentru adaptarea noastră și pentru luarea unor decizii responsabile. Situațiile de criză, fie ele naturale, economice sau politice, au un impact semnificativ nu doar asupra realității concrete, ci și asupra modului în care percepem și interpretăm lumea din jurul nostru. Atitudinile preexistente joacă un rol crucial în această reconfigurare a percepției sociale, influențând modul în care procesăm informația, interpretăm evenimentele și ne raportăm la ceilalți. Combaterea prejudecăților, promovarea dialogului și a unei comunicări transparente sunt esențiale pentru o percepție socială echilibrată și construirea unui climat de coeziune socială în momente dificile. Percepția socială este un proces complex influențat de o serie de factori, printre care și atitudinile preexistente. În contextul crizei, este esențial să fim conștienți de modul în care atitudinile ne pot distorsiona percepția realității și să luăm măsuri concrete pentru a ne informa din surse veridice, a dialoga cu cei care au opinii diferite și a promova o comunicare transparentă. Doar prin eforturi comune de combatere a prejudecăților și de promovare a toleranței și a înțelegerii reciproce putem construi o societate mai unită și mai rezistentă în fața crizelor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *atitudini, percepție socială, criză, conflict, valori, norme.*

Introduction

Currently, society is going through a difficult period that leaves its mark on all spheres of life: emotional, social, economic, political, medical, legal, etc. Over the past four years, humanity has been living in a continuous crisis situation. The years 2020-2021 were marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which completely changed the functioning of the society and the perception of stability and security. However, with the decline of the pandemic situation, the largest armed conflict since the end of World War II was triggered at the border of our country. Fear, confusion, panic, and instability are just a few of the feelings that have become chronic during this period, unfortunately, but few are those who know how to manage them.

Attitudes play an essential role in how we perceive and interpret social reality in the context of crisis. Combating prejudices, promoting dialogue, and transparent communication are essential for balanced social perception and building a climate of social cohesion in difficult times. Attitudes are part of everyone’s

suite of prejudices and stereotypes, as the crisis can amplify pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes, leading to the stigmatization of certain social groups considered vulnerable or responsible for the difficult situation.

At the same time, divergent attitudes can lead to heightened social polarization, creating opposing camps that accuse each other and fail to find common solutions. On the other hand, the lack of accurate information or mistrust in official sources can facilitate the proliferation of conspiracy theories, which can distort reality and create an atmosphere of panic and distrust.

Social perceptions in the context of crisis situation

Social influence represents ,,a type of interaction between two social entities (individuals or groups), one of which is the ,,target" and the other is the ,,source of influence" ". As a result of this interaction, the target reacts differently than usual to an ,,object" (expressing an opinion, making an evaluation, proposing an explanation, or performing a behavior) (Chelcea, Influența socială, 2013) Authors D. Abrams and M. A. Hogg define social influence as ,,any change that the relationships of the person with others (individuals, groups, institutions, or society as a whole) produce on their intellectual activities, emotions, or actions" [3].

In specialized literature, social perception can also be described, by several authors, under the term "social cognition" defined as "the set of mechanisms through which we try to understand other people" [7].

Social perception represents more than is directly presented [5]. Therefore, the components of "social perception and social reality can often differ significantly.

Nevertheless, if we set aside the generality encompassed by the term ,,social cognition", Pennington still defines social perception, in a narrow sense, as ,,the way we form first impressions in relationships with others, relying on mental schemes", with attitudes playing an important role [7]. The uniqueness of individuals' sets of opinions, values, and behaviors stems from the different ways in which each perceives the reality around them compared to other individuals. Individual perceptions influence the formation of attitudes, and values, in turn, contribute to the formation of perceptions and have a direct influence on attitudes [4]. The works of S. Asch (1946) and F. Heider (1958) explore, through the lens of social perceptions, the processes of inference involved in attitude formation, and phenomena of causal attribution [7]. Social perceptions are also framed within schema theory [6]. Thus, the formation of social perception involves four basic mechanisms/components: observation, attribution, integration, and confirmation [1].

If we talk about the concept of "crisis", then it is used in most spheres of life: both to describe personal and private situations and to describe situations that affect social groups, organizations, or states, including: social, political, economic, ethnic, religious, military, or environmental crises. Whatever the type of crisis, its influence on us is imminent. However, there are solutions through which we can avoid being affected by the impact of the crisis on us. We know from informational sources that we, as humans, connect to the environment through the reception of information. Unfortunately, during crises, the way we perceive information is distorted, and therefore, it is necessary to follow a series of recommendations to combat attempts at informational manipulation during a crisis..

First and foremost, it is necessary to accept the potential need to change attitudes/beliefs. Usually, if a person strongly holds onto their beliefs, they are difficult to modify. Even though we mentioned earlier that informational manipulation aims to change beliefs, sometimes the news serves a noble purpose, and changing beliefs is indispensable.

Secondly, before taking action during a crisis, it is necessary to confirm the information from multiple different sources. Only after receiving information from several sources are we able to make a well-calculated decision.

Thirdly, often during a crisis, the speed of response is a factor that could reduce damage. In the absence of information, rumors may arise, and often the first message received is the one internalized. In this case, it is important during the crisis to compare the information received initially with the updates presented. Updates should have the following characteristics: they should be repeated; they should be specific to the current crisis situation; they should come from multiple credible sources [2].

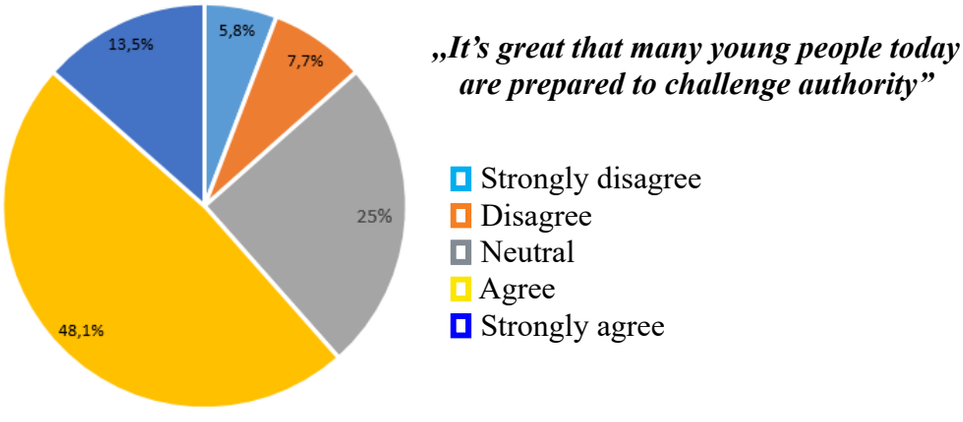
Unfortunately, during a crisis, there are more questions than answers, especially at the beginning. Depending on the magnitude of the crisis and its cause, the actions individuals take to protect themselves are unpredictable. The state of uncertainty will challenge even the most prepared person. Thus, to reduce anxiety, people tend to seek information to form their opinions and to confirm, or conversely, deny their beliefs. They usually choose a familiar source of information over a less familiar one, regardless of the accuracy of the information presented. Like that, social perception is not only about external stimuli received. An equally important factor as external influences is the individual's internal factors, expressed through needs, motivations, desires, opinions, emotions. In the same way, manipulation works. Low self-esteem, over-intellectualization, or low levels of emotional intelligence are just a few aspects that make the individual much more sensitive to informational manipulation.

Results of the study of attitudes regarding the formation of social perception in the context of crisis

The study of attitudes regarding the formation of social perception in the context of crisis was conducted using a questionnaire that aims to explore multiple dimensions, including: attitudes towards current norms and values; attitudes towards social aspects; attitudes towards military actions in general. A total of 52 subjects from the Republic of Moldova participated in the research.

One of the dimensions analyzed in our research is attitudes towards current norms and values. Regarding the question *„It's great that many young people today are prepared to challenge authority”*, subjects responded as follows (Figure 1.1): 48.1% partially agree, while 13.5% fully agree. On the other hand, 7.7% expressed partial disagreement, 5.8% completely disagree, and 25% tend to remain neutral. Thus, the majority perceive the fact that young people are not afraid to resist authority as a positive quality.

Fig. 1. Graphical representation of attitudes towards challenging authority.



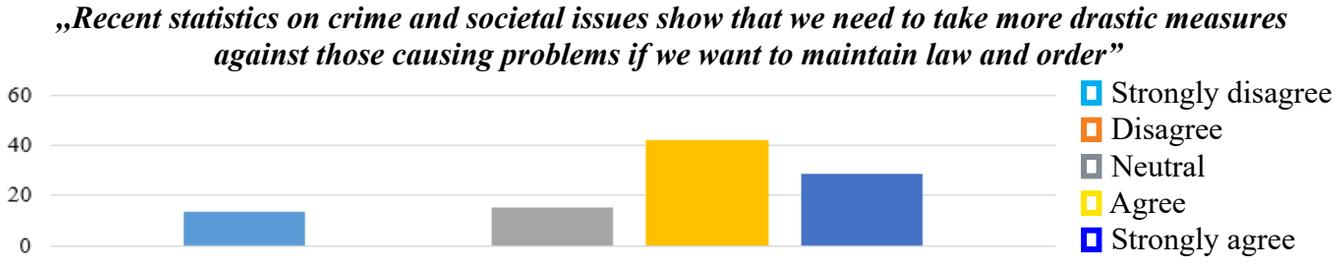
This indicates that we perceive the advantages and necessity of democracy and freedom, within which young people are able to express their opinions.

Regarding the question *„What our country needs most is discipline, everyone following our leaders in unity?”,* we observe that the majority (32.7%) express partial disagreement with this statement, while 3.8% strongly disagree. On the other hand, we note that opinions are fairly evenly divided at both extremes, with 25% partially agreeing with this statement and 7.7% completely agreeing.

We also observe a similar division of responses to the statement *„Our society DOES NOT need a tougher government and stricter laws”*: 28.8% tend to remain neutral, 26.9% strongly disagree to this extent, 23.1% partially agree to some extent, 11.5% partially disagree, and 9.6% strongly agree.

Analyzing the statement presented in Figure 1.2, *„Recent statistics on crime and societal issues show that we need to take more drastic measures against those causing problems if we want to maintain law and order”*, we can see that the majority of subjects agree with it: 42.3% expressing partial agreement and 28.8% strongly agreeing. Therefore, there is a clear awareness of the need to strengthen justice in order to achieve harmonious living in crisis situations.

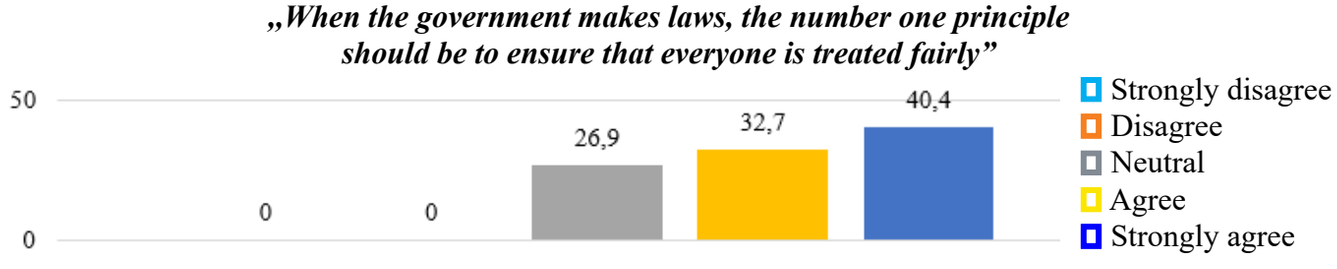
Fig. 2. Representation of opinions regarding the necessity of toughening the laws.



The attitudes of subjects towards current values are indicators of how they perceive the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of our people in crisis situations. Therefore, we observe the appreciation of democracy and freedom as fundamental values in crisis situations, which contribute to the resilience of a nation. On the other hand, we identify the need for the enactment of laws that will organize and guide society, especially in situations that provoke panic. These steps will lead to the strengthening of social structures, and will also increase citizens' confidence in the state's ability to react.

Another dimension of the research aims to evaluate individuals' attitudes towards social aspects. Analyzing the responses to the question *„When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be to ensure that everyone is treated fairly”*, as presented in Figure 1.3, we initially highlight the fact that there are no subjects who expressed strong disagreement or moderate disagreement with this statement. Therefore, we conclude that, considering the 40.4% who strongly agreed and the 32.7% who moderately agreed, the social perception of the utility and fairness of a law is influenced by adhering to the principle of fairness in its formation.

Fig. 3. Distribution of data regarding opinions on the manner of lawmaking.



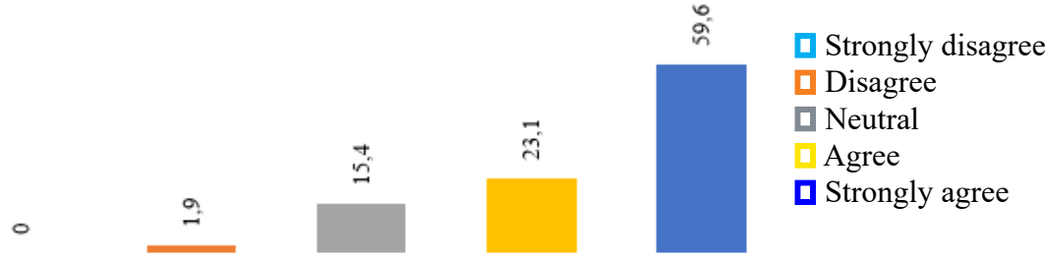
In response to the statement *„I am proud of my country's history”* the majority were undecided, with 46.2% of those surveyed selecting the "neutral" response. However, upon analyzing the other responses, we observe that a higher percentage of subjects believe they have reasons to be proud of their country's history, with 25% selecting the "moderately agree" response and 19.2% selecting the "strongly agree" response, compared to the percentage of those who believe there are no reasons to be proud of their country's history, with 7.7% expressing moderate disagreement in this regard, and 1.9% expressing strong disagreement. Nevertheless, we believe that the high frequency of the „neutral" response is a consequence of a lack of information about remarkable events in our country's history, and we hope that in the future, the number of those who agree with this statement will increase.

The statement *„People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed”* examines how individuals perceive „disgusting" things. Thus, evaluating the responses to this statement, where 36.5% expressed moderate agreement and 19.2% of respondents strongly agreed, we observe that the majority of participants do not accept things that are „disgusting", even if they do not cause harm to others. Therefore, disgusting things are perceived as wrong. This idea is supported by the fact that no respondent selected the „strongly disagree" response. At the same time, 34.6% of respondents do not have a definite opinion on this idea, and 9.6% expressed moderate disagreement.

Analyzing the responses recorded for the statement *„It is more satisfying to do good than to do harm”*, we note that 59.6% and 23.1% completely agree and partially agree with it, respectively. This indicates that

the majority of respondents, 82.7%, perceive goodness and good deeds as more acceptable than evil (Figure 1.4). This perception is further supported by the absence of respondents expressing strong disagreement with this statement and the presence of only one respondent expressing moderate agreement in this case.

Fig. 4. Results regarding the social perception of the concepts of „good” and „evil”.
„It is more satisfying to do good than to do harm”

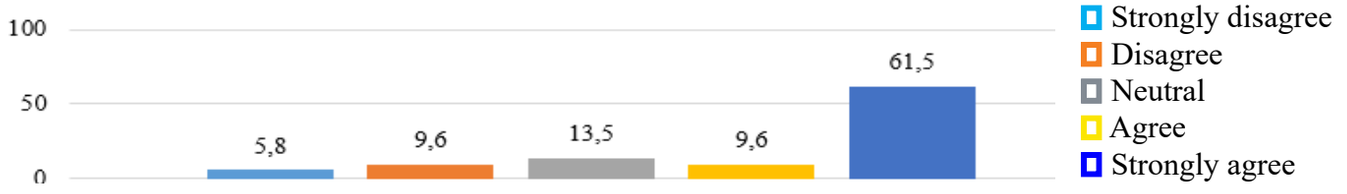


A percentage of 65.4% strongly agreed with the statement *„One of the worst things a person can do is to harm a defenseless animal”,* while 9.6% expressed moderate agreement. We know that during crisis situations, animals are among the victims of suffering, as they are abused, neglected, or helpless. However, there were also 1.9% of subjects who selected the “strongly disagree” response and 9.6% who expressed moderate disagreement.

The next statement in this dimension, *„Justice is the most important requirement for a society”*, is designed to assess the value of justice for the harmonious functioning of a society from the respondents’ perspective. Therefore, the majority of respondents indicated moderate agreement (44.2%) and strong agreement (40.4%), with 84.6% considering justice as the cornerstone of a society. The importance of justice is further demonstrated by the fact that no survey participant chose the “strongly disagree” response, and only 3.8% expressed moderate disagreement in this regard.

The next statement respondents expressed their opinion on is *„It can never be right to kill a human being”*. Thus, according to Figure 1.5, we can affirm that more than 70% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, with 61.5% selecting the „strongly agree” response and 9.6% selecting the „moderately agree” response. Therefore, we conclude that for these subjects, killing is perceived as an unacceptable action under any circumstances. On the other end of the axis, 5.8% strongly disagree with this idea, and 9.6% moderately agree, which could be an indicator that these individuals might justify the action of killing under certain circumstances.

Fig. 5. Graphical representation of attitudes towards homicide.
„It can never be right to kill a human being”



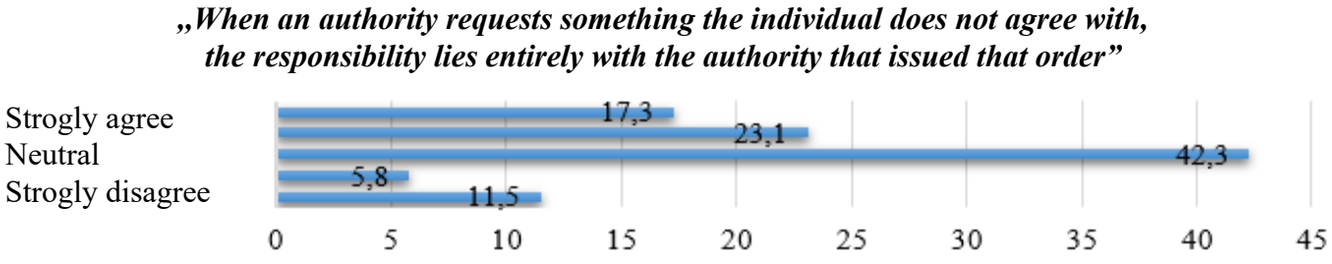
Therefore, analyzing the obtained results, we conclude that the majority of subjects perceive values, such as compassion, kindness, justice, and fairness as socially desirable. On the other hand, harming a defenseless animal and killing a human being regardless of circumstances are condemned by most subjects, being perceived as socially unacceptable. Similarly, the majority do not accept in society the commission of disgusting actions, even if they cause no harm. A large portion of subjects express pride in their own country.

The next dimension investigated aims to identify attitudes towards military actions in general

The statement *„When an authority requests something the individual does not agree with, the responsibility lies entirely with the authority that issued that order”* aims to assess how subjects perceive the role of

authority in actions taken in crisis situations and analyze the social phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility. Thus, we observe that, in addition to the 42.3% of respondents who preferred to remain neutral about this response, 17.3% completely agree with the statement presented, and 23.1% agree to some extent. This indicates that they consider that if an individual has committed an act ordered by authority, then the individual is not perceived as responsible, but the authority is, regardless of the act committed. These responses confirm the existence of the social phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility and explain why in crisis situations, when individuals are in a group, they tend to commit unacceptable actions without taking responsibility. However, the 5.8% of subjects who expressed their disagreement to some extent, as well as the 11.5% who strongly disagreed, indicate that they perceive each individual as responsible for their own actions (Figure 1.6).

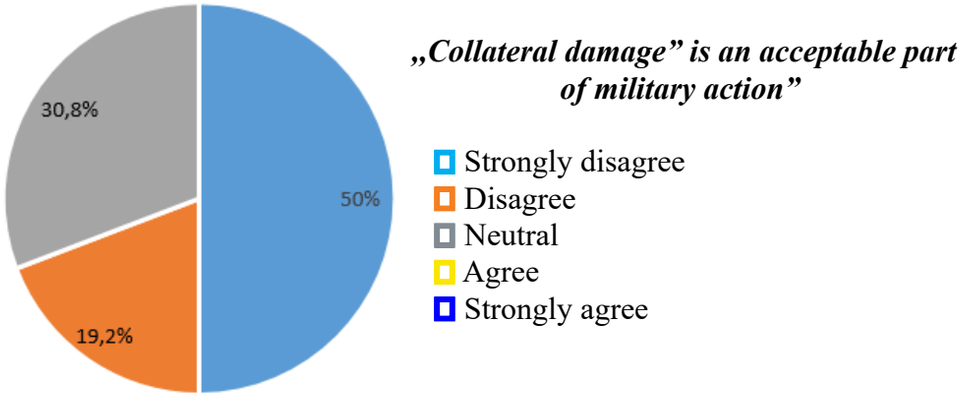
Fig. 6. Results regarding responsibility attribution.



Continuing, we attempted to identify how respondents perceive the term frequently mentioned in the media, „collateral damage". In this regard, in Figure 1.7, responses to the question *„Collateral damage is just a less intense term for „civilian deaths", used to make military actions more acceptable"* are presented. Thus, the fact that 40.4% of the subjects strongly agreed with this statement, followed by 26.9% who somewhat agreed, indicates that they view the use of the term „collateral damage" as a form of informational manipulation aimed at misleading the population. We observe that this opinion is expressed by the majority of respondents, given the low number who argue against this statement, with only 5.8% and 3.8%, respectively, doing so. Another 23.1% are unsure, choosing to remain neutral.

Furthermore, we attempted to identify how many respondents perceive deaths as an indispensable component of a military conflict, with the results to the statement *„Collateral damage" is an acceptable part of military action"* available in Figure 1.7. Thus, we notice the absence of respondents who perceive deaths in war as acceptable. Moreover, half of the respondents strongly disagree with the previously mentioned statement, while 19.2% disagree to some extent. However, 30.8% remain neutral in this case, probably considering that the word "war" has always been associated with human losses.

Fig. 7. Representation of opinions regarding the acceptability of „collateral damage" in military actions.



The statement *„Reports of damage resulting from military interventions are usually exaggerated"* aims to assess to what extent respondents believe that the information reaching the public is modified and exaggerated to manipulate ordinary citizens. Thus, we have identified that 26.9% of respondents do not

fully agree with this statement, while 13.5% partially disagree, indicating that they consider the information they receive about the damage caused by military attacks to be truthful. On the other hand, there are 11.5% who partially agree with this statement and only 5.8% who strongly agree that the information reaching the public does not correspond to reality, thus perceiving this as a form of informational manipulation.

Analyzing the responses to the question *„The media only report the negative effects of military campaigns, but rarely the good ones”* we observe that the majority (57.7%) do not have a strong opinion on the statement. However, if we aggregate the frequencies of the responses „disagree” (11.5%) and „strongly disagree” (13.5%), compared to those recorded for „strongly agree” (5.8%) and „agree” (11.5%), we can notice that a higher percentage of respondents still trust the information presented in news portals.

Thus, in this way, we have managed to identify how individuals perceive military actions in general and how they appreciate the information about military actions transmitted by the mass media. Consequently, we can say that the majority of respondents evaluate the gravity of the situation based on the information they receive from news portals. They trust that the information presented in the mass media is accurate, thus tending to construct their perception of reality based on it. A significant portion of participants disagrees with the idea that the media exaggerates certain aspects of military campaigns; moreover, they believe that some aspects are presented in a less serious manner than they actually are. Participants, for the most part, are aware of the consequences caused by military actions, including deaths, yet they perceive the enemy more as a human rather than as a soulless animal.

Attitudes are an important part of shaping social perception. One of the consequences of the current crisis situation we are experiencing is the large number of refugees who have been forced to leave the regions where the conflict has intensified.

Conclusions

The data obtained regarding the analyzed dimensions in the research communicate important aspects of attitudes and their role in shaping social perception based on various criteria. Social perception is defined as the process by which we interpret and understand the behavior and characteristics of other individuals, and our attitudes, beliefs, and past experiences play a crucial role in forming social perception, influencing how we: choose and retain information that aligns with our pre-existing attitudes; give a specific interpretation to information based on our attitudes; better retain information that confirms our attitudes.

Contemporary society faces a variety of crises, ranging from economic and political to social and environmental ones. In this turbulent context, how we perceive and interpret social reality becomes essential for our adaptation to changes and for making responsible decisions. Attitudes play an important role in shaping social perception, but it is important to be aware of their influence and to take measures to improve the accuracy of information interpretation and the evaluation of others. The attitudes of individuals towards current values are indicators of how they perceive the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of our society in times of crisis. Thus, we observe an appreciation for democracy and freedom as fundamental values at the moment, as well as the current need for the enactment of laws that will organize and lead society, especially in the given situation of uncertainty.

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