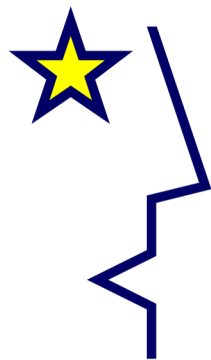


CEE Consumer Attitudes Toward Parasite SEO & Search Engine Responsibility

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This paper was produced with support from our industry partners, who neither influence nor have veto power over our findings. We do not represent their individual positions and remain committed to our principles, even when they diverge.

Executive Summary

Search engines play a fundamental role in how Europeans access information and experience the internet. Just as consumers rightly expect that e-commerce platforms do not facilitate illegal trade or that social media companies take preventive steps to curb fraud and deepfake manipulation, it is reasonable to expect that search engines reduce exposure to misleading or fraudulent material.

The challenge arises when policymakers consider whether these consumer-protection measures rise to the level of unfair business restrictions. Ultimately, search engines are designed to serve everyday consumers – not publishers or businesses; hence it is appropriate that they reflect preferences of those users.

Following up on our large-scale EPPP–ECIPE Digital Markets Act (DMA) regional survey of 3,500 consumers across seven CEE countries¹, we now focus on one issue that has recently come under scrutiny in the European Commission’s DMA enforcement: the treatment of parasite SEO practices and publisher-hosted commercial content.

We sought to understand how users themselves view the responsibilities of search engines in this regard, so that we do not have to “reasonably expect” consumer preference – we can demonstrate it clearly.

This study shows that ordinary users in the European Union expect search engines to protect them on the basis of content quality and user experience – not the reputation of the website hosting the content. 78% of European consumers expect search engines to actively filter out low-quality or misleading material, even when it appears on well-known news websites, while 81% oppose regulation that would force search engines to give such content more prominent visibility. **These findings, drawn from a survey of nearly 2,000 users across five EU countries – Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Croatia – reflect a clear expectation that search quality and user protection should take precedence over formal neutrality toward publishers.**

The data further show that publisher-hosted third-party commercial content is rarely accessed through deliberate user choice. Only 17% of users intentionally seek such material on general news websites, while many encounter it incidentally or are unaware of it altogether. **When users do interact with this content, outcomes are frequently poor, with a clear majority reporting unreliable or non-functional results.**

¹ Bauer, M. & Pandya, D. (2025) *What about us? Consumer response to the Digital Markets Act: a study of expectations, lived experiences and attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe*. ECIPE Occasional Papers, October 2025. Available at: <https://ecipe.org/publications/consumer-response-to-the-digital-markets-act/>

Taken together, the evidence points to a systematic mismatch between search visibility and consumer benefit. From the perspective of European consumers, demoting such content is therefore not a penalty against publishers, but a necessary and proportionate quality-control measure that improves reliability, reduces wasted time, and better aligns search results with genuine user needs. **Therefore, using the DMA to protect parasite SEO would act against the explicit wishes of the electorate, prioritizing short-term commercial tactics over the safety and integrity of the European digital ecosystem.**

1. Background & Introduction

Search engines play a fundamental role in how Europeans access information and experience the internet. Just as consumers rightly expect that e-commerce platforms do not facilitate illegal trade or that social media companies take preventive steps to curb fraud and deepfake manipulation, it is reasonable to expect that search engines reduce exposure to misleading or fraudulent material. The challenge arises when we consider how to balance this protective role with the principles of transparency and fairness in online search.

Following up on our large-scale EPPP–ECIPE Digital Markets Act (DMA) regional survey², which gathered the perspectives of 3,500 consumers across seven Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, **this paper turns to an issue that has recently become central to DMA enforcement debates: the treatment of so-called parasite SEO practices, also referred to as site reputation abuse.** This phenomenon involves the placement of third-party content on a reputable website for the primary purpose of leveraging that website’s established search authority³. In other words, site reputation abuse does not arise merely because a publisher hosts third-party material; rather, it concerns the strategic exploitation of a site’s credibility and ranking for unrelated commercial gain. **A clear example would be a long-established travel guide hosting a page promoting high-risk cryptocurrency schemes. Such content is entirely outside the guide’s editorial remit and posted chiefly to capitalise on the site’s strong search visibility.**

This paper builds on the aforementioned research by examining user expectations toward how search engines should handle such borderline or misleading content. **We analyse the attitudes of nearly 2,000 consumers in five Central and Eastern European countries toward the visibility, credibility and prioritisation of online content in search results.**

At the beginning of November, the European Commission opened an investigation into Google under the DMA in relation to its site reputation abuse policy⁴. The DMA was originally designed with the intention to ensure fair and competitive conditions in the digital market. The regulation targets large platforms, known as gatekeepers (including Google), which serve as important intermediaries between businesses and consumers. The investigation arises from concerns that Google may be breaching two core obligations under the DMA, specifically Article 6(5)

² Bauer, M. & Pandya, D. (2025) *What about us? Consumer response to the Digital Markets Act: a study of expectations, lived experiences and attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe*. ECIPE Occasional Papers, October 2025. Available at: <https://ecipe.org/publications/consumer-response-to-the-digital-markets-act/>

³ Google (2025) ‘Spam policies for Google web search’, Google Developers. Available at: <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies#site-reputation>

⁴ European Commission (2025) *Commission press release: Digital Markets Act – Commission opens investigation into Google for “site-reputation abuse”*. Available at: <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies#site-reputation>
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2675

and Article 6(12), which require gatekeepers to apply transparent, fair and non-discriminatory ranking practices in their search services⁵. **The Commission suspects that Google reduces the visibility of news publishers when their websites host content from commercial partners.** The inquiry will thus examine whether Google's approach limits publishers' ability to operate on equal terms, innovate, and engage in legitimate cooperation with external content providers.

In practice, this means the Commission is concerned that Google's enforcement efforts may extend beyond combating spam and could inadvertently limit revenue models commonly relied upon by publishers. Reduced visibility leads to reduced traffic and corresponding financial losses, which may weaken the sustainability of legitimate media. **Google argues that its policy is necessary to protect users from low-quality or misleading material and cites its experience with parasite SEO, where third parties post content on reputable websites to exploit their ranking status⁶. According to Google, moderating such content preserves trust and search quality.** The Commission will now assess whether the application of this policy is proportionate and consistent with the DMA, and Google may be required to adjust or justify its practices if violations are found.

Europe's approach to regulating digital business practices should not be shaped solely by regulators or major platforms. The perspectives of the people who actually use these services are essential. To ensure that this understanding reflects the diversity of users across the continent, we place particular emphasis on five Central and Eastern European countries: Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Croatia, whose views are often underrepresented in the wider policy conversation. **We specifically explain their attitudes in regard to search visibility, risk reduction, content fairness, and platform responsibility, to ensure that their perspective contributes meaningfully to the wider European policy debate.**

⁵ Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector and amending Directives (EU) 2019/1937 and (EU) 2020/1828 ('Digital Markets Act') (2022) *Official Journal L* 265, pp. 1–66. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/1925/oj/eng>

⁶ Google (2025) *Defending Search users from "Parasite SEO" spam*. Available at: <https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/defending-search-users-from-parasite-seo-spam/>

2. Survey Methodology

This policy brief is based on a quantitative online survey conducted among consumers across five CEE markets: Slovakia, Czechia, Poland, Hungary, and Croatia.

The objective of the research was to assess attitudes and behaviours related to online search practices and perceptions of handling potentially misleading or low-quality online content.

Data Collection Approach

Data collection in Slovakia, Czechia, and Hungary was conducted via Ipsos Instant Research, an established online research platform. Samples in these countries were designed to be broadly representative of each national population aged 18–65. Representativeness was ensured through stratification by age, gender, region, settlement size, and education.

Data for Poland and Croatia were collected through the Ipsos FastFacts online platform. These samples targeted the general population, with a narrower age range of 18–55.

The survey design, subsequent analysis, and interpretations presented in this paper are solely those of the ECIPE and EPPP authors and do not represent the views of Ipsos. This methodology was specifically chosen to secure timely and robust consumer insights in light of fast-moving regulatory developments.

The final achieved sample sizes were as follows:

- Slovakia: n = 523
- Czechia: n = 521
- Hungary: n = 521
- Poland: n = 300
- Croatia: n = 100
- Total sample: N = 1,965

Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire consisted of multiple closed-ended questions using categorical and Likert-type response scales.

3. Survey Findings & Conclusions

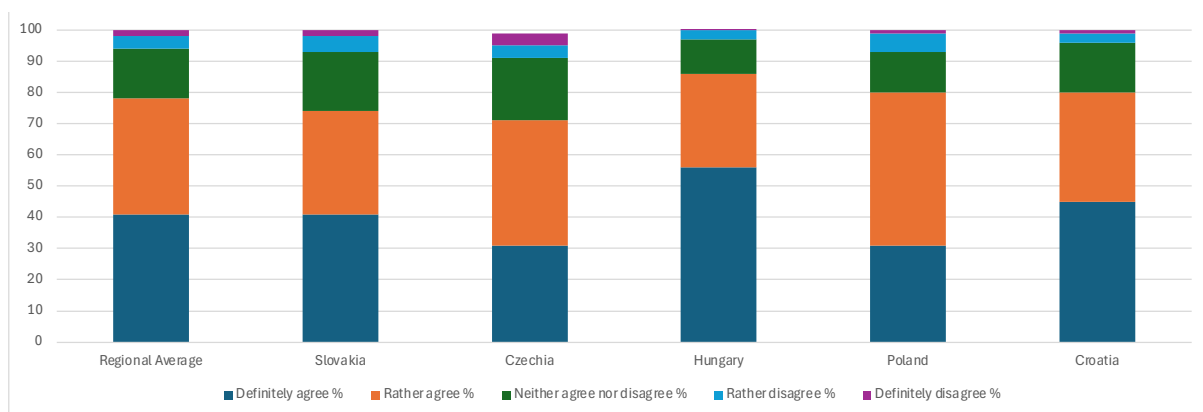
Our survey of nearly 2,000 consumers across Central and Eastern Europe provides a picture of user sentiment regarding search engine responsibility, content quality, and online safety. **The data reveal a consumer base that is highly sceptical of parasite SEO practices and strongly supportive of robust intervention by search engines to curate quality, even at the expense of established publishers.** The following five key findings detail these insights.

3.1 The Mandate for Active Curation Over Domain Authority

A central question in the debate on site reputation abuse is whether a website's established reputation should shield its third-party content from scrutiny. The survey results offer a resounding rejection of this idea.

There is a commanding regional consensus that search engines must act as active gatekeepers rather than passive indexes. **78% of respondents agree** (with 41% in *definite* agreement) that search engines should actively filter out and demote content identified as low-quality or spammy, regardless of the host website's reputation.

FIGURE 1: WHEN I SEARCH ONLINE, I EXPECT THE SEARCH ENGINE TO ACTIVELY FILTER OUT AND DEMOTE CONTENT IT IDENTIFIES AS LOW-QUALITY OR “SPAMMY”. IN THIS CONTEXT, I DO NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHETHER THE CONTENT APPEARS ON A WELL-KNOWN OR REPUTABLE WEBSITE.



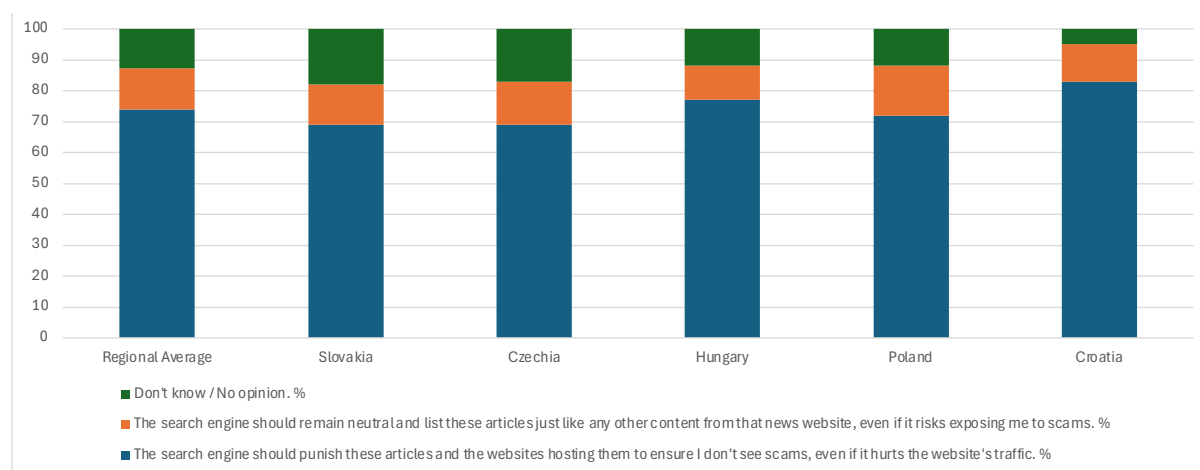
Users do not view reputable websites as having a *carte blanche* to host low-quality content. The data suggests that consumer trust is tied to the specific content served, not just the domain it lives on. Consequently, algorithmic adjustments that penalize parasite content on major news sites align with the explicit expectations of the vast majority of users (only 6% disagreed with this approach).

3.2 Safety Over Neutrality: A Clear Consumer Priority

When users are presented with a direct trade-off between platform neutrality (treating all content from a news site equally) and user safety (punishing sites to prevent scams), the preference is lopsided.

74% of respondents believe search engines should punish articles and hosting websites to ensure they do not see scams, explicitly stating this should happen “**even if it hurts the website's traffic.**” Conversely, only 13% prioritized neutrality.

FIGURE 2: SOMETIMES, SCAMMERS PAY TO PLACE ARTICLES PROMOTING FAKE PRODUCTS OR FINANCIAL SCHEMES ON OTHERWISE LEGITIMATE NEWS WEBSITES TO TRICK USERS. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES HOW YOU WOULD PREFER A SEARCH ENGINE TO HANDLE SUCH CONTENT?



This finding is critical for the regulatory interpretation of the DMA. While regulators emphasize fairness to publishers, consumers overwhelmingly define fairness as the right to be protected from predatory financial schemes and fake products. The data indicates that users view the strict enforcement of anti-spam policies not as an abuse of gatekeeper power, but as a necessary consumer protection service.

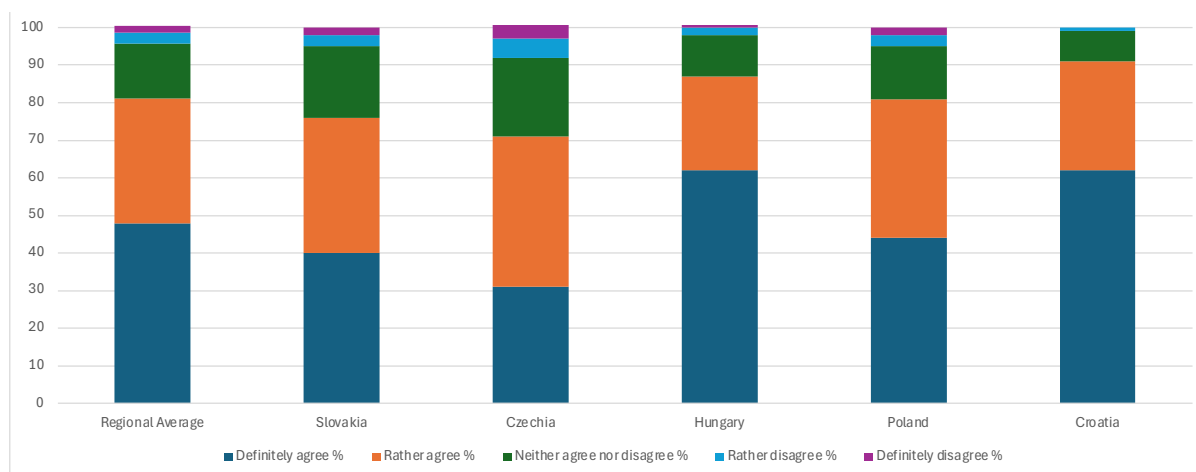
3.3 The Regulatory Red Line

Perhaps the most significant finding for policymakers is the strong public opposition to regulations that might inadvertently protect low-quality content.

81% of respondents indicated they would **oppose regulation** that forces search engines to show low-quality or spammy third-party content in advantageous positions.

- **48%** Definitely agree with opposing such regulation.
- **33%** Rather agree.

FIGURE 3: I EXPECT SEARCH ENGINES TO PROTECT ME FROM EXPOSURE TO SPAM, SCAMS, OR LOW-QUALITY ADVERTISING. I WOULD THEREFORE OPPOSE REGULATION THAT FORCES SEARCH ENGINES TO SHOW LOW-QUALITY OR “SPAMMY” THIRD-PARTY CONTENT IN MORE ADVANTAGEOUS POSITIONS WITHIN SEARCH RESULTS.



This establishes a clear regulatory red line for consumers. There is a risk that if the DMA is enforced in a way that protects the revenue streams of parasite SEO (under the guise of protecting publishers), it would act directly against the wishes of the electorate. Consumers expect the DMA to foster competition and lower prices, not to force search engines to serve them expired coupons and potential scams.

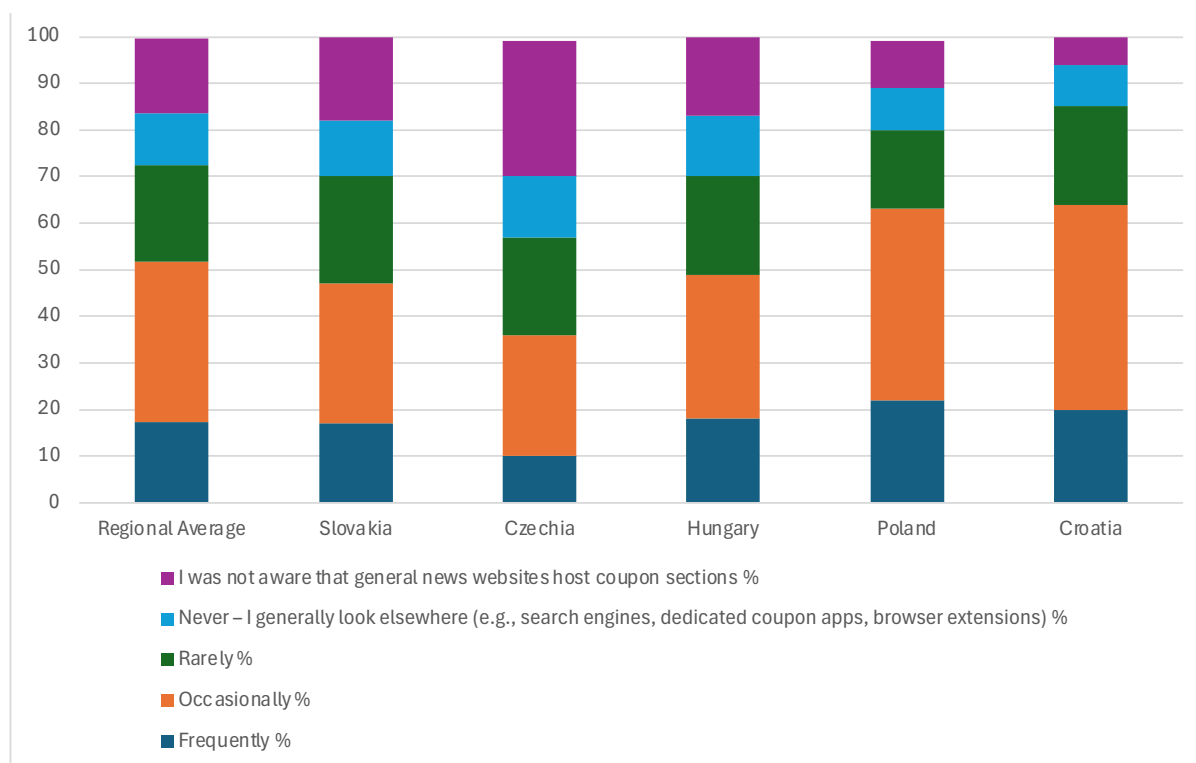
3.4 The Parasite Hypothesis: Arbitrage vs. Intent

Publishers that host third-party coupon content may frame these sections as a response to user demand. However, our data supports the parasite SEO hypothesis: that traffic to these sections is largely the result of algorithmic arbitrage (leveraging the news site's ranking power) rather than organic user intent.

The survey shows that general news sites are not the natural home for coupon hunters:

- **Lack of Intent:** Only **17%** of users say they frequently visit general news websites specifically to find vouchers.
- **Low Awareness:** A significant portion of the market is disconnected from this practice; **16%** were unaware these sections existed, and a further **11%** never use them, preferring dedicated apps or extensions.
- **Opportunistic Traffic:** Combined with the rarely (21%) segment, nearly half of the respondents do not view news sites as a primary destination for discounts.

FIGURE 4: WHEN YOU ARE ACTIVELY LOOKING FOR A DISCOUNT CODE FOR AN ONLINE PURCHASE, HOW OFTEN DO YOU INTENTIONALLY VISIT A GENERAL NEWS WEBSITE SPECIFICALLY TO FIND ITS “COUPONS” OR “VOUCHERS” SECTION?



This suggests that the high traffic numbers often cited by publishers for these sections are likely derived from users stumbling upon them via search queries (e.g., Nike discount code) rather than through brand loyalty to the news publisher.

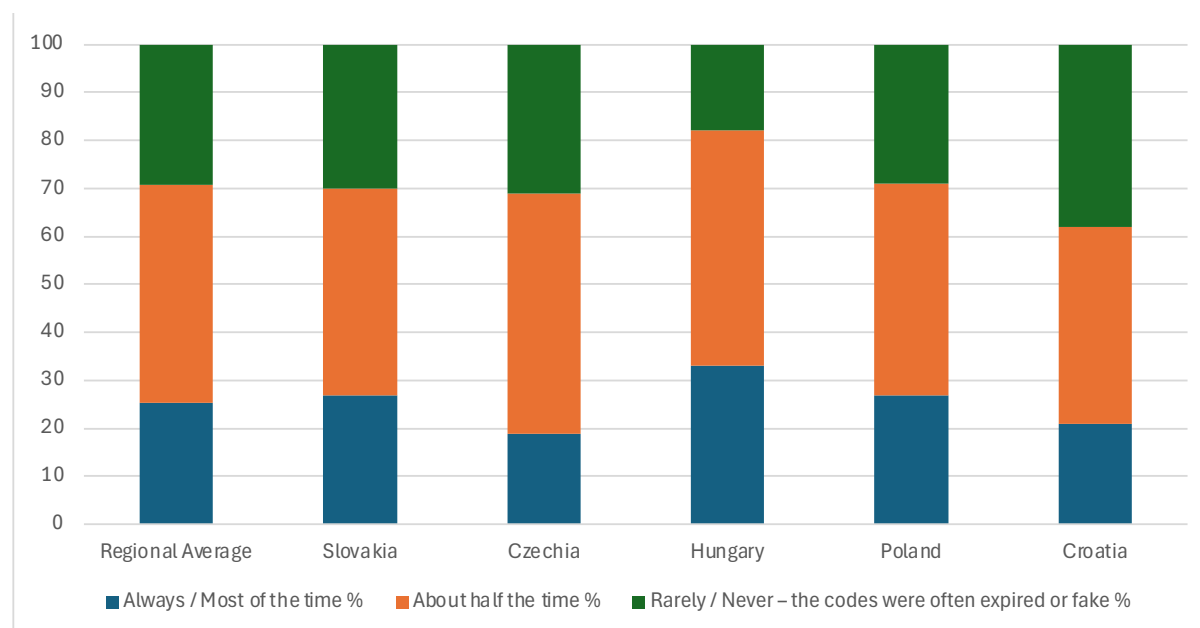
3.5 The Quality Gap: User Experience on Parasite Pages

The argument for demoting site reputation abuse is further bolstered by the reported quality of the content itself. If search engines are tasked with organizing the world's information, parasite SEO appears to be disorganizing it by providing subpar results.

Among those who have used coupons from general news sites, the experience is predominantly negative:

- **High Failure Rate:** 75% of users report that the codes fail at least half the time. Specifically, 29% say codes are rarely or never working, and 45% say they work only about half the time.
- **Low Reliability:** Only 25% of respondents claim a consistently positive experience (always / most of the time).

FIGURE 5: IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHEN YOU HAVE USED A DISCOUNT CODE FOUND ON A GENERAL NEWS WEBSITE, HOW OFTEN HAS THE CODE ACTUALLY WORKED?



If three out of four users experience failure rates of 50% or higher, this provides strong evidence that the content is of low quality. Demoting these pages is therefore not an anti-competitive act against publishers, but a quality-control measure consistent with ranking legitimate, functional content higher.

Taken together, the data show that publisher-hosted coupon pages combine low user intent with low content quality, making them doubly misaligned with consumer welfare. Only 17% of CEE consumers frequently visit well-known news websites with the intention of finding discount codes, while at least 48% either never do so, rarely do so, or are not even aware such sections exist. This means that the vast majority of traffic to these pages is incidental rather than deliberate. When this low intent is combined with user experience data, the picture worsens further: among those who do encounter and use these coupons, 75% report that the codes fail at least half the time, and only 25% experience reliable success. **In practical terms, this implies that a large share of users are being funnelled – unintentionally – toward content that is statistically highly unlikely to work. From a consumer perspective, this is not a marginal quality issue but a systematic one: algorithmic visibility is amplifying content that most users neither seek out nor benefit from. Demoting such pages is therefore not a penalty against publishers, but a mathematically justified and proportionate quality correction that aligns search results with genuine user intent and real-world usefulness.**

In conclusion, while the DMA seeks to ensure open and fair markets, our research indicates that using it to protect parasite SEO would run contrary to clear consumer demand. With 81% of users opposing regulations that might inadvertently elevate low-quality content, the public explicitly prefers active quality control over blind neutrality. Therefore, any regulatory approach that forces search engines to maintain the visibility of this material would not only frustrate users but would prioritize short-term commercial tactics over the safety and integrity of the European digital ecosystem.