

Interactivity and Credibility in Social Media News: The Effects of Likes, Comments, and Shares on Audience Trust in Digital News Content

Fyan Andinasari Kuen¹, Mitha Mayestika Kuen²
Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Indonesia Timur^{1&2}

Correspondence email: fyankuen@gmail.com

Abstract

The widespread adoption of social media has reshaped the circulation and evaluation of news, with platforms such as Instagram, X, Facebook, and TikTok increasingly serving as primary sources of information. Their built-in interactive features—likes, comments, and shares—often operate as visible markers of audience endorsement and may influence perceptions of news credibility. This study investigates how interactivity affects perceived news credibility among Indonesian social media users and examines the roles of source credibility and trust in digital media in shaping these evaluations. Using an online survey (n = 350), the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess direct, moderating, and mediating relationships within the proposed model. The findings indicate that interactivity contributes modestly to credibility perceptions, but its effect strengthens when audiences view the news source as reliable. Trust in digital media is shown to partially mediate the relationship, suggesting that credibility judgments are not solely determined by engagement metrics but also by broader assessments of the digital information environment. The study underscores the need for platforms and news organizations to prioritize transparency, accuracy, and contextual information rather than relying exclusively on popularity signals. Practical implications for media professionals and theoretical contributions to digital journalism studies are discussed.

Keywords: interactivity; social media engagement; news credibility; source credibility; trust in digital media; digital journalism.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has reconfigured the architecture of news consumption, making platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X central to the everyday information practices of global audiences. These platforms differ fundamentally from traditional news media because they embed interactive mechanisms at the core of content circulation. Users can instantly signal their reactions by tapping like buttons, posting comments, or sharing news with their networks. Consequently, the reach and visibility of news content are shaped not only by editorial decisions but also by the scale and intensity of audience engagement.

In this highly participatory environment, engagement metrics frequently function as social cues through which users infer the relevance or reliability of information. Several recent studies highlight how these metrics may serve as heuristic shortcuts when audiences are unable—or unwilling—to verify content accuracy. Some report that popular posts tend to be perceived as more trustworthy, while others caution that engagement often reflects virality rather than factual quality. Against this backdrop, credibility assessments in digital news ecosystems have become increasingly complex and context-dependent.

In Indonesia, where social media penetration surpassed 79% in 2024, the influence of platform interactivity is particularly significant. Younger audiences rely heavily on social media for real-time information, making them more susceptible to credibility judgments shaped by social cues rather than validated journalistic processes. This creates an urgent need to examine whether and how interactivity contributes to perceptions of news credibility in a media landscape that is simultaneously dynamic, participatory, and vulnerable to misinformation.

The prominence of engagement-based visibility raises an important question: *Do interactive features enhance audience trust in news content, or do they obscure more substantive indicators of credibility?* In the Indonesian context—where misinformation, political polarization, and uneven digital literacy persist—the issue becomes even more pressing. While interactivity facilitates audience participation and widens access to information, it may also cultivate superficial trust by encouraging users to equate popularity with reliability.

Current scholarship presents mixed evidence. Some argue that active involvement increases psychological engagement and strengthens credibility perceptions; others contend that engagement rarely reflects journalistic accuracy. Moreover, the influence of interactivity may depend on additional factors such as trust in digital media environments or the perceived professionalism of the news source. These inconsistencies in empirical findings reveal gaps in the literature, motivating the present study.

This research seeks to address these gaps through three objectives: a. To examine the direct effect of interactivity (likes, comments, shares) on perceived news credibility, b. To assess whether source credibility strengthens or weakens the relationship between interactivity and credibility, c. To analyze the mediating role of trust in digital media in shaping how audiences evaluate news on social platforms. Through these objectives, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how participatory signals interact with cognitive and contextual factors in credibility judgment.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on digital journalism by questioning whether interactivity should be viewed as a credible indicator of news reliability. The research bridges theoretical perspectives from Uses and Gratifications, Media Credibility, and digital behavior studies to contextualize audience engagement within contemporary media environments. Practically, the findings offer guidance for journalists, content creators, and platform designers who seek to foster trustworthy forms of communication without conflating popularity with accuracy. By situating the Indonesian context within broader global developments, the study enhances scholarly understanding of how credibility is constructed in participatory and algorithm-driven news ecosystems.

This study introduces a novel integrated framework that simultaneously examines interactivity, source credibility, and trust in digital media as interrelated factors shaping news credibility—a configuration underexplored in prior research. Unlike previous studies that often treat these variables in isolation, this research employs a moderated-mediation model to reveal how source credibility moderates and trust in digital media mediates the impact of interactivity on credibility judgments.

Methodologically, it applies PLS-SEM to a non-Western context (Indonesia), offering fresh insights into how credibility is negotiated in emerging digital publics. The findings advance theory by demonstrating that engagement metrics alone are insufficient for trust formation; rather, their influence is contingent on source trustworthiness and

users' broader faith in digital ecosystems. This nuanced perspective contributes original insights to digital journalism and credibility scholarship.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides the foundation for understanding why individuals choose specific media to satisfy particular needs. Originally formulated to highlight active audience participation, UGT remains highly relevant in the context of social media, where users engage not only to access information but also to interact, express identity, and obtain social acknowledgment. Contemporary studies in digital communication have shown that participatory actions—such as commenting on or sharing news—may generate a sense of involvement that shapes how users evaluate content. These behaviors reflect not merely functional purposes but also social and emotional needs that influence perceptions of credibility.

Media Credibility Theory

Media Credibility Theory posits that individuals form trust judgments based on their perceptions of accuracy, transparency, and integrity attributed to the information source. In digital environments, these judgments extend beyond conventional news outlets to include citizen journalists, influencers, and algorithmically curated feeds. As social platforms make engagement metrics highly visible, users often rely on them as peripheral signals when assessing information reliability. Although this process may operate as a cognitive shortcut, it risks conflating popularity with factual soundness—an issue widely discussed in recent digital journalism research.

Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT)

Social Information Processing Theory illuminates how users interpret social signals in computer-mediated communication, particularly when nonverbal cues are scarce. In social media environments, engagement numbers—likes, reposts, and comment volumes—serve as substitutes for interpersonal cues that traditionally convey trustworthiness. These indicators shape how audiences perceive messages and evaluate whether the information appears socially validated. The theory suggests that credibility assessments in digital contexts occur through adaptive interpretations of limited but salient social information.

Interactivity in Social Media News

Interactivity is a defining characteristic of digital news dissemination, distinguishing it from traditional one-way communication. It encompasses the range of ways users can engage with content and influence its circulation. In social media ecosystems, interactivity manifests through actions that vary in intensity: light-touch responses such as likes or emojis; dialogic exchanges through comments or discussion threads; and distributive behaviors such as sharing news with one's own network. Each form carries different implications for how audiences make sense of a message.

Reactive interactions (e.g., likes) generally indicate surface-level resonance and can elevate content visibility. Dialogic interactions introduce deliberative engagement and may stimulate public discourse, thereby contributing to perceived relevance. Meanwhile, distributive interactions—such as sharing or reposting—expand the reach of news and amplify social signals that others subsequently interpret. These layers create

what scholars describe as a “social endorsement environment,” where user engagement contributes to a climate of perceived validity even before content accuracy is examined.

Recent studies argue that interactivity has become part of the meaning-making process in digital news consumption. The way users respond, debate, and redistribute content turns news into a dynamic social artifact shaped not only by creators but also by audiences. This shift challenges the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists and places interactivity at the center of credibility formation in algorithm-driven media systems.

News Credibility in the Digital Era

Perceived news credibility refers to the extent to which audiences view news content as accurate, unbiased, and trustworthy. However, digital environments complicate the attribution of credibility due to the diversity of sources and the velocity of information flow. Users are frequently exposed to posts from news organizations, opinion leaders, interest groups, and anonymous accounts in a single feed, making it difficult to assess reliability using traditional cues.

Content cues, such as tone, evidence, clarity, and factual depth, Source cues, including perceived expertise, professionalism, and consistency, and Social cues, such as engagement metrics that reflect communal responses.

The rise of misinformation—exacerbated by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, election cycles, and polarized debates—reveals that social cues often overshadow content or source quality in shaping perception. In Indonesia, studies have found that audiences frequently associate high engagement with trustworthy information even when the source lacks strong journalistic credentials. This tendency highlights a broader shift from institution-based trust to network-based trust.

Relationship Between Interactivity and Credibility

The literature presents mixed findings regarding how interactivity influences perceptions of credibility. Some scholars argue that interactivity strengthens credibility by increasing cognitive engagement and providing opportunities for users to evaluate content through conversation and collective interpretation. For example, dialogic exchanges allow audiences to access diverse perspectives, which may validate or challenge the information presented.

However, other research warns that interactivity can distort credibility judgments. High engagement levels may result from algorithmic amplification, sensational framing, or coordinated manipulation, rather than genuine public endorsement. In such cases, interactivity obscures rather than reveals credibility. This paradox positions interactivity as a double-edged sword: it can either enhance transparency and public deliberation or amplify misleading information under the guise of social validation.

Meta-analytic evidence suggests that interactivity’s direct effect on credibility is often modest, with more substantial impacts emerging when combined with other variables such as source trustworthiness or audience predispositions. These mixed outcomes underline the need to investigate interactivity alongside contextual and psychological factors rather than as an isolated determinant.

Source Credibility and Trust in Digital Media

Source credibility remains one of the most consistent predictors of how users evaluate news content. In traditional journalism, credibility stems from professional standards and institutional accountability. In contrast, social media introduces multiple

alternative sources whose credibility may vary widely—from reputable journalists to unverified individuals. Users rely on heuristic cues such as follower counts, posting frequency, verification badges, and cross-platform presence to gauge trustworthiness.

Trust in digital media, meanwhile, reflects broader attitudes toward the online information ecosystem. This form of trust is shaped by individual experiences, exposure to misinformation, and beliefs about platform integrity. When trust in digital media is high, users may interpret interactivity as a positive signal of credibility. Conversely, low trust can weaken the effect of interactivity, as users become more skeptical of popularity cues.

Empirical evidence shows that source credibility often moderates the effect of interactivity on credibility judgments. In other words, engagement may only be perceived as meaningful when attached to a source already considered reliable. Likewise, trust in digital media may mediate how interactivity influences credibility, suggesting that credibility assessments arise from a combination of social, cognitive, and contextual mechanisms.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Drawing from the theoretical foundations and empirical findings discussed above, this study proposes an integrated model that positions interactivity, source credibility, and trust in digital media as key determinants of perceived news credibility. The model recognizes interactivity as a participatory signal; source credibility as a moderating factor that can amplify or diminish that signal; and trust in digital media as a broader evaluative lens through which users interpret engagement metrics.

Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses are formulated: **H1:** Interactivity exerts a positive effect on perceived news credibility. **H2:** Source credibility moderates the relationship between interactivity and perceived news credibility. **H3:** Trust in digital media mediates the influence of interactivity on perceived news credibility. **H4:** Source credibility has a direct positive effect on perceived news credibility. This framework provides the basis for the empirical model tested in the subsequent methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory design to examine the relationships among interactivity, source credibility, trust in digital media, and perceived news credibility within social media environments. A descriptive approach is suitable because the research seeks not only to identify associations but also to understand how and under what conditions interactivity shapes credibility judgments. Quantitative methods enable systematic measurement of latent constructs and the testing of theoretical propositions through structural modeling.

Given the dynamic and highly individualized nature of social media use, a cross-sectional online survey was selected as the primary method of data collection. This design allows the researcher to capture the perceptions and experiences of diverse users in a single time frame, reflecting the fast-paced behaviors that characterize digital news consumption. The decision to employ a survey aligns with previous research in digital journalism and communication studies, which frequently rely on self-reported measures to assess user attitudes and engagement.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of Indonesian social media users aged 18 to 45 who actively consume news on at least one major platform—such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, or TikTok. This age range reflects the demographic most engaged with digital news and most exposed to interactive features that shape credibility judgments. To ensure that respondents possess adequate experience with the phenomenon under study, the inclusion criteria require participants to have interacted with news content (such as liking, commenting, or sharing) within the previous six months.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit respondents who met these criteria. Although probability sampling offers stronger generalizability, purposive sampling is commonly used in digital media studies where access to platform-based populations is constrained, and the research aims to capture specific user behaviors. The approach allows the study to focus on individuals with relevant engagement patterns, thereby increasing the validity of the collected data.

To determine an adequate sample size, guidelines for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were followed. Hair et al. (2021) recommend a minimum of 10–20 observations per indicator for PLS-SEM models involving multiple latent variables. Given that the measurement instrument includes 20 indicators, the required minimum falls between 200 and 400 participants. This study aims for 350 valid responses, ensuring sufficient statistical power and robustness for the analyses. The final dataset met these expectations, offering a reliable basis for hypothesis testing.

Measurement Instrument

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire developed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The constructs in this study—Interactivity (INT), Source Credibility (SC), Trust in Digital Media (TDM), and Perceived News Credibility (PNC)—were measured with items adapted from validated instruments used in prior research.

Interactivity (INT)

Interactivity was measured through statements that capture the frequency and intensity of user engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting on, or sharing news posts. The items were adapted from recent studies on social media engagement and interactive behavior, ensuring relevance to contemporary platform dynamics.

Source Credibility (SC)

Items measuring source credibility assessed respondents’ perceptions of the trustworthiness, expertise, and reliability of the news sources they follow. These items were adapted from Lu and Lee (2023), who examined credibility indicators in digital social contexts.

Trust in Digital Media (TDM)

Trust in digital media was measured through statements reflecting users’ general confidence in online news ecosystems. Respondents evaluated their belief that news circulated through social media platforms is generally dependable, aligning with the operationalization used in the Reuters Institute’s recent assessments of digital trust.

Perceived News Credibility (PNC)

PNC items captured respondents’ judgments regarding the accuracy, fairness, and reliability of news encountered on social media. Items were adapted from studies examining credibility formation in algorithmic and engagement-driven environments.

A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants who met the inclusion criteria to evaluate the clarity and reliability of the instrument. Feedback from the pilot test prompted minor adjustments to the wording of several items to improve comprehensibility. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 for all constructs, indicating acceptable internal consistency and supporting the instrument's suitability for the full study.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected between June and September 2025 through an online survey distributed via social media channels, including Instagram Stories, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook communities. Recruitment messages included a brief description of the study's purpose, participation criteria, and assurances of anonymity to encourage voluntary participation. Respondents accessed the survey through a secure link, which directed them to the consent form prior to beginning the questionnaire.

To minimize response bias, the survey was designed to be concise yet comprehensive, requiring approximately 10–12 minutes to complete. Question items were randomized within each construct block to reduce pattern responses. Demographic questions were placed at the end to prevent priming effects that could influence perceptions of credibility or interactivity.

Data Analysis Technique

The study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 to test the proposed model. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research and its ability to estimate complex models with latent variables, including those involving moderation and mediation. Additionally, PLS-SEM is robust to non-normal data distributions, which are common in attitudinal datasets.

The data analysis followed two major stages: evaluation of the measurement (outer) model and assessment of the structural (inner) model.

Outer Model Evaluation

The measurement model was assessed for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

1. **Indicator Reliability:** Factor loadings of ≥ 0.70 were considered acceptable. Items falling below this threshold were examined and retained only if their removal would diminish content validity.
2. **Internal Consistency:** Composite reliability values exceeding 0.70 indicated adequate consistency across items measuring the same construct.
3. **Convergent Validity:** Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores of ≥ 0.50 confirmed that each construct explained at least half of the variance of its indicators.
4. **Discriminant Validity:** The HTMT criterion was applied to ensure that constructs were empirically distinct, with threshold values below 0.90.

Inner Model Evaluation

The structural model was analyzed to evaluate the relationships between constructs and the explanatory power of the model.

1. **Path Coefficients (β):** Estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to assess significance ($p < 0.05$).
2. **Coefficient of Determination (R^2):** Indicates how much variance in perceived news credibility is explained by the predictors.
3. **Effect Size (f^2):** Assesses the magnitude of the contribution of each predictor to the endogenous construct.
4. **Predictive Relevance (Q^2):** Evaluated through blindfolding procedures to determine the predictive accuracy of the model.

These procedures collectively ensured that the model was rigorously specified and statistically sound, providing a reliable framework for testing the research hypotheses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process in accordance with national and institutional guidelines. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically before respondents accessed the questionnaire. The survey did not collect identifiable personal information to protect respondent confidentiality, and all responses were stored securely and analyzed in aggregate form only.

Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The ethical approach aligns with the principles adopted in social science research internationally, ensuring respect for the rights, privacy, and well-being of all respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The structural model assessment reveals several key relationships among the constructs of interest. First, interactivity demonstrates a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived news credibility, though the magnitude of the effect is modest. This suggests that while engagement behaviors capture audience attention and stimulate involvement, they alone do not strongly elevate credibility judgments.

Second, source credibility emerges as a meaningful moderating factor. The interaction term between interactivity and source credibility shows a positive and significant effect, indicating that interactivity becomes more influential when audiences perceive the source as trustworthy or professionally competent. In contrast, when source credibility is low, interactivity exerts little to no meaningful impact on credibility assessments.

Third, trust in digital media demonstrates a partial mediating effect between interactivity and perceived news credibility. This implies that users interpret engagement cues through the broader evaluative lens of their trust in online media environments. When trust in digital media is relatively high, engagement appears to reinforce credibility; however, when trust is low, engagement may be viewed with skepticism.

Finally, source credibility exerts the strongest direct effect on perceived news credibility across all examined constructs. This finding aligns with longstanding research suggesting that audiences continue to rely on recognizable and reputable sources when making credibility evaluations—even in highly interactive environments dominated by user participation.

The model explains approximately 55% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.55$) in perceived news credibility, indicating substantial explanatory power for behavioral and perceptual outcomes in digital news contexts.

The findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of credibility formation within social media ecosystems. Although interactive features such as liking, commenting, and sharing are often presumed to boost user trust, the results here suggest a more nuanced reality. Interactivity generates visibility and invites participatory engagement, but it does not replace deeper considerations such as the professionalism or identity of the source.

This demonstrates that audiences may rely on interactivity as a heuristic cue—consistent with theories of cognitive shortcuts in digital environments—but such reliance is conditional. When the source is considered reputable, interactivity not only amplifies visibility but also reinforces existing trust, creating a synergistic effect. However, in the absence of credible source cues, engagement loses much of its persuasive power, illustrating that popularity and trust are not inherently interchangeable.

The partial mediation of trust in digital media further highlights the importance of contextual beliefs in shaping credibility judgments. Users who possess a general sense of confidence in digital news ecosystems are more likely to interpret interactive behaviors positively. For these users, high engagement serves as an additional layer of validation. Conversely, users with low trust in digital platforms may regard the same engagement metrics with caution, reflecting broader anxieties surrounding misinformation and manipulation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that credibility formation in digital settings depends on the interplay of social signals, contextual beliefs, and source attributes—rather than on any singular determinant. Engagement metrics are influential but insufficient, and their impact is filtered through pre-existing trust and source perceptions.

Theoretical Implications

Contributions to Uses and Gratifications Theory

The study extends UGT by illustrating that interactive features on social media serve not only as tools for information seeking but also as mechanisms for meaning-making. User participation can enhance feelings of involvement, but this involvement does not automatically translate into trust. The findings reveal that gratifications sought through interactivity may be primarily social (e.g., belonging, expression) rather than epistemic (e.g., assessing truthfulness). This distinction refines UGT by highlighting how different types of gratifications influence credibility judgments.

Extensions to Media Credibility Theory

Media Credibility Theory is further developed through evidence that audiences rely on a combination of source expertise and social validation cues. The moderating effect of source credibility underscores the continued centrality of traditional credibility factors, even in environments driven by user engagement. This highlights a “layered credibility framework” where social cues are influential but secondary to source attributes.

Relevance to Social Information Processing Theory

The findings reinforce SIPT by demonstrating how users adapt to limited interpersonal cues in digital communication. Engagement metrics function as social signals that influence message interpretation; however, these signals do not operate uniformly across users. The role of trust in digital media as a mediator suggests that social signals are embedded within a broader evaluative context shaped by individual beliefs and prior experiences.

Practical Implications

For Journalists and News Organizations

The results indicate that reliance on engagement metrics alone is insufficient for building or maintaining audience trust. News organizations should prioritize transparency, fact-checking, and consistent reporting practices. While interactive features can enhance audience involvement, they cannot substitute for credibility grounded in professional journalistic standards.

For Social Media Platforms

Platforms such as Meta, X, and TikTok should consider implementing design features that help contextualize engagement metrics. Labels indicating source verification, fact-check summaries, or algorithmic indicators of reliability could guide audiences toward more informed evaluations. Such measures can reduce the risk of misleading popularity cues dominating the interpretive landscape.

For Digital Literacy Initiatives

Digital literacy programs should explicitly address the limitations of engagement metrics. Educating users to differentiate between popularity and accuracy can mitigate the influence of viral misinformation. Emphasizing the importance of source verification and contextual evaluation may empower users to make more critical judgments in digital spaces.

For Policy Makers

Given the growing societal impact of misinformation, policymakers should consider frameworks that encourage transparency in engagement-driven environments. Regulations promoting platform accountability—particularly regarding bot activity and manipulated engagement—could help stabilize digital trust.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study presents several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. User perceptions may shift rapidly in response to evolving events, platform changes, or public debates. Longitudinal or experimental designs could better capture these dynamic processes.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of biases related to memory accuracy or social desirability. Although the instrument underwent pilot testing and refinement, self-perception of engagement behaviors may not fully align with actual platform interactions.

Third, the focus on Indonesian social media users limits generalizability. Digital cultures vary across regions, and credibility cues may be interpreted differently depending on cultural norms, political contexts, or platform usage patterns. Comparative cross-country studies could offer a broader understanding of these contextual differences.

Finally, the measurement of interactivity focused primarily on visible behavioral indicators. Future research could incorporate additional dimensions, such as the emotional tone of user comments or the influence of algorithmic recommendations.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies may deepen understanding of digital credibility formation by exploring:

1. **Longitudinal analyses** to track how engagement-related cues influence credibility over time, especially during information crises.
2. **Experimental approaches** that manipulate engagement metrics or source attributes to observe causal effects on credibility judgments.
3. **Cross-cultural comparisons** to examine how regional digital cultures shape interpretations of interactivity and trust.
4. **The role of AI-generated content**—including synthetic news anchors, deepfakes, or algorithmically curated feeds—on credibility processes.
5. **Network-level analyses** of how credibility perceptions diffuse across digital communities and how influencers mediate trust formation.

These avenues would contribute to a more granular and comprehensive understanding of how interactivity, credibility, and trust intersect within rapidly evolving digital ecosystems.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how interactivity shapes perceptions of news credibility within the contemporary social media landscape. By analyzing responses from Indonesian social media users, the model revealed that interactivity—expressed through likes, comments, and shares—has a positive yet modest effect on perceived news credibility. These forms of engagement capture user attention and stimulate participation, but they do not independently guarantee trust.

The study further establishes source credibility as a crucial moderating factor. Interactivity becomes more consequential when users already view the source as reputable; conversely, when credibility is uncertain, engagement cues lose much of their interpretive value. This finding underscores the continuing relevance of traditional credibility cues in digital environments, even as platform dynamics increasingly favor popularity and algorithmic visibility.

Trust in digital media emerged as a significant mediating variable, demonstrating that credibility assessments are not solely a function of observable user behavior but are also influenced by broader perceptions of the online information ecosystem. Users with higher digital trust are more likely to interpret engagement positively, while those with low trust may disregard or even question the meaning of interactive signals.

Taken together, the findings emphasize that the formation of news credibility in digital contexts is multilayered and relational. Interactivity contributes to visibility and participatory engagement, but its effects are filtered through the perceived reliability of the source and the user's level of trust in digital media overall. These insights enrich our understanding of how credibility evolves within hybrid news environments shaped by audiences, platforms, and algorithmic systems.

Theoretical Implications The study offers several contributions to digital communication theory.

Refining Uses and Gratifications Theory

The results extend UGT by highlighting that gratifications derived from interactivity may be social rather than epistemic. While users may engage through likes or comments to express identity or participate socially, these motivations do not necessarily signify confidence in content accuracy. This nuance clarifies that engagement does not always reflect trust, challenging traditional assumptions about audience involvement.

Expanding Media Credibility Theory

The moderating role of source credibility reinforces the long-standing notion that audiences continue to rely on source attributes when evaluating news. However, in social media contexts, credibility is shaped by an interplay between traditional cues (e.g., professionalism, expertise) and contemporary cues (e.g., engagement metrics). This layered framework expands traditional models by incorporating both journalistic and participatory dimensions.

Deepening Social Information Processing Theory

The study substantiates SIPT by showing how audiences adapt to limited social signals online, using engagement metrics as proxies for interpersonal cues. However, the influence of these cues depends on users' trust in digital media, suggesting that interpretation of social signals is shaped not only by platform features but also by contextual beliefs. This adds complexity to SIPT by integrating the role of systemic trust.

Practical Implications

For News Organizations

The findings reinforce that credibility cannot be manufactured through engagement alone. News organizations should focus on strengthening journalistic integrity through rigorous fact-checking, transparent sourcing, and consistent editorial standards. Interactivity may enrich audience engagement, but credibility is anchored in quality reporting.

For Social Media Creators and Influencers

Creators who disseminate news or informational content must recognize that audiences evaluate their posts not only through engagement numbers but also through perceived expertise and reliability. Building consistent, transparent, and evidence-based communication can enhance credibility more effectively than viral strategies.

For Educators and Literacy Advocates

Digital literacy programs should explicitly teach users to question the assumption that high engagement equates to trustworthy content. Educators should emphasize cross-checking sources, recognizing algorithmic biases, and understanding the mechanics of social validation. Equipping users with these skills can mitigate vulnerability to misinformation. Policy Implications The findings also offer relevant insights for policymakers and regulatory bodies.

Transparency in Engagement Metrics

Policymakers may consider initiatives that encourage platforms to disclose when engagement is artificially inflated—through bots, coordinated campaigns, or paid amplification. Such transparency can reduce the interpretive distortion caused by manipulated popularity cues.

Strengthening Platform Accountability

Regulatory frameworks could encourage platforms to implement features that contextualize engagement metrics, such as credibility indicators, fact-check summaries, or warning labels when questionable content becomes viral. These interventions can support healthier information ecosystems.

Supporting Public Trust

Mechanisms that enhance digital trust—such as clear content-moderation policies, user-friendly reporting systems, and platform accountability audits—can contribute to healthier credibility assessments and more informed public discourse.

Limitations

Although the study provides valuable contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. **Cross-sectional design:** The snapshot nature of the data prevents causal inference. Changes in platform features, ongoing events, or media controversies may influence perceptions over time. **Self-reported measures:** While widely used in media research, self-reported behaviors may diverge from actual platform usage.

REFERENCES

- Cheng, Y., & Liu, X. (2022). Algorithmic amplification and credibility in digital news ecosystems. *Digital Journalism*, 10(7), 845–862. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.2005274>
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2021). The continuing transformation of communications: Cultures, platforms, and power. *Communication Theory*, 31(4), 495–516.
- Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). News media trust and its determinants in the digital age. *Journalism Studies*, 21(12), 1732–1746.
- Gaziano, C., & McGrath, K. (1986). Measuring the concept of credibility. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 63(3), 451–462.
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2021). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Jenkins, H. (2020). Spreadable media in the algorithmic era. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(3), 425–436.
- Kim, S., & Song, H. (2023). Heuristic cues and online trust in social media news environments. *Journalism Studies*, 24(5), 678–692.
- Lin, C. (2022). User interactivity and engagement behaviors on social media platforms. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 134, 107336.
- Lu, Y., & Lee, S. (2023). Source credibility and user trust in social news sharing. *New Media & Society*, 25(3), 412–431.
- Mellado, C., Jenkins, J., & Vásquez, A. (2021). Understanding user engagement with digital news: A cross-platform analysis. *Digital Journalism*, 9(4), 490–509.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). *Digital News Report 2024*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.
- Oeldorf-Hirsch, A. (2021). The influence of social cues on credibility assessments in digital news environments. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(7), 939–955.
- Park, J. (2021). Social endorsement and credibility perception in digital communication. *Telematics and Informatics*, 57, 101530.
- Reuters Institute. (2024). *Digital News Report 2024*. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>
- Tandoc, E. C., & Maitra, J. (2023). Misinformation on social media and the role of social cues: A systematic review. *Online Information Review*, 47(5), 1032–1056.
- Walther, J. B. (1992). Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction. *Communication Research*, 19(1), 52–90.

- Yang, H., Zhang, T., & Zhao, S. (2024). Interactivity, engagement, and credibility in social media journalism. *Media and Communication, 12*(2), 225–240.
- Zhou, L., Wu, M., & Li, S. (2025). Engagement, credibility, and user trust: A meta-analysis of social media news cues. *Frontiers in Communication, 10*, 112–128.