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## Do Certain Forums Affect Students' Trust In News Situations?

Cassandra Raucheisen <sup>a</sup>, Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter <sup>a, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Texas Tech University, USA

### Abstract

As college students increasingly encounter news across traditional and social media platforms, understanding how platform context shapes trust judgments remains important. This study examined how undergraduate students evaluate the credibility of news presented in traditional news and social media video formats, with particular attention to algorithmic awareness, media literacy, and platform-based trust. Participants included 235 college students who completed an online survey and viewed two short video clips representing different media formats. Results indicated high engagement with news content and strong awareness of algorithmic content curation. Although overall trust ratings for traditional news and social media clips did not significantly differ, direct comparisons revealed a stronger preference for traditional news sources in perceived trustworthiness and confidence. Participants were also more likely to question information encountered on social media and reported that stylistic features, including tone, pacing, and presentation, influenced credibility judgments. No significant gender differences emerged. Findings highlight the relationship between media literacy, platform design, and trust, emphasizing the continuing importance of presentation and forum type in shaping perceptions of news credibility among college students. The study also demonstrates that students actively compare information across platforms, reinforcing the importance of critical evaluation skills within contemporary digital news environments and journalism.

**Keywords:** algorithmic awareness, college students, media trust, news credibility, social media.

### 1. Introduction

As online media has continued to expand. It is important to understand the impacts that our communities face due to this ever-changing digital landscape. Furthermore, online media has crossed over into different sectors, such as the news. A once black and white landscape categorized by two main forums of news media, print and broadcast, is long gone. Today, there is an increasingly gray area. This change has a stronger effect than seen on the surface (Johnson, John, 2025; Tandoc et al., 2018). One major stakeholder in this cross between old school journalism and the digital world is college-aged students.

Many studies have been conducted on print and broadcast news trust or social media trust (Kohring, Matthes, 2007). More recently, there have been more studies conducted on social media algorithms and whether users can identify algorithmic influence (Bucher, 2018; Zarouali et al., 2021). It is known that the traditional forms of media have been in sharp decline (Lee, 2005). However, younger consumers have moved towards social media and an ever-growing news platform (Johnson, John, 2025). However, no to minimal studies have been done regarding college-aged students' trust in news situations among different platforms.

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [crauchi@ttu.edu](mailto:crauchi@ttu.edu) (C. Raucheisen), [n.punyanunt@ttu.edu](mailto:n.punyanunt@ttu.edu) (N.M. Punyanunt-Carter)

This study aims to understand students' trust in news forums by testing trust in journalism, algorithmic awareness, media bias, ideological lean, social media use, and media literacy. This is vital information as the next generation to make informed, ethical, and decisive decisions will be college-age students.

## 2. Materials and methods

Media literacy and Need for Cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, 1982) serve as key moderating factors in how individuals interpret and respond to news content. Those with higher news media literacy (Ashley et al., 2013) understand the constructed nature of media messages and are more adept at identifying bias or misinformation, while individuals high in Need for Cognition tend to process information more analytically. Based on previous literature, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: How do college students evaluate the trustworthiness of news presented in traditional news formats compared to social media video formats?

RQ2: How does platform context influence college students' confidence in the accuracy and credibility of news content?

RQ3: To what extent are college students aware of algorithmic content curation when consuming news across media platforms?

RQ4: How do stylistic features such as tone, pacing, and presentation influence the perceived credibility of social media-based news content?

RQ5: Does gender relate to differences in perceived trust and credibility of news across traditional and social media platforms?

Participants were 237 college students recruited from undergraduate communication courses at a large public university in the southern United States. After excluding incomplete surveys, the final analytic sample consisted of 235 participants for most analyses. In terms of demographics, 150 (63.7 %) participants identified as female and 85 (36.3 %) participants identified as male. Participants represented a range of academic classifications: 75 (32.1 %) participants were juniors, 66 (28.3 %) participants identified as seniors, 44 (18.6 %) participants were sophomores, and 36 (15.2 %) participants were freshmen; 14 (5.8 %) participants identified as graduate students or selected another classification.

Students reported a wide variety of academic majors spanning communication, social sciences, humanities, business, and STEM fields. Access to the Internet was high across the sample. Two hundred fourteen participants (91.1 %) reported being able to connect to the Internet most of the time or always. Participants also reported frequent engagement with news and media platforms. More than three-quarters of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they use news to stay informed about current events and to understand what is happening in the world.

Patterns of news exposure reflected a multi-platform media environment. Participants reported encountering news through a combination of traditional outlets and social media platforms rather than relying on a single source. Social media and online news sites were among the most commonly reported avenues for accessing news, while television news remained a regularly used source for many participants. This overlap suggests that students in the sample routinely navigate and compare information across multiple media contexts rather than consuming news within a single platform ecosystem.

This study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board before data collection. Participants were recruited through a SONA Platform and completed the study online via a secure survey platform. All 237 students who accessed the survey reviewed an informed consent statement before proceeding. Of these, 235 participants consented and provided usable data for most analyses.

Students were offered extra credit for participation where permitted by their instructor. Alternative assignments of equivalent value were made available to students, ensuring that participation was voluntary and free from coercion. Extra credit amounted to 0.5 course credits when applied.

After providing consent, participants completed survey items assessing news use, trust in media, algorithmic awareness, and social media self-efficacy. All participants then viewed two short video clips embedded in the survey. One clip represented a traditional news format, and the other represented a social media-style short video. Following each clip, participants responded to a set of trust and credibility items specific to that video. Demographic questions were completed at

the end of the survey. Based on system timestamps, the average completion time for the survey was approximately 20 minutes.

News use and trust were assessed using a series of Likert-type items. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as using the news to stay informed, relying on news to understand current events, and trusting information provided by traditional media and social media ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Responses were recorded on five-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. According to M. Kohring and J. Matthes (Kohring, Matthes, 2007) Trust in News Media Scale.

Algorithmic awareness was measured using multiple items assessing participants' understanding of how social media platforms curate content. Items addressed awareness that algorithms determine which posts are shown, that user behavior influences future exposure, and that algorithms may introduce bias or lack transparency. Responses were recorded on five-point agreement scales ( $\alpha = .92$ ). According to Brahim Zarouali, Sophie C. Boerman, and Claes H. de Vreese, Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale (Zarouali et al., 2021).

Social media self-efficacy was assessed using five items measuring perceived ease of use, mental effort, and perceived control when interacting with social media platforms. Responses were recorded on seven-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree ( $\alpha = .94$ ). According to L.F. Bright, S.B. Kleiser and S.L. Grau (Bright et al., 2015).

After viewing each video clip, participants rated their agreement with six statements assessing trustworthiness, accuracy, reliability, source credibility, and presentation style. Responses were recorded on five-point agreement scales. Participants also completed forced-choice items comparing the two clips and indicating whether platform type affected their trust judgments ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### 3. Discussion

Viewers' trust in news media greatly affects the forms of news content that viewers consume. The multidimensional study by M. Kohring and J. Matthes (Kohring, Matthes, 2007). Confirming its hypothesis that trust can be measured in hierarchical order, the study breaks the measurements into four dimensions. First is trust in the selectivity of topics, which is the belief that journalists cover the most relevant issues. Second is trust in the selectivity of facts, which is confidence that journalists use the most significant facts. Third is trust in the accuracy of the depiction, which is trust in reporters correctly representing the state of reality. Lastly, trust in journalistic assessment, which is the belief that reporters conduct fair evaluations. Each factor of this scale evaluates journalistic performance from an individual's perspective.

Algorithmic curation fundamentally shapes how audiences encounter news content by personalizing information flows and influencing what users see or miss. This process affects exposure diversity – limiting encounters with differing perspectives – and shapes perceptions of fairness and transparency in news delivery. To understand users' awareness of these mechanisms, Zarouali et al. (Zarouali et al., 2021) developed the Algorithmic Media Content Awareness Scale (AMCA), which measures how individuals recognize and evaluate the role of algorithms in curating online content. The scale encompasses three key dimensions: awareness of content filtering (understanding that algorithms selectively present or hide information), awareness of automated decision-making (recognizing that algorithms – not humans – make many content choices), and awareness of bias (acknowledging that algorithmic processes may systematically favor certain types of information or viewpoints). Together, these dimensions help explain how user awareness of algorithmic systems mediates perceptions of fairness, credibility, and trust in digital news environments.

Perceived media bias refers to the belief that news content or media platforms exhibit ideological leanings that favor one side of the political or social spectrum over another (Lee, 2005). When audiences perceive bias – whether intentional or not – they tend to question the objectivity and fairness of journalistic practices. This perception undermines the credibility of news outlets and leads to a decrease in trust toward both individual news sources and the media as an institution. As research shows, audiences who believe the media are ideologically slanted are less likely to rely on them for accurate or impartial information, reinforcing skepticism and selective exposure to confirmatory outlets.

Patterns of media habits and routines play a central role in shaping individuals' exposure to news and information. Rather than making deliberate choices, users often engage with news through habitual scrolling and platform routines, which influence the diversity and frequency of content encountered. To capture how deeply social media use is integrated into daily life, Jenkins-Guarnieri et al. (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013) developed the Social Media Use Integration Scale

(SMUIS). This scale measures two dimensions: social integration and emotional connection – the extent to which social media use is tied to one’s social relationships and emotional experiences – and integration into social routines, reflecting how embedded these platforms are in everyday activities. High integration tends to produce passive and repetitive exposure patterns, meaning users are more likely to encounter algorithmically curated or homogenous content rather than actively seeking diverse perspectives. Thus, habitual media use contributes to patterned exposure that can reinforce existing beliefs and shape perceptions of credibility and trust in news.

Individual differences in information processing motivation also influence how people evaluate and trust news. The concept of Need for Cognition (NFC), introduced by Cacioppo and Petty (Cacioppo, Petty, 1982), refers to a person’s tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activities such as analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting on information. Individuals high in NFC are more likely to critically assess media content rather than accept it at face value. Similarly, measures such as the News Media Literacy Scale assess awareness of journalistic processes, recognition of bias, and understanding of how media messages are constructed. Together, these cognitive and literacy-related traits are associated with lower levels of blind trust in media, as analytically minded individuals tend to scrutinize news sources, question credibility, and recognize potential bias or manipulation. However, such critical engagement can also promote more informed and conditional trust, grounded in evaluation rather than passive acceptance.

The relationship between audiences and information credibility is shaped by the type of forum through which news is encountered – whether traditional news outlets or social media platforms. News organizations are typically associated with professional journalistic norms, while social media integrates user-generated content and algorithmic curation that can obscure editorial accountability. This distinction affects how users perceive reliability and fairness. Simultaneously, perceived media bias (Lee, 2005) plays a critical role in shaping trust. When individuals believe that either platforms or news outlets exhibit ideological leanings, they tend to evaluate content as less objective and less credible. This erosion of trust in news (Kohring, Matthes, 2007) reflects broader concerns about fairness and transparency in information environments.

#### 4. Results

Participants reported high levels of engagement with news content. A total of 182 participants, representing 77.4 % of the sample, agreed or strongly agreed that they use the news to stay informed about current events. Similarly, 179 participants, or 76.2 %, agreed or strongly agreed that they read or watch the news to understand what is happening in the world. Additionally, 169 participants, representing 71.9 % of the sample, agreed or strongly agreed that following the news makes them feel like a well-informed person.

Algorithmic awareness was notably strong. One hundred ninety-seven participants (83.8 %), agreed or strongly agreed that algorithms determine which posts they see on social media platforms. One hundred ninety-one participants (81.3 %) recognized that their past clicks, likes, or shares influence the content they encounter. A total of 162 participants (68.9 %), agreed or strongly agreed that algorithms may present biased information. In addition, 172 participants (73.2 %), agreed that algorithms should be more transparent about how content is selected and prioritized.

Composite trust scores were calculated by averaging six trust-related items for each video clip. Higher scores reflected greater perceived trust. For the traditional news clip, the mean trust score was 3.47 with a standard deviation of 0.84. For the social media clip, the mean trust score was 3.48 with a standard deviation of 0.88. A t-test conducted among participants with complete data for both clips indicated no statistically significant difference between trust in the traditional news clip and trust in the social media clip,  $t(164) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .93$ .

Despite similar composite scores, item-level analyses revealed meaningful differences. For the traditional news clip, 136 participants (58.0 %), agreed or strongly agreed that the clip felt reliable and accurate. Additionally, 143 participants (60.9 %), agreed or strongly agreed that the use of sources or experts made the clip more trustworthy. In contrast, only 99 participants (42.1 %), agreed or strongly agreed that the social media clip provided an accurate picture of the situation. Furthermore, 160 participants (68.1 %) agreed or strongly agreed that they are more likely to question information encountered on social media.

##### Platform Comparisons and Perceived Credibility

When asked to directly compare platforms, participants expressed a clear preference for traditional news formats. A total of 131 participants (55.6 %) indicated that the traditional news

clip felt more trustworthy overall. In comparison, 43 participants (18.2 %) selected the social media clip as more trustworthy. Forty-six participants (19.4 %), reported trusting both clips equally, while 16 participants (6.8 %), indicated that neither clip felt trustworthy.

Similarly, 134 participants (57.1 %), reported that the traditional news clip gave them greater confidence in the information presented, whereas 40 participants (16.9 %), selected the social media clip. Nearly two-thirds of the sample, 151 participants (64.3 %), indicated that the platform itself affected how much they trusted the story.

Stylistic features were particularly influential in evaluations of social media content. A total of 169 participants (71.9 %), agreed or strongly agreed that tone, style, or pacing affected how much they trusted the social media clip. Additionally, 162 participants (68.9 %), agreed or strongly agreed that the person or voice delivering the message influenced their trust judgments.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study examine how platform context shapes trust judgments. Participants demonstrated high levels of engagement with news and strong awareness of algorithmic curation, yet their trust evaluations revealed important tensions between media literacy and media reliance.

One of the most noteworthy findings is the apparent paradox between algorithmic awareness and continued engagement. A substantial majority of participants recognized that algorithms determine content visibility, may introduce bias, and are not fully transparent. These findings align with prior research suggesting that users are increasingly aware of platform mechanisms but lack practical alternatives to algorithmically curated environments, particularly when social media serves as a primary gateway to news exposure (Bucher, 2018; Eslami et al., 2015).

The absence of a statistically significant difference between composite trust scores for traditional news and social media clips is also theoretically meaningful. While participants ultimately expressed greater confidence in traditional news when making direct comparisons, the similarity in overall trust ratings suggests that social media content may be approaching parity with traditional news in perceived credibility at an aggregate level.

At the same time, item-level analyses and forced choice comparisons revealed a clear and consistent preference for traditional news sources. Participants were more likely to trust traditional news, report greater confidence in its accuracy, and view it as more reliable overall. These findings align with demonstrating the continued authority of institutional news media, particularly when cues such as expert sources, formal presentation, and professional norms are present (Johnson, Kaye, 2015).

The salience of stylistic and presentational features in evaluations of social media content further highlights the role of mediated message design in shaping credibility perceptions. Participants reported that tone, pacing, and the presence of a visible speaker strongly influenced how much they trusted social media videos. This finding supports research on social presence and mediated authenticity, suggesting that personalization and relational cues can enhance engagement while simultaneously complicating credibility assessments. This raises important questions about how effective appeals and perceived relatability may substitute for traditional credibility markers in digital environments.

The results suggest that students are not passive or uninformed media consumers but rather critically aware participants operating within constrained media ecosystems. Instructional efforts may benefit from moving beyond awareness-based interventions toward strategies that emphasize comparative evaluation, platform-specific norms, and the communicative consequences of algorithmic design. Additionally, the findings point to the need for continued research that examines trust as a situational and platform-contingent construct rather than a stable individual trait.

By empirically demonstrating how college students negotiate trust across traditional and social media contexts, this study contributes to ongoing conversations in communication studies about credibility, media convergence, and the evolving relationship between audiences and news institutions. The results highlight the continued relevance of trust research while also pointing toward new theoretical and practical challenges posed by algorithmically curated media environments.

This study investigated whether different components, such as various media platforms, algorithm awareness, and self-efficacy, affect college-aged students' trust in news situations. There are two main findings: first, evidence shows that college-age students are more aware of algorithms than previously thought. Secondly, more students preferred traditional news forums over social

media news forums. These findings have significant implications on today's society, as this changes a stigma that students are unaware of the media they consume and why they consume it. While this study tends to focus on college-age students' trust in news situations based on the forum, future research should explore how this will affect news media in the future (Bucher, 2018).

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