News Credibility on Facebook: The Role of Media and Intermediary Trust and Their Interplay

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On social network sites, news media have lost their dominance as news sources, as individual actors (family members, friends) play the role of news intermediaries. Since determining a news source and its trustworthiness is central to attributing news credibility, the distinction between institutional and individual news sources is crucial for audience members. Current research offers only partial and conflicting conclusions about the influence of source trust on news credibility. This experimental study (N = 702 2 × 3 between-subjects design) uses a customized environment simulating a Facebook Timeline to examine whether and how institutional trust in news media and interpersonal trust in news intermediaries contribute to news credibility. Using two-way analysis of covariance and two one-sided t-tests, we found only a small effect of media trust, while interpersonal trust and its combination with news media trust showed no effect. We discuss the implications of news consumption mechanisms on social network sites and their impact on informedness.

Keywords: news credibility, media trust, interpersonal trust, Facebook, experiment, ANCOVA

The functioning of democratic societies depends on credible news, which guides citizens' actions (Ryfe, 2019) and maintains a shared sense of reality (Coleman, 2012). News credibility is established through interaction with content (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009) but is also linked to trust in news sources (van Dalen, 2019), which reduces the need to scrutinize each news piece (Rosanvallon, 2008; van Dalen, 2019).

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Today, news sources include media outlets, digital intermediaries (e.g., news aggregators and social media algorithms), and human intermediaries, such as friends, family, and influencers (Foster, 2012; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024).

For news audiences on social network sites (SNS), particularly Facebook (Newman et al., 2021), media institutions (e.g., news outlets) are accompanied by individual intermediaries ("friends"). This decentralizes the gatekeeping process (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Wallace, 2018), making news more social (Wallace, 2018). Individual intermediaries share news with "friends," often framing it with personal opinions (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) thereby contributing to its curation and contextualization (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). These intermediaries partially assume roles traditionally held by media professionals, shaping curated news flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Since identifying the source is key to assessing news source trustworthiness and thus news credibility (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Sundar, 2008), the "layered" perceptual situation (Jang, 2021), created by the simultaneous presence of media outlets and intermediaries during reposting, can complicate source attribution (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020).

Existing studies indicate a positive influence of general trust in the media on Facebook news credibility (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Other research presents conflicting evidence regarding the effect of trust in news media, while the intermediary effect remains unclear, having been examined through factors such as the (dis)agreement of other Facebook users' comments or the social proximity of an "FB friend" (Kim, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020). The important role of trust in intermediaries on SNS news, however, has recently been identified (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). Sterrett et al. (2019) examine the effect of trust in both the news medium and the individual (public figure) intermediary, showing that the latter positively influences news credibility—a finding that contrasts with the evidence provided by Tandoc (2019).

We build on the aforementioned studies and enhance the investigation by exploring the main and interactive effects of trust in both the news media outlet and the intermediary, acknowledging these as distinct types of trust. Consequently, we avoid relying on indirect measures of the relationship to the intermediary, such as social proximity. Furthermore, participants were exposed to actual media outlets and intermediary individuals, enabling us to address conflicting evidence regarding the interplay between media and intermediary trust/credibility in shaping news credibility.

Consequently, this experimental study aims to determine whether and how the credibility of news consumed on Facebook is influenced by institutional trust (trust in the media outlet), interpersonal trust (trust in the person sharing the news), and their combination.

News Credibility and Institutional Trust in News Media

Credibility influences behavior (Hu & Sundar, 2010), opinion formation (Metzger, 2007), and news engagement (Keib & Wojdynski, 2019), making it central to understanding information persuasion. Source credibility is often defined as (a consequence of) source expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis, &

Kelley, 1953); message (content) credibility is most often conceptualized as believability, namely truthfulness or accuracy, meaning the reliability and verifiability of the information (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Fawzi et al., 2021; Meyer, 1988; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019). In the online environment, the perceived range and depth of information referred to as the "coverage" aspect of credibility also proved to be important (Metzger, 2007). We focus on these two dimensions of credibility.

Evaluating news credibility on a case-by-case basis is inefficient and demanding (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019), so audiences often rely on trust in media as professional organizations responsible for producing and disseminating news (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024). Media trust is currently (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020) understood as a relationship to news media stemming from one's expectations regarding the reliability and correctness of media performance. Here reliability and correctness refer to the dominant professional norms of objectivity (factuality and impartiality) and independence (Knudsen, Dahlberg, Iversen, Johannesson, & Nygaard, 2021; Wien, 2005). Due to the inherent opacity of news media, media trust is always based on "knowing and not knowing" (Simmel, 1964)—it is inherently risky and places the trustor in a vulnerable position relative to the trustee (Fawzi et al., 2021).

While often conflated, credibility and trust are distinct. While credibility is an attributed feature and its evaluation refers to a present or past state, trust refers to the expectation of (someone) performance. Trust is rooted in the awareness of someone's intention or action. Therefore, trust is more appropriately placed in individuals (e.g., journalists) or institutions (e.g., media organizations or specific outlets). By contrast, news content is evaluated based on its credibility (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Importantly, in a high-choice media environment, people tend to have specific news media repertoires—they do not consume (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, & Kondor, 2022) and trust all media equally (Daniller, Allen, Tallevi, & Mutz, 2017). Trust in news outlets functions as an "institutional economizer," simplifying credibility evaluations by reducing the need to assess each piece of news individually (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). Perceiving media in general—or a specific media outlet—as trustworthy is positively associated with the perceived credibility of news (Kang, Bae, Zhang, & Sundar, 2011; Primig, 2022; Tandoc, 2019; Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), the quality of Facebook posts featuring news articles (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020), and their credibility (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020).

However, focusing on distrust in a media outlet is equally important because distrust is a functional counterpart to trust in the economizer function (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Luhmann, 1979). Distrust simplifies media navigation by guiding decisions to avoid, limit consumption, find alternative sources, or treat them as unreliable (Garusi & Splendore, 2023; Schwarzenegger, 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Thus, distrust is increasingly recognized as an active negative attitude toward the media, not merely the absence of trust. The discussion centers on whether distrust in media is simply a negation of trust or a distinct construct based on different antecedents and outcomes (Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Since this study works with mainstream professional media that share the basic normative performance assumptions (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019), we define media distrust as a negative counterpart of trust in media. It is a relationship based on the perceived nonfulfillment of expectations regarding objectivity (factuality and impartiality) and independence of a news media outlet. While the lack

of news content credibility may cause distrust in the media (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019), the reverse effect has not been directly examined. However, evidence suggests that media distrust triggers a need to verify news content or reject it entirely (Ahmed, 2023; Nelson & Lewis, 2023). This likely results in a loss of news credibility.

We expect that news credibility is primarily linked (through the main effect) to trust and distrust in news media, and so:

H1:   *There will be a positive effect of the most trusted news media outlet and a simultaneous negative effect of the most distrusted media outlet on news content credibility.*

News Credibility and Trust in Individual Intermediaries

Audiences' attitudes toward news are influenced by their social connections, who act as gatekeepers and "individual economizers" by sharing and recontextualizing news on SNS (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Hermida, Fletcher, Korrell, & Logan, 2011). The relationship between news credibility and interpersonal trust remains unclear, despite interpersonal trust being foundational to more general forms of trust (in expert systems and people in general; Sztompka, 1999) and critical for social and economic development (Kwon, 2019). Interpersonal trust is rooted in familiarity with specific individuals in our social network (Newton & Zmerli, 2011). Therefore, it is also called particular (social) trust, contrasting with generalized trust, which reflects positive expectations toward most people (Shabahang, Aruguete, & Shim, 2021). Media (outlets) trust, in contrast, refers to formal organizations and their expert knowledge and practices (Giddens, 1990; Kwon, 2019). Finally, opinion leadership stems from an individual's perceived knowledge of a topic, alongside their influence on opinions or attitudes (Jungnickel, 2018).

Interpersonal trust is a relationship drawing on the expectation of the trustee's benevolence (acting in the trustor's interest with goodwill) and integrity (adherence to moral norms such as honesty and virtue; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). Other dimensions, such as competence (the ability and power to act in the expected way) and predictivity or concern (empathy, tolerance, and care), are also discussed in the literature (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). This study focuses on benevolence and integrity as core aspects of interpersonal trust (Potter, 2019) as the competence dimension aligns more closely with expertise, which is inherent to institutional trust and opinion leadership.

News intermediaries can influence perceived news content credibility (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). Sterrett et al. (2019) concluded that trust in individual news intermediaries is a stronger predictor of trust in news content than trust in media. Tandoc, Huang, Duffy, Ling, and Kim (2020) argued that trust in an individual's SNS "friends" increases trust in shared news content.

Platforms like Facebook help to cultivate both strong and weak preexisting ties, typically grounded in trust and social and psychological homogeneity (Cargnino & Neubaum, 2019; Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015; Lönnqvist & Itkonen, 2016; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). We do not expect that individuals commonly maintain Facebook friendships characterized by distrust, as interpersonal trust is crucial for forming ties

here (Gashi & Knautz, 2016). Thus, we expect that interpersonal trust in FB "friends" exists on a continuum, ranging from high to low levels.

Consequently, we hypothesize that the credibility of news content is connected primarily (through the main effect) with news intermediary trust:

H2:   *There will be a positive effect of a highly trusted intermediary on news content credibility, whereas a low-trusted intermediary will have a simultaneous negative effect.*

News Credibility and Diffusion of Trusts

In online environments, content recirculation complicates authorship attribution and thus challenges the evaluation of news credibility, where source identity is crucial (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Content sharing and reframing on SNS (Burgess, Marwick, & Poell, 2018) further obscures credibility assessment through authorship layering. The mechanism of interplay between news outlet trust and intermediary trust remains unclear in terms of its impact on credibility evaluation.

Drawing on trust theory and limited empirical evidence, we identify two combined effects of these two forms of trust (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Simon, 2019).

According to the system theory of trust (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979), institutional and interpersonal trust are ontologically distinct yet functionally interconnected, particularly in the context of layered authorship.

Both types of trust reduce uncertainty, complexity, and the need for personal case-by-case verification, functioning as two distinct "economizers" (Coleman, Morrison, & Anthony, 2012). Institutional trust, though largely impersonal ("faceless"), includes a personalized facet ("facework") influenced by interactions with specific representatives of expert systems—"access points" like individual journalists. These access points provide tangible representations of abstract systems, shaping trust positively or negatively (Giddens, 1990).

In layered authorship situations, news credibility is influenced both institutionally, through media outlet visibility, and socially, through trusted "friends" as access points to news media. These friends affect credibility via their perceived benevolence and moral integrity. This interplay of institutional and interpersonal trust produces two types of mutual effects, each with two variations.

First there is the *amplification effect*. Although Sterrett et al. (2019) found no interaction between the two types of trust regarding perceived content credibility, from a theoretical perspective, it makes sense to examine the impact of both positive and negative congruence of trust. We hypothesize a mutually reinforcing (interaction) effect between both types of trust, and a symmetric situation for distrust and low trust:

H3:   *News content credibility will be highest for the most trusted news media outlet, mediated by a highly trusted intermediary.*

H4:   *News content credibility will be lowest for the most distrusted news media outlet, mediated by a low-trusted intermediary.*

Second, there is the *substitution effect*. It occurs when institutional and interpersonal trust are incongruent, that is, when distrust in a media outlet contrasts with high interpersonal trust, and vice versa. Low trust or distrust in a media outlet may lead individuals to seek alternative news sources (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010) or rely on SNS news intermediaries (Coleman et al., 2012). Thus, we assume that the two types of trust substitute each other in two ways.

On the one hand, low intermediary trust can be substituted by high news media outlet trust (*media substitution*). A friend who fails to meet expectations of interpersonal trust can be substituted by a reliable institution that employs processes that reduce individual failures (Luhmann, 1979). As Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020) suggest (under high involvement), the news content retains the same level of trust whether it comes from a friend perceived as close or distant, as long as it comes from a trusted medium.

On the other hand, distrust in news media outlets can be substituted by increased intermediary trust (*personal substitution*). A media outlet may fail to function properly due to dysfunctional or nontransparent expert processes, but trusted individuals can "guarantee" credibility, as Nelson and Lewis (2023) suggest. Sterrett et al. (2019) found that trust in an intermediary nullifies the effect of trust in the media, while Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020) concluded that news content from a distrusted outlet shared by a close friend has higher credibility than content from a trusted outlet shared by a distant friend.

We formulated hypotheses for both trust substitution effects:

H5:   *The credibility of news content from a most trusted news media outlet mediated by a low-trusted intermediary will not significantly differ from the credibility of news content from a most trusted news media outlet.*

H6:   *The credibility of news content from the most distrusted news media outlet mediated by a high-trusted intermediary will not significantly differ from news content from the most trusted news media outlet.*

Methods

Sample

Data were collected from September 13 to October 31, 2021, through an online 2 × 3 between-subjects quasi-experimental survey (MacLin, 2020) using Qualtrics. The sample consisted of adult (18+)

students from Masaryk University in Czechia who were Facebook users—the most popular social network for news consumption in Czechia and worldwide (Newman et al., 2021). Students were recruited via leaflets, Facebook groups, and a call for participation on the university's information system dashboard. The study was approved by the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee (approval number EKV-2020-123). Informed consent was required for participation. Participants who completed the procedure were entered into a cash prize draw (3 × 3000 CZK ≈ 120€; 83 × 1000 CZK ≈ 40€). The sample consists of 702 participants (Gender: 64.9% female, 0.7% nonbinary; Age: $M = 22.44$ $SD = 3.42$; Study program: 52.3% bachelor, 43% master, 3.8% doctoral, and 0.9% lifelong learning).

Procedure

First, participants answered sociodemographic questions and provided information about their Facebook usage to meet inclusion criteria.

Since the experiment tests differences in the credibility of news content based on the source (trusted vs. distrusted news outlet) and the intermediary (high- vs. low-trusted), it was necessary to identify which media outlets each participant perceived as trusted or distrusted and the names of their high- and low-trusted Facebook friends.

Each participant indicated whether anyone among their Facebook "friends" (or users they followed) shared or made news available to them, and whether they clicked on any of these articles. If so, participants listed up to five of these Facebook usernames. Then, each intermediary was evaluated on a measure of interpersonal trust (see Measures section). The scale values were automatically recoded as high (score >3), moderate (score = 3), and low (score <3) by a background script. The script also compared scale values to identify and assign the most trusted and least trusted intermediary name for each participant.

Participants then answered questions about some of the control variables.

Next, they selected up to two news outlets they considered personally important from a list of 22 Czech professional mainstream media outlets (Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, 2018)[3] and evaluated each on measure of trust in news media. Then, from the same list, they indicated up to two outlets they avoided as sources of news and information (different from those selected as trusted) and evaluated each on the measure of distrust in news media. A script compared the trust scores and assigned the most trusted outlet to each participant. Similarly, the distrust scores were compared to assign the most distrusted outlet.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental groups: (1) Trusted media outlet + no intermediary (M+Int0); (2) Distrusted media outlet + no intermediary (M−Int0); (3) Trusted media outlet + high-trusted intermediary (M+Int+); (4) Trusted media outlet + low-trusted intermediary

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[3] The channels of television stations that produce TV and Web news were added.

(M+Int−); (5) Distrusted media outlet + high-trusted intermediary (M−Int+); (6) Distrusted media outlet + low-trusted intermediary (M−Int−).

Participants in groups 1 and 2 (no intermediary) were shown a screen simulating a Facebook Timeline, with one news article posted by their trusted or distrusted media outlet (see Figure A1 in the Appendix for a description of customized and constant elements).[4]

Participants in the groups with intermediaries (3, 4, 5, and 6) evaluated high-/low-trusted intermediaries on their opinion leadership and competence.

To improve internal validity, participants were asked to write down any characteristic that best described the intermediary.

Next, they were shown a screen simulating a Facebook Timeline, with one news article from their most trusted or most distrusted media outlet shared by the high-/low-trusted intermediary (see Figure A2 in the Appendix for a description of customized and constant elements).

All participants were instructed before displaying the news post: "Please look at this Facebook news post and click 'Next' to open the post and view the actual news article, stripped of unnecessary graphical components for technical reasons."

Subsequently, participants were shown the news article (see Figure A3 in the Appendix). Originally published by the Czech public service television's news portal, the article was customized—the header corresponds to the participant's dis/trusted media outlet. It reported on a planned health campaign to reduce cardiovascular disease mortality and was signed by a nonexistent journalist. To improve internal validity, the topic was chosen for its general relevance and non-polarizing nature. After reading the article, participants evaluated its credibility and relevance on relative scales.

Measures

Manipulation Variables

Trust and Distrust in News Media

Measures (Smejkal, Macek, Slavík, & Šerek, 2024) draw on participants' evaluations of news media outlet un/reliability in terms of normative professionalism: objectivity, that is, factuality, impartiality, and independence. Trust was assessed for up to two news media outlets considered by participants as important sources of news and information, while distrust was assessed for up to two news media outlets avoided as such sources. The answers employ a 5-point scale ranging from "absolutely disagree" (5) to "absolutely agree" (1) as well as the following scales. Both 3-item measures evince composite reliability (trust in media

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[4] Due to its robustness, the appendix is stored in external storage. Please visit https://osf.io/y95nk/?view_only=6b3a08feac6745f0851f220948745ffe

ω= .899; distrust in media ω = .724) and average variance extracted (*AVE*; trust in media *AVE*: .747; distrust in media *AVE*: .467). The wording adaptation illustration of all measures is presented in the Appendix (see Table A2).

Trust in News Intermediaries

A measure of trusting beliefs in technological agents (Vance, Elie-Dit-Cosaque, & Straub, 2008) was adapted to assess trust in individual trustees, focusing on the dimensions of benevolence, integrity, and competence. It has been used for the same purpose (Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). We used only benevolence and integrity items (see above), considering the measure as a latent second-order factor (see Whang & Im, 2018). The measure evinces satisfactory composite reliability (benevolence ω = .889; integrity ω = .911) and AVEs (benevolence *AVE*: .728; integrity *AVE*: .719) for first-order factors as well as second-order one (ω = .877).

Dependent Variables

News Article Credibility

We used an adapted measure of trust in media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), which aligns with the broader concept of content credibility by focusing on perceptions of news coverage. The accuracy of depictions dimension reflects information believability, while the selectivity of topics and the selectivity of fact dimensions address the perceived range and depth of information. This measure overcomes theoretical and validity deficiencies in adjective-based approaches (see Kohring, 2004; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & Mccann, 2003; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The selectivity of topics dimension was excluded as inapplicable. During adaptation, the wording of one question and items was adjusted to better focus on news article content. The validation study supported the use of a single second-order latent factor (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) verified the hierarchical factor structure, satisfactory composite reliability (ω = .817), *AVE*, and measurement invariance (configural, metric, scalar). Further details on psychometric properties are provided in the Appendix.

Control Variables

The propensity to trust (Frazier, Johnson, & Fainshmidt, 2013) measure was used to control for the general tendency to trust others, which may influence media trust (Jackob, 2012). The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .874 for 4 items) and *AVE* (.634).

Relevance of the news known to impact credibility evaluations (Chung, 2017), was controlled for in the analysis. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .837 for 3 items) and *AVE* (.633).

Intermediaries' opinion leadership can amplify the effect of media trust on willingness to consume news from this source (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015); therefore, this effect was controlled for. The measure enables the assessment of opinion leadership in relation to a specific individual (Jungnickel,

2018). A third item was added to address a reliability issue. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .845 for 3 items) and *AVE* (.652).

Intermediaries' competence was assessed using an adapted measure to evaluate their influence in the context of Facebook news sharing. The competence dimension items of McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar's (2002) trusting beliefs measure were used. The wording was adjusted to measure the competence of a specific individual. The measure evinces composite reliability (ω = .866 for 4 items) and *AVE* (.620).

Analysis

The factor structures of all scales were verified with CFAs (see Table A1 in the Appendix). In addition, composite reliability was verified using McDonald's omega, which, unlike Cronbach's alpha, does not require the assumption of tau-equivalence (Hayes & Coutts, 2020). The average variance extracted was also verified (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2024). Furthermore, measurement invariance of the News Article Credibility scale across experimental conditions (i.e., trusted vs. distrusted medium and intermediary vs. non-intermediary conditions) via a set of subsequently restricted multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA) was also verified. The criteria proposed for configural models (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and for metric and scalar invariance (Chen, 2007) were used.

The differences between experimental conditions were verified using a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with media outlet (trusted vs. distrusted) and intermediary (none, high-trusted, and low-trusted) as between-subjects factors (i.e., 2 × 3 design) and with three covariates (propensity to trust, news relevance, and intermediaries' competence). Intermediaries' opinion leadership was not used because of its lack of association with the outcome (see Table A3 in the Appendix). Since sample sizes of experimental conditions were highly unbalanced,[5] we used Type III to estimate sums of squares (i.e., partial sums of squares). Before the main analysis, assumptions of ANCOVA were tested.

Given that our sample is strongly skewed toward young women, who in some countries tend to consume less news (see Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), the main analysis (H1–H4) was repeated with gender as a covariate as a robustness check. This is reported in the Appendix.

The last two hypotheses (H5 and H6) were verified via equivalence tests: two one-sided t-tests (TOST; Lakens, 2017). Given prior evidence (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020) indicating a very small effect size (d = −0.16), we specified upper (ΔU) and lower (ΔL) equivalence bounds based on the smallest effect size of interest (Lakens, Scheel, & Isager, 2018) to d = −.20 and d = .20, which is equivalent to weak effect size.

All analyses were done in R (v4.1.2), packages car (v3.0–12), rstatix (v.0.7.0), sjstats (v0.18.1), TOSTER (v0.4.1), emmeans (v1.7.2), lavaan (v0.6–9), and semTools (v0.5–5).

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[5] See the Discussion section.

Results

We found that participants in trusted media conditions perceived slightly higher news credibility than those in distrusted media conditions. The high-trusted intermediary also showed higher credibility than the low-trusted one in trusted media outlet conditions (but surprisingly, the opposite difference was found for distrusted media conditions). The complete descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and News Article Credibility Mean Difference Across Experimental Conditions.

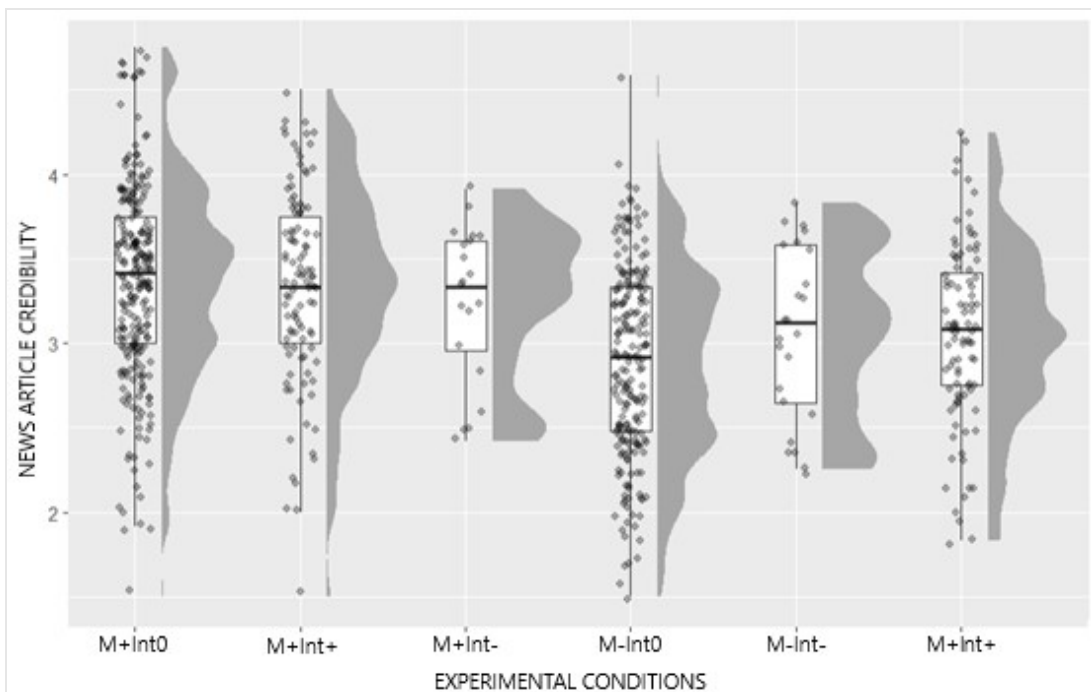| Condition	N	M [95% CI]	SD
M+Int+	105	3.345 [3.233, 3.457]	0.577
M+Int−	20	3.250 [3.031, 3.469]	0.467
M+Int0	246	3.357 [3.284, 3.430]	0.583
M−Int+	93	3.047 [2.938, 3.156]	0.529
M−Int−	24	3.059 [2.842, 3.276]	0.515
M−Int0	208	2.881 [2.804, 2.958]	0.563

Figure 1. Box plots and distributions visualized via rain cloud plots.

The two-way ANCOVA was applied to analyze whether these differences are statistically significant. Before the main analysis, the assumptions of ANCOVA were verified and met (see Table A3 in the Appendix), so no robust or nonparametric approach was necessary.

We analyzed the main effects of the media outlet and intermediary, as well as their interaction, on the News Article Credibility measure, controlling for propensity to trust, news relevance, and intermediaries' competence. The main effect of the media outlet was statistically significant with a small effect size, $F(1, 235) = 12.495$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2 = .044$. Since this factor contains two groups, post hoc tests are not needed. Participants in the trusted media outlet condition (*EMM* = 3.32 [95% *CI*: 3.19, 3.45], *SE* = .066) reported higher perceived credibility than their counterparts in the distrusted media outlet condition (*EMM* = 3.06 [5% *CI*: 2.94, 3.18], *SE* = .062; see Figure 2). The H1 was therefore supported.
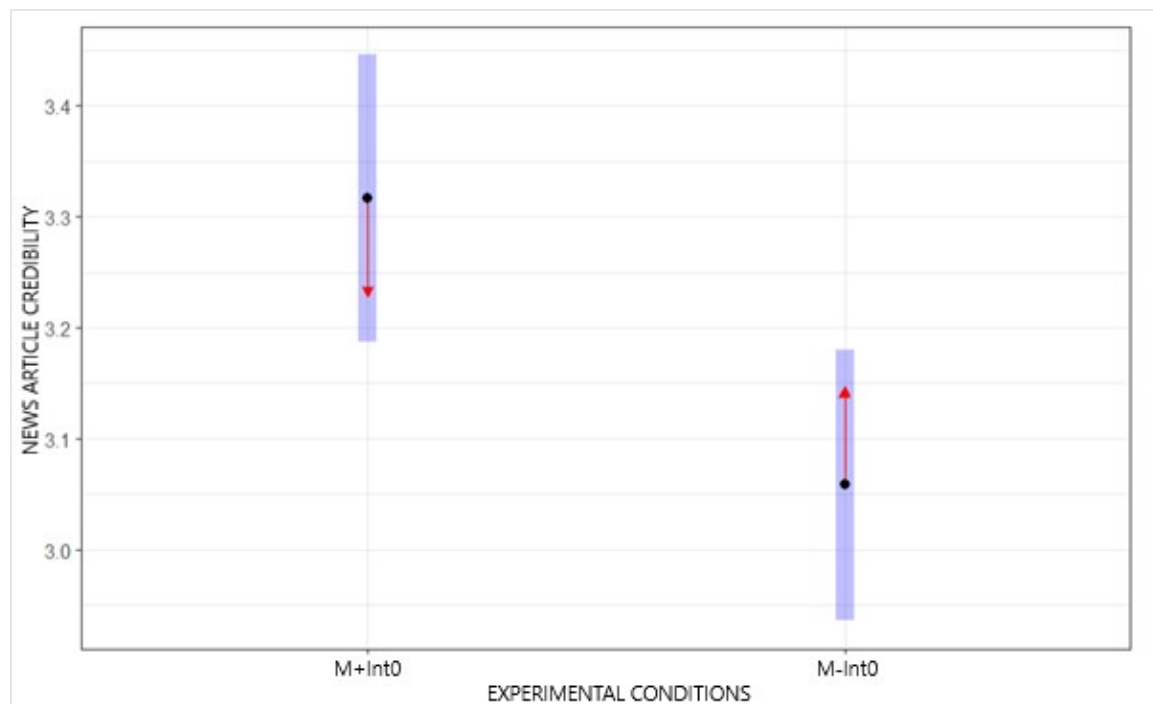

Figure 2. Difference between trusted and distrusted media conditions.

The main effect of the intermediary was not statistically significant, $F(1, 235) = 0.019$, $p = .891$, $\omega^2 = -.004$. No differences in high-trusted and low-trusted intermediary conditions were identified; the H2 was therefore not supported.

The media outlet and intermediary interaction effect was also not statistically significant; $F(1, 235) = 0.017$, $p = .897$, $\omega^2 = -.004$. Therefore, H3 and H4 were not supported.

Finally, the differences between M+Int– and M+Int0 and M–Int+ and M+Int0 were verified via TOST. For the difference between M+Int– and M+Int0, the traditional t-test was insignificant, $t(23.97) = 0.987$, $p = .333$. TOST for lower bound was significant, $t(23.97) = 1.93$, $p = .032$, but for upper bound insignificant, $t(23.97) = 0.040$, $p = .516$. Since the results of traditional null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) and TOST are inconclusive, H5 was not supported. For the difference between M–Int+ and M+Int0,

the traditional t-test was significant, $t(180.29) = 4.680$, $p < .001$. TOST for lower bound was significant, $t(180.29) = 6.36$, $p < .001$, but for upper bound insignificant, $t(180.29) = 3.00$, $p = .998$. Consequently, we cannot conclude that both groups are equivalent. Yet NHST suggested a statistically significant difference between them. Thus, H6 was not supported either.

Discussion

Our experimental study of Facebook news consumers contributes to the ongoing debate on how trust in news media and trust in individual news intermediaries influence perceptions of news credibility. In the context of SNS "layered" perceptual situations (Jang, 2021)—where institutional sources (e.g., news outlets) and individual sources (e.g., other SNS users) merge into a unified phenomenological-perceptual framework—represent credibility attribution, a critical aspect of news consumption.

In line with Oeldorf-Hirsch and DeVoss (2020), we found that news from trusted outlets is perceived as more credible than from distrusted ones, although the effect size is surprisingly small. Consistent with Tandoc (2019), our findings also show that institutional trust has a greater impact on news credibility than interpersonal trust, while trust in intermediaries does not influence perceived credibility. We observed no main effect of trust in intermediaries, nor its amplification or substitution effect on the relationship between (dis)trust in news outlets and credibility. This contradicts findings suggesting a parallel or even dominant intermediary effect (Sterrett et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2019). Conversely, our findings align with those of Zimmermann, Klee, and Kaspar (2023) regarding Instagram, where no difference was found in the perceived credibility of news from media outlets compared to influencers. In our case, neither institutional nor interpersonal trust functions as an effective economizer of news credibility attribution in the SNS environment. Zimmermann et al. (2023) attribute their findings to potential low internal validity because of the use of fictitious sources, whereas we relied on participants' actual sources. Therefore, we propose different explanations.

The first one lies in the specifics of news consumption on SNS. Attention to the news source may intensify in certain situations, such as during "news snacking" (Duffy, 2020)—a quick, fragmentary engagement with news where only the headline, media outlet, or intermediary cues inform perceptions of news credibility. As a result, differences in news credibility based on trust in media outlets or intermediaries may become more pronounced when recipients cannot evaluate credibility through the news content itself. Conversely, SNS often serve as a supplementary news source that receives limited attention (Andı, 2021). This reduced focus may weaken awareness of the news source and its trustworthiness. Future research should test this explanation using the systematic-heuristic perception model.

The second explanation may lie in perceptions of the SNS environment. News consumed on SNS platforms has long been associated with low credibility (Newman et al., 2021). The mere presence of news on Facebook reduces the influence of source credibility on its approval (Jang, 2021). Default skepticism toward this environment may lead users to assess news credibility primarily based on content characteristics when possible. Our findings suggest that the lack of an economizing function of institutional or interpersonal trust in shaping news credibility on Facebook may indicate that content characteristics play a more significant role than expected (see Ou & Ho, 2024; Zimmermann et al., 2023). This phenomenon has mixed

implications. On the positive side, it may reduce the risk of misattributing credibility (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), and strengthen audiences' information competencies (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Ultimately, sharing news on Facebook may then increase trust in media (Turcotte et al., 2015). However, one-by-one evaluations of credibility can impose significant cognitive burdens, potentially leading to news avoidance and disengagement from public affairs (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). This underscores the need to seek ways to foster a productive role for institutional and interpersonal trust in attributing news credibility.

This potential platform skepticism may have a theoretical implication for interpersonal trust. Unlike Sterrett's et al.'s (2019) study of public figures, our study of "common Facebook friends"—where interpersonal trust would seemingly be more relevant because of familiarity—found no effect on content perception. This raises the question of whether Sterrett's findings could not have been influenced by opinion leadership intervention, which was controlled for in our case. It is worth investigating the extent to which the concept of interpersonal trust applies to the informational influence of "high-profile" individuals, and why it appears ineffective in contexts involving "common SNS friends." This is particularly relevant given that SNS users indicate that they turn to trusted contacts when they do not trust the media (Nelson & Lewis, 2023).

The third explanation pertains to the set of limitations of our study. Since our participants were university students, the findings may be specific to this nonrepresentative sample. Younger individuals and those with higher education levels (as in our sample) are more likely to trust professional media (Fawzi et al., 2021; Mangold, Bachl, & Prochazka, 2022) and report higher levels of media literacy (Yates et al., 2020). This may account for both the observed, albeit weak, effect of trust in media and the "reluctance to transfer" interpersonal trust to news credibility. Replication with a more representative population is therefore welcome. Our study prioritized maximizing internal validity by involving participants' actual institutional and individual news sources. However, this methodological strength also imposes limitations. First, the nomination criteria for a news intermediary (a real person and recent exposure to mediated content) may have contributed to unequal saturation across experimental groups. Additionally, homophily and the strength of social ties on SNS (Liu, Rau, & Wendler, 2015) may have limited the availability of low-trusted intermediaries. Both factors could significantly reduce the statistical power needed to detect the typically small effects in experimental research (Ou & Ho, 2024). Future studies should consider using less restrictive criteria for intermediary nomination. Finally, friend-mediated news may not have been perceived as authentic despite our efforts. Shared news often originates from alternative sources and is typically thematically or politically shaped (Zúñiga et al., 2017). Additionally, the topic of a news story—particularly health-related topics—can amplify the effect of source credibility on news credibility. Conversely, audiences' familiarity with a topic can increase skepticism toward SNS news (Ou & Ho, 2024). Replicating our study with thematically diverse news stories would help control for the potential impact of the health topic and allow for a deeper exploration of the mechanisms behind news credibility attribution across different topics.

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