

## Navigating Credibility on TikTok: How Young Adults Evaluate and Verify Information on the Platform

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TikTok has become an important information source for young adults, yet little is known about how they assess the credibility of content encountered on the platform. This study builds on a combination of a 7-day diary study with semistructured qualitative interviews with 46 young adults (aged 18–24), providing nuanced insights into credibility assessments during everyday platform use. The findings reveal that participants are generally skeptical of TikTok’s overall credibility, but rely heavily on source authority as a heuristic for judging individual posts. Message characteristics play largely supportive roles, as TikTok’s affordances—particularly its entertainment orientation and aesthetics—make many cues ambiguous. Participants predominantly employ internal verification strategies, drawing on their own knowledge and intuition, and use external strategies only occasionally, mainly by checking on-platform comment sections. Our findings challenge the applicability of traditional credibility models and demonstrate the importance of considering platform affordances when studying credibility assessments.

*Keywords: credibility, information use, interview study, media diaries, TikTok, young adults*

Social media platforms have become central to accessing and engaging with information, with the short-form video-sharing platform TikTok emerging as a particularly influential player in this landscape, especially among young adults. Recent data show that substantial portions of young audiences now use TikTok to stay informed about current events and societal issues (Newman, Arguedas, Robertson, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2025; Tomasik & Matsa, 2025). This shift in information use patterns raises important questions about how young adults navigate and evaluate the information they encounter in this unique digital space.

However, TikTok’s rise as an information source coincides with growing concerns about the prevalence of misinformation on the platform. Studies have documented the widespread circulation of false and misleading content across various topics, from health advice to political discourse (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024; Yang, Li, Terán, Choi, & Choi, 2024). These concerns are amplified by TikTok’s distinctive

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platform affordances—that is, its perceived actual or imagined properties, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual factors, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platform (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, & Batlle Rubio, 2023). They shape information use in ways that differ substantially from other (social) media environments: The platform’s extensive algorithmic curation creates highly personalized content feeds, its emphasis on short-form video prioritizes audiovisual over textual information, and its communicative culture embraces an “ugly aesthetic” (Douglas, 2014, p. 314)—informal, user-generated content featuring colloquial language, trending sounds, and platform-specific genres (e.g., Schellewald, 2021, 2023; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). These affordances fundamentally alter the information environment in which young adults encounter content, potentially influencing how they assess its credibility.

Understanding this is crucial, as credibility perceptions serve as a prerequisite for other media effects, including persuasion and attitude change (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970). Despite this centrality to communication research, surprisingly little scholarship has examined credibility assessments specifically within the TikTok context. While a growing body of research has investigated how social media users more broadly evaluate information credibility (e.g., Borah & Xiao, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Lin, Spence, & Lachlan, 2016), these studies often employ quantitative or experimental designs that isolate individual factors such as source or message characteristics. Such approaches, while valuable for establishing causal relationships, provide limited insight into the nuanced, situated practices through which young adults actually assess credibility during everyday platform use. Moreover, treating social media as a monolithic category overlooks how platform-specific affordances shape users’ credibility assessments and verification strategies. Finally, collapsing findings across age groups risks obscuring the distinctive information practices that characterize young adults, who have developed specific patterns of information seeking, evaluation, and sense making within digital environments (e.g., Duvekot, Valgas, de Haan, & de Jong, 2024; Peters, Schröder, Lehaff, & Vulpius, 2022).

This study addresses these gaps by providing fine-grained, in-depth insights into the factors and strategies that shape young adults’ credibility assessments on TikTok. We employ the messaging app diary approach (Kümpel, 2022), combining mobile self-report data collection with semistructured interviews to capture participants’ experiences with information encountered on the platform. Over seven consecutive days, 46 German young adults (aged 18–24) documented TikTok videos containing political or health-related content from their feeds. Subsequently, we conducted in-depth interviews where participants reflected on their credibility assessments of specific posts and their broader strategies for evaluating information on TikTok. This multimethod approach allows us to examine not only which factors influence credibility perceptions but also how these factors interact and which verification steps users (do not) take.

By centering TikTok’s specific affordances and their influence on credibility assessments, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of information evaluation in contemporary information environments. Our findings challenge traditional credibility models that treat media, message, and source credibility as equally weighted dimensions. Instead, we show that platform affordances create hierarchies among these factors: Some serve as sufficient criteria, while others merely support. Moreover, our results demonstrate the need to account for platform-specific characteristics when theorizing about verification strategies, as affordances and usage contexts shape which approaches users find feasible. These insights

have practical implications for media literacy interventions and information providers seeking to effectively reach young audiences.

### **Information Credibility and Social Media**

Given their centrality to media use and effects, investigating credibility assessments has a long tradition in media and communication research (Hovland et al., 1953; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). In the present study, we focus on the *information* credibility of TikTok posts. Following Roberts (2010), we define information credibility as the extent to which users perceive a post to be believable (p. 45). As this definition highlights, information credibility—or believability (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013)—is not an inherent property of a given stimulus, but rather a subjective perception (Bentele, 1988, p. 408).

#### ***Factors Shaping Credibility Assessments on Social Media***

Against this background, the question arises as to which factors shape users' credibility assessments and how platform affordances influence the salience of these factors. According to the classic literature on credibility, information credibility can be understood as a function of three dimensions: media, message, and source credibility (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & Mccann, 2003; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

#### *Media Credibility*

Media credibility refers to the perceived credibility of the medium through which content is encountered (Metzger et al., 2003; Sundar, 2008), such as newspapers, television, or, in our case, the social media platform TikTok. Research consistently shows that social media are often perceived as less credible than traditional media (e.g., Newman et al., 2025; Swart & Broersma, 2022), largely because of the blurred boundaries between professional and nonprofessional information providers and the sheer abundance of (conflicting) information (Cotter & Thorson, 2022; Swart, 2023).

However, it is unclear whether this pattern holds for young adults, who tend to be more skeptical of traditional mainstream news outlets (see Duvekot et al., 2024, for a review). Additionally, Swart (2023) identified noticeable differences between platforms: While her young participants were generally skeptical of Facebook, many uncritically considered the information they encountered on Instagram as credible.

One explanation for such differences lies in how prevalent users perceive misinformation to be on each platform. On TikTok, users perceive a strong presence of mis- and disinformation, likely undermining its credibility (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024; Lan & Tung, 2024). Some of the platform's affordances, however, may enhance its perceived credibility. For instance, TikTok's high degree of audiovisuality (Anter, 2025) may increase credibility, as visual content tends to be perceived as more credible than text alone (e.g., Gunther, 1988; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). In addition, its algorithmic system may play a role: Many users display high levels of "algorithmic trust" (Schellewald, 2025, p. 5) and perceive TikTok's personalization as accurate and even identity-forming (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2023). Consequently, users might perceive posts as credible merely because the platform's algorithm recommends them.

Nonetheless, there is little dedicated research on TikTok's platform credibility, leaving the precise role it plays in users' assessments of information credibility unclear.

### *Message Credibility*

The credibility of social media posts is also shaped by the characteristics of the message itself, captured by the message credibility dimension (Metzger et al., 2003; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). These characteristics include both the messages' content (e.g., argumentative coherence, use of evidence and sources) and their presentation (e.g., verbal and visual aesthetics, genre; Li & Suh, 2015; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024).

Regarding content, and in line with findings for other media (e.g., Sundar, 1999), coherence, consistency with other information, and the inclusion of sources and evidence enhance the perceived credibility of social media posts (e.g., Millet, Tang, Seelig, petit, & Sun, 2024; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). However, TikTok's affordances potentially discourage creators from including sources and elaborating on their arguments: Captions appear only when users click on them and, moreover, cannot include hyperlinks. Additionally, spatiotemporal boundaries are tight, with most videos being under 60 seconds long (Anter, 2025; Guinaudeau, Munger, & Votta, 2022).

Concerning presentation, users tend to favor posts they perceive as neutral and conveyed in a calm, serious tone (e.g., Li & Suh, 2015; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). However, authenticity within the platform context also matters: Posts that reflect platform-typical aesthetics and genres are often viewed as more credible. For instance, personalization increases credibility on Facebook, whereas users used to favor more impersonal, abstract news styles on Twitter (Houston et al., 2020; Yilmaz & Quintero Johnson, 2016). On TikTok, it thus seems plausible that users perceive posts employing common communicative forms such as humor and memes, or genres such as tutorials and life hacks, as more credible than, for example, conventional news videos repurposed from television (Schellewald, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Finally, research is mixed regarding the influence of social endorsement cues. Some studies suggest that the number of likes, comments, or shares—information that is prominently visible on the TikTok interface—enhances perceived credibility (e.g., Ross Arguedas et al., 2024), while others find these cues to be largely irrelevant (Lin et al., 2016) or influential mainly for authoritative sources (Borah & Xiao, 2018).

### *Source Credibility*

Alongside media and message credibility, users' evaluations of source credibility form a key component of credibility assessments. It refers to the believability of the communicator (Metzger et al., 2003; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Following existing literature, we distinguish between two dimensions of source credibility: authority and identity (Bause, 2021; Metzger et al., 2003; Sundar, 2008).

Source authority refers to the perceived competence, expertise, and reputation of the source. Research on social media shows that authoritative sources—such as familiar legacy news providers—are generally perceived as more credible (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Swart & Broersma, 2022). Similarly,

influencers who appear knowledgeable (e.g., Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019) or health professionals (e.g., Lin et al., 2016) are perceived as more credible, especially when they possess verification badges (Gehrke, Eggers, de Vreese, & Hopmann, 2024; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). Given that these actors are also active on TikTok (e.g., Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024; Li, Guan, Hammond, & Berrey, 2021), young adults likely rely on source authority as a heuristic when evaluating a post's credibility. However, TikTok's audiovisuality also means the video dominates the interface, while source information appears inconspicuously at the bottom (Guinaudeau et al., 2022), potentially making it less accessible for credibility assessments.

Source identity, in turn, refers to users' familiarity with the source and their perceived sociocultural closeness. On many social media platforms, this dimension plays a central role, as users often encounter information shared within their social circles. Studies show that young adults, in particular, tend to perceive information from their peers as credible (e.g., Duvekot et al., 2024; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024).

TikTok's affordances, however, make it a unique case. Unlike other platforms, TikTok lacks a public sharing feature, and its immersive, personalized feed—combined with the relatively high threshold for producing and publishing videos—creates what Faltsek and colleagues (2023) describe as “a highly concentrated world of one-way communication,” where many users are passive (p. 10). Hence, it remains uncertain whether source identity is meaningful for credibility assessments on TikTok.

As shown above, previous research has identified several factors that social media users draw on when assessing the credibility of content encountered on these platforms. However, despite TikTok's particular relevance for young adults and its affordances that distinguish it from other platforms, research on credibility assessments in this context remains scarce. To address this gap, we pose the following research question:

*RQ1: Which factors influence how young adults assess the credibility of information they encounter on TikTok?*

### ***Strategies for Assessing Information Credibility on Social Media***

The factors outlined above also shape the specific actions users take—both on and off the platform—to assess the credibility of TikTok posts. Drawing on Tandoc et al.'s (2018) framework, we distinguish between two overarching types of such strategies: internal and external.

Internal strategies include all activities users engage in based solely on their own experiences and knowledge, without any additional steps. The first of these is reliance on “the self” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 2754), meaning judging posts' content based on one's gut feeling and tacit knowledge. Internal strategies also include using the abovementioned factors (related to media, message, and source credibility) as heuristics for credibility judgments, without considering any other external sources.

When these initial internal strategies are insufficient, users might turn to external strategies, which involve consulting other sources to assess credibility. These can be further distinguished by (a) the type of source (interpersonal or institutional) and (b) whether they occur on or off the platform.

Interpersonal strategies refer to drawing on other people's judgments, such as asking friends or family for their opinions or checking whether people in one's network have commented on the post. Institutional strategies include consulting professional information providers or intermediaries, for example, googling a story or waiting to see whether it appears in the daily television news.

On-platform strategies involve credibility checks within TikTok itself, such as sending posts to friends via direct message or visiting a legacy news provider's account for additional information. Off-platform strategies require leaving the platform—for instance, to consult external websites or ask one's parents for their assessments.

While social media users are generally aware of external verification tactics, research suggests that they apply them only when posts "raise some red flags" (Swart, 2023, p. 513; see also Tandoc et al., 2018) and they have a considerable interest in the respective topic. Accordingly, users tend to rely on the internal strategies described above to assess posts' credibility (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Swart, 2023). This aligns with psychological research showing that people often process information with minimal cognitive effort, particularly when motivation or time is limited (e.g., Chen, Duckworth, & Chaiken, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). On TikTok, this tendency may be even stronger, as the platform's affordances promote entertainment and escapism (Hendrickx, 2025; Schellewald, 2025). Moreover, users' perception of TikTok's personalization algorithm as accurate (Schellewald, 2023) increases time spent on the platform (Dekker, Baumgartner, & Sumter, 2025) and may reduce their motivation to leave it and deploy external strategies. At the same time, this very personalization may heighten young adults' interest in the content they encounter, potentially increasing their motivation to apply external strategies when topics are personally relevant.

Nevertheless, no research to date has specifically examined credibility assessment strategies on TikTok. Even within the broader context of social media, existing studies often rely on quantitative designs that yield insights into how individual factors shape credibility assessments, but overlook the strategies and reasoning underlying these evaluations. Thus, we ask:

*RQ2: Which strategies do young adults use to assess the credibility of information they encounter on TikTok?*

## **Method**

### ***Design***

To address our research questions, we employed the messaging app diary approach (Kümpel, 2022)—a primarily qualitative, mobile self-report data collection method designed to capture everyday practices of information use within established messaging environments. This multimethod approach comprises two phases: documentation and discussion. In the documentation phase, participants keep a

multimedia diary by responding to daily prompts from the researchers via a messaging app, thereby documenting relevant experiences as they occur. The subsequent discussion phase builds on these entries through semistructured interviews that encourage participants to contextualize and reflect on the documented content and experiences.

In the present study, participants were asked to submit up to 10 links to TikTok videos featuring political or health-related content they encountered each day during the study period. The focus on these two topics captures domains where credibility assessments are especially consequential and enables comparison across two socially relevant yet distinct contexts that differ in personal involvement and everyday relevance. Further, limiting participants to a maximum of 10 posts per day avoided overburdening them while still ensuring sufficient material for the subsequent discussion phase.

Over seven consecutive days in winter 2024 (December 16–22), participants received two WhatsApp messages per day, following the suggestions on duration and message intervals from Kümpel (2022), which have proven effective in a similar study (Anter & Kümpel, 2025): a morning reminder to collect relevant videos throughout the day and an evening prompt to submit them. During a preliminary briefing, also conducted via WhatsApp, participants were introduced to the study procedures and provided with definitions and examples of political and health-related content.<sup>1</sup> The discussion phase took place in January 2025 and consisted of semistructured face-to-face interviews, for which all participants were successfully invited via WhatsApp. During these sessions, participants were asked to walk us through their credibility assessments of up to four videos submitted during the documentation phase. Specifically, we selected two posts per topic to capture theoretically relevant variation in message and source characteristics (e.g., posts with different amounts of engagement cues and from verified/unverified accounts). Additionally, the interviews explored participants' general TikTok use, their broader strategies for evaluating information credibility on the platform, and their reflections on the study procedures.

To ensure the transparency and accessibility of our study design, we share all instruments (e.g., WhatsApp message templates, interview guide) and study materials (e.g., codebook with detailed coding rules, definitions, and examples; overview of participant characteristics) in a repository on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/KBF82>).

### **Participants**

Participant recruitment was conducted with support from communication students as part of a bachelor-level course. Students were instructed to recruit TikTok users aged 18–24 enrolled at a German university. To minimize social desirability bias, students were instructed not to recruit individuals they knew personally. Additionally, to avoid overrepresentation of communication students, who may exhibit heightened reflexivity about their media use because of their academic training, students were encouraged

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<sup>1</sup>Political content was broadly defined as “everything that shapes how we live together as a society” and health content as “everything that affects our physical and mental well-being.” Full definitions are available in the briefing instructions on OSF (<https://osf.io/kbf82/files/6n5ru>).

to recruit participants from a variety of academic disciplines. The recruitment process was conducted individually by the students.

In total, 46 young adults with a mean age of 20.80 ( $SD = 1.50$ ) participated in the study. The sample approximated the gender distribution among German TikTok users<sup>2</sup> (sample: 54.3% female) and included participants from diverse study programs (e.g., business and economics, medicine, law). All participants used TikTok at least several times a week.

Although our purposive sampling strategy limits the generalizability of the findings, it was intentionally employed to ensure comparability across participants' backgrounds and experiences. As the analysis progressed (see below), theoretical saturation was achieved with 46 interviews, and no additional participants were recruited (Elo et al., 2014).

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, as well as about the study's anonymization and data-handling procedures. The interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and were conducted either in person or via video call. Participants did not receive an incentive.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the interview transcripts, we employed content-structuring, qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). This technique involves filtering relevant segments from the material, grouping thematically similar content, and interpreting it within and across categories. Categories were derived both deductively from the concepts introduced above and inductively from the material. Starting with the deductive categories, we developed the codebook iteratively by first applying and expanding it through coding four diverse interviews. This step was followed by testing and refining it on six additional interviews before applying the finalized codebook to the entire data set.

The resulting codebook included categories on participants' TikTok use (e.g., usage contexts, information needs on TikTok), factors influencing their credibility assessments (e.g., message content, perceived AI generation, source authority), specific credibility assessment strategies (e.g., institutionalized off- and on-platform strategies), and methodological reflections (e.g., feasibility of the study procedures).

During the coding process, transcripts were thoroughly read, and text segments were assigned to one or more categories. Double coding was explicitly encouraged to enable subsequent pattern identification (e.g., if a participant described using search engines to assess the credibility of a political TikTok video, the respective segment would be assigned to both "Topic: Politics" and "Strategy: Institutional, off-platform"). Coded segments were analyzed both horizontally (i.e., across all segments for one participant) and vertically (i.e., across all segments within one category). The diary entries (i.e., the submitted videos) were not analyzed separately, but provided additional contextual richness to the analysis. The first author, who shared

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<sup>2</sup>According to recent data (Kemp, 2025), 53.4% of TikTok's adult ad audience in Germany was female in early 2025, whereas 46.6% was male.

the participants' first language, conducted all coding. Throughout both codebook development and coding, the authors engaged in regular exchanges and consensus-building discussions to ensure analytic validity and reliability.

## Results

In what follows, we discuss the key factors and concrete strategies shaping young adults' credibility assessments on TikTok, as revealed in the interviews and post discussions. We focus on overarching findings and the most salient differences, illustrated with representative quotes.

### ***RQ1: Factors Influencing Young Adults' Information Credibility Assessments on TikTok***

#### *Platform Credibility*

Platform credibility—understood as the perceived credibility of the medium through which content is accessed (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013)—is generally low among most of our interviewees. While acknowledging “there are indeed videos that try to inform people seriously” (P6), they do not view TikTok as overall credible (e.g., P13, P17).<sup>3</sup> Their skepticism largely stems from the perception that “fake” content is widespread on the platform (P4; see also P12). The absence of a gatekeeper further reinforces these doubts, as “basically, anyone can upload a video in which they claim complete nonsense” (P14; see also P1). Moreover, TikTok's focus on entertainment is seen as undermining its credibility, particularly when compared with platforms like Instagram or YouTube (e.g., P22, P40).

Thus, our participants do not consider TikTok posts credible *a priori* because of the platform's perceived credibility. It is instead message- and source-related cues that guide users' credibility assessments on TikTok.

#### *Message Credibility*

We begin with factors related to message credibility—that is, the content-related, formal, and contextual characteristics of the post itself (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). As noted previously (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024), social media users consider the actual content of the posts, instead of relying only on formal characteristics.

Most basically, participants regard posts with a plausible argumentation that “makes sense” (P35; see also P22) as credible. Especially for political posts, our interviewees repeatedly mentioned their external coherence, meaning their alignment with information provided by others on and off the platform. If posts' topics are “everywhere in the news” (P5; see also P8) or they saw similar videos on TikTok, they tend to consider them credible, reasoning that “not everyone will have made up the same thing” (P33; see also P17).

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<sup>3</sup>When referring to participants, we use the letter P followed by the number we assigned to participants for data analysis.

Another important factor is whether posts provide evidence supporting their claims (e.g., links to studies or articles). Some participants perceive such features as authoritative and thus sufficient for posts' credibility (e.g., P14, P16), while others extend their skepticism toward TikTok to the cited evidence and therefore disregard it (e.g., P24, P26).

Between these poles, many participants consider evidence supportive, but not decisive for credibility judgments, partly because of TikTok's perceived entertainment orientation. As P25 explained, "You can't expect someone to do enough research for a TikTok video to back up every single statement" (see also P43). Moreover, participants noted they perceive evidence as "reassuring," but "wouldn't actually look it up" (P8; see also P33). However, evidence is more important for posts with low source credibility (see below) or for particularly complex topics (e.g., P20, P41). Overall, it matters most in specific constellations, but it rarely serves as a sufficient criterion for deeming posts credible.

We observed a similar pattern for most formal cues, such as the posts' genre. Many participants are skeptical of commentaries and opinionated language, while they consider longer, fact-oriented news or explainer videos more credible, perceiving them as less biased and more meticulously prepared (e.g., P19, P24). Interviews and street polls are also perceived as more credible, with participants figuring they are difficult to fake or manipulate (e.g., P11, P26).

As mentioned above, personalization can also increase credibility. Some participants—particularly those more skeptical of TikTok overall—perceive the presence of people in videos as merely an attention-grabbing device (e.g., P15, P39). Others regard it as supportive of posts' credibility, often referring to an "anticipative power of platform logic": Those who put their face to the information they share have likely researched it carefully, as they would otherwise risk personal damage. Thus, personal narrators are valued because they do not "hide behind the anonymity of the Internet" (P14; see also P41).

Regarding verbal and visual aesthetics, many participants perceive professionally produced videos with a serious tone as more credible, as such aesthetics signal diligence and institutionalized production (e.g., P12, P40). Interestingly, they were rather skeptical toward aesthetic choices often considered typical for TikTok, such as fast cuts, an exaggerated tone, or everyday settings. Our interviewees regard these elements primarily as tactics to gain visibility in TikTok's algorithmic environment and as a form of pandering to younger audiences (e.g., P4, P20). As one participant explained, "People often try to appeal more to our generation by using typical TikTok features like adding music or addressing a topic with humor, but that can easily backfire and make everything seem a bit less serious" (P27).

However, participants noted that "self-made content" (P15; see also P19), particularly from influencers, may also appear credible. Ultimately, TikTok's diverse aesthetics make participants reluctant to rely too heavily on aesthetics when assessing credibility.

Finally, we consider the role of engagement cues in credibility assessments on TikTok. While a few participants perceive the number of likes and comments as sufficient and regard posts with many reactions as credible (e.g., P2, P10), others doubt the trustworthiness of other users' reactions and thus consciously ignore engagement metrics. As one participant stated, "There are so many videos with tons of likes that tell

complete nonsense" (P9; see also P12). Most participants, however, viewed engagement primarily as an initial point of orientation that helps them form a preliminary impression of posts' credibility (e.g., P6, P14), supporting or weakening—but rarely determining—their credibility assessments.

#### *Source Credibility*

"If it's a credible account, I'm more likely to think that the content is credible" (P11). As this quote illustrates, source credibility—using the perceived credibility of the account as a heuristic for judging the information's credibility (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013)—emerged as a key factor in participants' assessments.

While source identity (i.e., familiarity with and the peer character of sources) is largely irrelevant because posts rarely originated from participants' social circles, source authority plays a crucial role. Participants are skeptical of posts from "random creators" (P27) or ordinary users (e.g., P30, P44), but tend to consider posts from known and reputable sources as credible. These include legacy media and public broadcasters (e.g., P3, P40); experts such as lawyers, medical professionals, or fitness coaches—provided they can prove their expertise, for instance, through titles (e.g., P12, P44); and companies or political actors (e.g., P14, P34). Especially in the latter case, participants assume that renowned sources would not post "fake news or so, because of reputational damage" (P15; see also P13).

In contrast to many message characteristics, source authority often appears to be a sufficient criterion. For instance, our participants do not consider a video from a legacy news provider less credible merely because of informal aesthetics (e.g., P9, P23), nor do they expect credible sources to provide evidence for their claims: "With sources like Tagesschau [Germany's main public television news program], you can still assume that the information is correct, simply because it's Tagesschau" (P20; see also P22).

Similar to findings for other platforms (e.g., Gehrke et al., 2024), formal source cues—mainly the verification checkmark—play a largely supportive role and serve primarily as "first hints" (P14) in credibility assessments. As one participant explained, "Just because someone has a blue checkmark doesn't automatically mean that everything they say is 100% true. Still, I tend to trust such an account more than one without it" (P45; see also P15).

The relevance of formal source cues also depends on the perceived credibility of the source: Participants attach greater weight to verification when they already consider a source credible, whereas the checkmark does little to enhance the credibility of questionable ones (e.g., P25, P44). Only a few participants consider verification sufficient: "I hardly question anything then" (P2; see also P22). Similar to those who said they generally do not pay attention to the source at all (e.g., P28, P39), these were often participants who mainly use TikTok for entertainment or non-news purposes, indicating that the extent of their elaboration depends on their information needs, as discussed later.

In sum, source credibility emerges as a central factor for young adults' credibility assessments, being perceived not only as an easily accessible but also reliable heuristic. Message cues, in turn, mostly play a supporting role. This is partly because evaluating content-related cues requires considerable cognitive

effort and partly because TikTok's platform-specific affordances, such as algorithmic curation and its diverse aesthetics, make many cues ambiguous rather than clear-cut heuristics.

### ***RQ2: Young Adults' Strategies for Information Credibility Assessments on TikTok***

#### *Internal Strategy: The Self*

Turning to participants' specific strategies for assessing the credibility of TikTok posts, an internal strategy emerged as their primary choice—referring to “the self” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 2754). Participants rely on their preexisting knowledge and gut feeling for assessing source and message credibility without making any further attempts to assess the credibility: “I don't really check anything. I just think, okay, that's bullshit, and keep scrolling” (P16; see also P3).

This strategy is more relevant for health-related videos: Participants readily rely on their own experiences and “common sense” (P8; see also P21) to judge dietary claims or fitness tips. For political TikToks, however, they claim to be more cautious and more likely to draw on external strategies.

#### *External Strategies*

For participants to use strategies that rely on external sources or institutions, they need a genuine interest in the topic and consider TikTok relevant for their information use (e.g., P11, P42). Otherwise, they show little motivation to check content encountered on the platform, even when they find it questionable (e.g., P7, P3).

The most common external credibility assessment strategies are institutional, off-platform strategies such as googling a topic (e.g., P2, P21), consulting specific news websites (e.g., P7, P12), or using AI chatbots such as ChatGPT (P5, P35). The importance of this strategy is closely tied to TikTok's low perceived credibility, as P19 explained: “I would check content anywhere, but not on TikTok” (see also P34). However, leaving the platform and actively looking up information requires time and motivation—resources that are often scarce in the mobile, entertainment-oriented contexts participants describe: “I often use TikTok on the bus or in the morning after waking up. I'm not in the mood to open a website and read” (P33; see also P15). Thus, while this strategy is in many participants' repertoire, it is only sporadically applied.

Reflecting TikTok's overall low platform credibility, institutional on-platform strategies, such as visiting an account profile to assess its credibility (e.g., P12, P14) or using TikTok's search function to find similar posts (e.g., P8, P23), are less common. This may also stem from the architecture of TikTok's search feature, which does not allow users to combine filters for sources and topics—an option that would be particularly relevant given the importance of source credibility (see RQ1).

When turning to strategies that rely on other people, interpersonal, on-platform strategies—especially reading posts' comment sections to see how other users assess their credibility—emerge as particularly relevant. Comments are accessible with a single click and therefore often serve as the only

verification step: "If I don't find a solution [in the comments], I usually forget about it pretty quickly" (P4; see also P33).

Several participants described positive experiences with this feature, suggesting that their rather negative assessment of TikTok's overall credibility does not necessarily affect their trust in other users: "People in the comments often provide more detail about the post, refute it, or confirm it, and sometimes even provide a source" (P33; see also P34). The relevance of comments may also stem from TikTok's algorithmic curation of comment sections, which promotes popular comments to the top, likely those perceived as helpful and informative by other users.

Overall, the strategies TikTok users employ for credibility assessments depend primarily on three factors: their evaluation of TikTok's overall credibility, TikTok's relevance for their information use, and their current usage context. Low platform credibility favors off-platform verification strategies or limits on-platform efforts to the comment section, while mobile and entertainment-oriented contexts promote low-effort strategies such as relying on one's gut feeling, checking comments, or simply dismissing posts as not credible and continuing scrolling.

## Discussion

Responding to the growing relevance of TikTok for young adults' information use (e.g., Behre, Hölig, Stöwing, & Möller, 2025; Newman et al., 2025), this study examined how they assess the credibility of information encountered on the app. Using the messaging app diary approach (Kümpel, 2022), which combines media diaries and qualitative interviews, we asked 46 German young adults to collect TikTok posts related to health and politics over seven consecutive days. Subsequently, we discussed their credibility assessments—both of the collected posts and more generally—in semistructured interviews.

Regarding the factors shaping credibility assessments (RQ1), our findings suggest that young adults are generally skeptical of TikTok's overall credibility as a platform. Nonetheless, a range of message- and source-related cues can enhance the perceived credibility of individual posts. Young adults infer a post's credibility primarily from the perceived authority of its source, which serves as a sufficient criterion for most of them. In contrast, message cues are less important. While factors such as the inclusion of sources and evidence; plausibility; or longer, news-like presentations can enhance perceived credibility, our participants consider these factors as ambiguous within TikTok's entertainment-oriented context. Therefore, they perceive them mainly as supportive criteria.

With regard to the specific strategies employed to assess credibility (RQ2), our study shows that young adults predominantly rely on internal strategies—especially for health content—and draw on their own beliefs, experiences, and intuition to evaluate whether a message or its source is credible. They only occasionally use external strategies, such as consulting additional sources or asking friends. When employing external strategies, participants tend to remain on the platform, for instance, by checking the comments under a post.

Overall, as has been observed in other online contexts (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Schwarzenegger, 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2022), young adults' credibility assessments on TikTok can be characterized as pragmatic, fast-paced, and heuristic-driven. Despite their general skepticism toward the platform's credibility, credibility assessments appear to play only a minor role in their TikTok use. One reason is that many participants associate TikTok with entertainment and "light" information, such as restaurant recommendations or fitness tips, where they seem to perceive the potential consequences of inaccurate information as less serious.

Our study also shows that TikTok's affordances shape users' credibility assessments and the individual salience of factors and strategies. For instance, its communicative forms, including humor and memes, make message characteristics such as aesthetics and genre ambiguous and hard to assess, while source credibility appears to be an efficient shortcut. Likewise, extensive algorithmic curation of posts likely creates an immersive and engaging user experience that keeps users on the platform (Dekker et al., 2025; Schellewald, 2023), making them less likely to elaborate on a post's argumentative coherence or to leave the app for external, more sophisticated credibility assessments. TikTok's low hypertextuality (Anter, 2025) further contributes to this pattern, deterring creators from including hyperlinks with sources and evidence in posts' captions.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings thus underscore the importance of integrating platform-specific affordances into credibility research rather than treating social media as a collective whole (see also Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). This sensitivity toward the influence of affordances might even inspire research to rethink traditional models for explaining credibility assessments. In light of TikTok's affordances, the triad of understanding information credibility as a function of source, message, and media credibility (Metzger et al., 2003) might no longer fit as well as it used to. Rather, a hierarchical model may be more suitable—one that distinguishes primary factors (source credibility) as sufficient on their own, secondary factors (message characteristics) as supportive, and tertiary factors (media credibility) as largely irrelevant.

Likewise, not all strategies for assessing information credibility are equally important in any situation. Thus, affordances and associated usage contexts should be considered as factors that shape users' likelihood of applying each strategy. Building on these insights, future research could systematically compare credibility assessments across platforms to refine existing models for different contemporary information environments.

From a normative perspective, these pragmatic, heuristic-driven assessments raise concerns, particularly regarding health information, where participants expressed high confidence in their own ability to judge the credibility. More broadly, relying on formal heuristics and gut feelings may increase young adults' susceptibility to misinformation and confirmation bias (see also Schwarzenegger, 2020; Swart, 2023). Users who quickly scroll and accept information that aligns with prior beliefs may overlook signs of misleading, manipulative, or AI-generated content—an urgent concern given the growing prevalence of AI-produced material on TikTok (Stanusch et al., 2025). Our findings suggest that media literacy interventions should move beyond a focus on skills and knowledge to also consider individuals' motivations and the inherent limits of personal evaluation (see also boyd, 2017).

In contrast to earlier findings (e.g., Brosius, Ohme, & de Vreese, 2022; Duvekot et al., 2024), however, most participants did not adopt the cynical view that “every source and every piece of informational content was subject to question” (Cotter & Thorson, 2022, p. 636). Rather, many described expert sources, political institutions, and legacy news media as their default authoritative sources. These positive perceptions of institutionalized information providers represent an important resource for democratic societies (Warren, 2018) and suggest that young adults (still) value institutionalized actors on TikTok. It should be noted, however, that our sample was limited to college students, which may constrain the generalizability of these findings to broader young adult populations.

Our findings also show that presentation matters. Many participants were skeptical of legacy media outlets or health experts who overly emulate TikTok’s typical verbal and visual aesthetics and corresponding communicative forms. Instead, they preferred a more serious and composed style, perceiving it as more professional and credible (see also Gehrke et al., 2024). This presents a dilemma for journalists, political communicators, or health professionals. On the one hand, TikTok’s algorithm rewards content that uses platform-typical features, such as trending music, fast cuts, or participation in challenges (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Some adaptation to the platform’s affordances is therefore crucial for visibility in TikTok’s highly competitive, algorithmically curated environment. Many news outlets, political institutions, and health professionals already do so, often more extensively than on other platforms (e.g., Cuşnir, 2025; Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). On the other hand, such presentation forms may raise skepticism among target audiences. Future research could identify the “sweet spot” between algorithmic visibility and perceived credibility by comparing user assessments of posts with varying degrees of platform adaptation, using both experimental and more qualitative methods such as think-aloud protocols (Freiling, 2019).

Finally, the messaging app diary approach (Kümpel, 2022) proved valuable for generating experience-based, context-sensitive insights into young adults’ credibility assessments. The stimulus-based reflections on specific posts showcased the practical relevance, context dependency, and interplay of different factors and strategies. This approach also holds promise for future research on users’ credibility assessments—particularly in the context of generative AI, which is becoming increasingly relevant for everyday information use (Newman et al., 2025). Given the hyperpersonal and individualized nature of information use with tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, gaining insights into users’ actual experiences, perceptions, and content exposure becomes ever more crucial.

Notwithstanding these benefits, our study has limitations. For instance, while the student sample ensures comparability and depth, it also limits our findings to young, educated individuals. Future studies should therefore extend this research to other demographics (e.g., older and less educated groups). Likewise, restricting data collection to specific topics enabled us to systematically analyze the impact of topic characteristics on credibility assessments, but also led to some reactivity—especially early in the field phase, when some participants unintentionally “trained” their algorithm to prioritize political or health content.

Despite these limitations, our study provides important insights into young adults’ online information behavior. Most importantly, it reveals a core tension in their TikTok use: While credibility is

rarely a primary concern, they nevertheless value the presence of expert sources and legacy media as credible anchors on the platform. This underscores the need for continued research into how young adults assess credibility across different online information environments, how these assessments are shaped by platform affordances, and how information providers can effectively reach young audiences without compromising their perceived credibility.

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