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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Liu, S., Xu, J., Zhao, Z., & Li, X. (2023). Factors Affecting Trust in Chinese Digital Journalism: Approach Based on Folk Theories. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 355-366. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7169>

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Article

Factors Affecting Trust in Chinese Digital Journalism: Approach Based on Folk Theories

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Submitted: 13 May 2023 | Accepted: 24 July 2023 | Published: 7 December 2023

Abstract

Trust in online digital news has become a significant concern affecting social cohesion in China. Under the framework of folk theories, we interviewed urban and rural residents' perceptions and imaginations of digital news credibility in China's digital journalism environment. The study finds that digital media giants in China are utilised by both urban and rural residents. Regarding the behaviour of news avoidance, scepticism of digital news accounts for only a tiny fraction of the reasons held by news avoiders. Chinese urban and rural residents have similar perceptions about the impact of news forms, quality of information, and individual stances on digital news, while rural residents show uncertainty about the transparency of news production, which may be related to their education level and media literacy. The relationship between recommendation algorithms and news trust is overlooked by respondents. In addition, news seekers are more likely to display herd behaviours, which may mislead their judgment of news credibility. News avoiders may refuse to consume news because of their distaste for China's digital news atmosphere, such as the ubiquity of unpleasant emotions, preconceived opinions, and attention-grabbing clickbait headlines.

Keywords

constructive journalism; digital journalism; folk theories; news avoiders; news seekers; news trust; social cohesion

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism" edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

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1. Introduction

Digital media has reshaped the process of news production and distribution, and digital news in the form of new media and self-media has ushered in great prosperity. Misinformation has become a critical variable plaguing digital journalism in many countries, leading to a decline in the credibility of government agencies (Lovari, 2020) and trust in mainstream media (Lee et al., 2023). Fake news producers deliberately associate information discourse with news to deceive audiences (Träsel et al., 2019), and social media has become a breeding ground for them to spread false information. During the 2016 US election, there were seven types of misinformation on social media networks, including false connection, false

context, manipulated content, satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, and fabricated content (Wardle, 2018), which misled and confused the public. The prevalence of global social media such as Twitter and Facebook accelerates the dissemination of news information, leading to an extensive influence of false news as well.

Massive quantities of digital news distract the public's attention, and it is often of low quality, causing the public to doubt the authenticity of the news. The trust issue of online digital news has become a common problem in Western society (Grosser, 2016). Ross Arguedas et al. (2022) conducted interviews with journalists from Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, showing that digital platforms such as search engines, social media, and

chat software have undermined traditional norms of trust, weakening the authority of news brands, exacerbating distrust of news worldwide. In the network society, untrustworthy news widens the gap between professional news and citizens (Hermans & Drok, 2018). People are increasingly starting to avoid the news, as they believe that professional news has become irrelevant and untrustworthy (Shehata et al., 2016).

We followed the framework of folk theories and used semi-structured interviews to investigate the perceptions of Chinese urban and rural residents on digital news and its credibility. On the one hand, we compared news seekers and news avoiders in the two levels of digital media preferences and attitudes towards digital news. On the other hand, we integrated Chinese residents' beliefs about digital news trust and explored the key factors that affect the trustworthiness of digital news. Our study may improve the public's ability to assess news credibility in a complex digital media environment and reduce "dark participation" (M. N. Nelson et al., 2021) in participatory journalism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. News Avoidance, News Trust, and Social Cohesion

News avoidance has become a critical problem faced by mass media organisations. Algorithmic news reduces information overload, and those who believe that "news finds me" are more likely to perceive that social and user-driven algorithmic news is usually the most relevant, so they will tend to avoid other types of news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022). We define news avoidance as a phenomenon in which audiences do not have direct contact with news media or do not even pay attention to the news. The former means that audiences abandon the direct means of getting news: television news channels, newspapers, news websites, and news apps, instead choosing digital intermediaries like social media or search engines to access information via distributed discovery (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). The result is that many do not watch the news at all. Due to their distaste for the news or their preference for other content, they watch the news very infrequently (Gorski & Thomas, 2022; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) and even consume no news within a certain period (Blekesaune et al., 2012). As digitalisation changes the media environment, information becomes highly selective, and there is a trend toward news avoidance (Karlsen et al., 2020), which is exacerbated by factors such as information overload, emotional stress, and lack of trust in the news (Schäfer et al., 2023). The popularity of social media news is closely related to the reduction of news credibility, and this mistrust may be more serious (Park et al., 2020). As Toff and Nielsen (2018) have shown, distributed exploration of audience behaviour (distributed discovery) is affected by trust in digital news, forming the folk theory called "I don't know what to believe." Reduced trust in

media will lead to people increasingly avoiding the news and choosing non-journalistic alternative news sources, resulting in more information isolation and public polarisation (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

In traditional news democratic theory, trust is often regarded as the premise of public connection. That is, the fulfilment of citizenship must first rely on trust in the news (Swart & Broersma, 2022). Democracy loses its informed foundation when the public no longer trusts the news and thus avoids it (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Citizens' awareness of current events affects their political knowledge and participation (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). At the same time, trust in news is crucial for enhancing social cohesion. Only credible news media can play the role of public opinion supervision, consensus building, and political stability (Usher, 2018). In China, traditional institutional media and mainstream media guide public opinion and build social consensus. According to Cai (2020), China's mainstream media has distinct characteristics, such as addressing the mainstream members of society, representing mainstream ideology, disseminating crucial public information, and having strong credibility and influence. The news practice of China's mainstream media is predominantly guided by the Marxist view of journalism, which mainly comprises four core concepts: party principle, people-centred, news law, and correct public opinion (Yang, 2017). The people-centred concept requires the news media to care about the work, life, and interests of the people (Yang, 2017). With the prevalence of mobile new media technology, the public is increasingly shifting their attention toward social media (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021). Traditional mainstream media has started the process of media convergence to maintain and improve its influence among the public (Triko & Nurfathiyah, 2022; Zhao, 2017). Nevertheless, user-generated content is increasingly becoming an influential news source (called citizen-generated news) that may compete with curated news from official media sources (Wang & Mark, 2013). Drawing on a survey of news users from 35 countries, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) have found that using social media as a primary news source correlates with lower levels of trust in news. Thus, in the intricate and perplexing digital environment, the reliability of digital news, especially that of mainstream media, is seriously challenged; social opinions appear more unstable and fragmented (Pham et al., 2020). It is vital to rebuild trust in digital news, as it constitutes a critical component of the social infrastructure (Moran & Nechushtai, 2023). Although digital media reduces the credibility of news, journalists can also use digital means and combine sources of information to restore trust in news production (Christensen & Khalil, 2023; Zahay et al., 2021). Trust in social media helps the audience come across news (Goyanes, 2020), while enabling the effective function of public connection with digital journalism (Penney, 2023; Swart et al., 2017).

Factors affecting trust in digital news can be divided into news production and consumption. As for news

production, previous studies concentrated on objective attributes of the media, including source trustworthiness, competency and objectivity of media personnel, audiovisual characteristics of the media, and accuracy and fairness of information (H. Zhang et al., 2014). In the digital environment, the algorithm has become an essential topic in digital news. Wölker and Powell (2021) found that automated news is as credible as human-edited news when algorithms are added to automated news production. Furthermore, machines as news sources have little impact on credibility (Graefe et al., 2018). News source is an essential factor affecting credibility and is moderated by partisan leaning. Pennycook and Rand (2019) pointed out that political laypeople trust mainstream media far more than hyper-partisan websites, and using the algorithmic ranking mechanism to prioritise highly credible content is an essential means of combating misinformation. Transparency is another crucial topic that scholars concentrated on, which has been shown to increase audience trust in news in some studies (Chadha & Koliska, 2015; Lu & Zhen, 2023), while other studies cast doubt on it (Henke et al., 2021; Koliska, 2022). In addition, social navigation features such as likes, comments, and shares significantly impact the trust evaluation of social media news (Seckler et al., 2015).

As for news consumption, audiences' individual characteristics and psychological cognitions are essential factors that affect news credibility. For those who care about current affairs, the watchdog performance evaluations are related to the degree of trust in the news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022). Robinson et al. (2021) believed that four dimensions of audience news literacy are conducive to fostering trust in public information exchange: civic consumption, amateur co-production, professional information production, and algorithms/technology. Moreover, political ideology and partisanship influence the degree of news trustworthiness (Jones, 2004). In the context of China, Xu (2013) found that the education level, exposure to online news, and the audience's trust in the government are correlated with trust in state media. Apart from education level, other demographic factors of the public like gender, age, place of residence, and socioeconomic status, also contribute to news trust (Westley & Severin, 1964). In terms of audience perception, perceived media values have been shown to affect trust in social media brands differently, which include information value, entertainment value, social networking value, social status value, and organisational communication value (M. Zhang et al., 2022). These studies provided us with insights to find a solution to build trust in digital news from the audience's perspective under the framework of folk theories.

2.2. *The Framework of Folk Theories*

A solution to address the distrust in journalism is to develop constructive journalism, also called solutions journalism. However, the crisis of trust in digital jour-

nalism also affects it to some extent. Christians et al. (2010) proposed that the traditional press has four normative roles: monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, and radical. The fifth normative role, a constructive role, refers that the press offers a vision of how society should move forward, shifting focus from problems to solutions (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). Constructive journalism must be legitimised as a trustworthy and necessary form of journalism because its news coverage aims to be rigorous, accurate, representative, and comprehensive (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). As a relatively new movement, constructive journalism, indebted to civic journalism, advocates a more public-oriented approach than the traditional press (Hermans & Drok, 2018). That is to say, in order to make up for the gap between citizens and institutions, constructive journalism puts ordinary people at the centre of journalism, hoping to enhance the relationship between citizens and professionals (journalists, editors, etc.), even between citizens and their community (Hermans & Drok, 2018). The audience-based orientation differs from traditional professional journalism which encompasses characteristics of newsroom work, news gatekeeping, and reporting techniques (Waisbord, 2013).

It was a new attempt in line with the audience-based orientation of constructive journalism that we applied the framework of folk theories to the study of trust in digital news. Moreover, it helped to address the gap in previous studies that rarely studied trust from the audiences' perspective (Knudsen et al., 2022). Folk theories are intuitive and informal (Ngo & Krämer, 2022), referring to non-authoritative conceptions of the world that develop among non-professionals (also called laypeople and the general public) and circulate informally (Eslami et al., 2016). First-hand experience and social interaction are the main ways ordinary people acquire their own theories regarding the world around them (Kempton, 1986). Following Kempton (1986), we recognise that folk theories are distinct from institutionalised theories used by professionals and acquired from scientific literature and controlled experiments. Unlike studies drawing on behavioural data, direct observation, and survey research, folk theories tell us what the actions of ordinary people actually mean to them instead of what scholars think they mean (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Furthermore, folk theories, embodying cognitive biases that affect thought and action, are applied to categorising things, making predictions, and guiding behaviour (Gelman & Legare, 2011; Kempton, 1986).

The framework of folk theories has been applied to biology and developed into folk biology earlier, representing people's everyday knowledge about the biological world (Medin & Atran, 1999). Focusing on folk theories in journalism helps define journalism's legitimacy, recognised role, and perceived public value (Palmer et al., 2020). Folk theories on news consumption, as culturally available symbolic resources, reveal how news consumers access news in an increasingly dispersed

environment and how news avoiders separate from traditional mass media by using distributed discovery in their daily lives (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Ordinary users often believe algorithms are confining, practical, reductive, intangible, and exploitative (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Regarding algorithmic recommendations, Siles et al. (2020) found two folk theories: First, users impersonate the platform (Spotify), and second, users regard it as a well-resourced system. Algorithms have long been regarded as a “black box” (Pasquale, 2015), leading scholars to think about algorithmic operations. Dogruel (2021) identified five folk theories of algorithmic operations: economic orientation theory, personal interaction theory, popularity theory, categorisation theory, and algorithmic thinking theory. Furthermore, Eslami et al. (2016) disclosed several folk theories on how people reason and talk about their thoughts on algorithmic operations by focusing on seamless designs of feed curation algorithms.

Folk theories suggest that it may improve trust in news by changing people’s self-telling stories about news (J. L. Nelson & Lewis, 2021). Nonetheless, few studies on folk theories paid attention to trust in digital news. In an exceptional study on Twitter’s shadowbans, Jaidka et al. (2023) showed that lack of transparency can lead to folk theories speculation among Twitter users, regulatory agencies, and policymakers and further to accusations of ideological bias in platform censorship policies, which jeopardises user trust and the long-term development of the platform. That involved folk theories on the relationship between algorithmic transparency and digital news trustworthiness, but it was only briefly mentioned. At the same time, most previous studies on folk theories focused on social media platforms and users’ cognition of algorithms. Few studies cared about other extensively available digital news channels, such as online news websites and news aggregator apps. To this end, this study focused on the trust issues of various digital news channels under the framework of folk theories. In addition, at the level of audiences, existing studies on news trust have focused on the characteristics of news avoiders while paying less attention to news seekers. Accordingly, this study explored how the public interpreted trust in news, so-called folk theories, in China’s digital journalism. We proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the digital media usage patterns differ between news seekers and news avoiders?

RQ2: What factors affect the credibility of digital news in folk theories?

RQ3: How do news seekers and news avoiders perceive digital news trust differently in folk theories?

3. Research Design

In this study, news is defined as information about recent events, regardless of whether the source is an institution

or an individual. The acquisition of folk theories needs to understand the real opinions of audiences, and in-depth interviews are a suitable research method to meet that target. Guided by the folk theoretical framework, we used semi-structured in-depth interviews to discover the public’s trust in digital news. We identified two types of respondents through purposive sampling: news seekers and news avoiders. News seekers actively watch the news to keep up with current events. In contrast, news avoiders refer to those who do not actively watch the news in daily life and only come across news occasionally or even intentionally avoid the news. The interviews were primarily to explore the status of digital media use, the factors that affect trust in digital news, and the differences between news seekers and news avoiders. Before formal interviews, we told every respondent that digital news refers to news presented and disseminated by digital technologies such as computers and networks. Moreover, common digital news carriers include news websites, mobile news apps, social chat apps (such as WeChat and Weibo), short video apps (such as Douyin [Chinese TikTok] and Bilibili), podcasts, electronic newspapers, etc.

The main steps of the interviews were as follows. First, we asked the respondents whether they had systematically studied related knowledge of journalism and communication. Individuals with professional knowledge in journalism are likely to perceive digital news very differently compared to those with other professional backgrounds. To ensure folk theories of trust in digital news best reflect the beliefs of ordinary citizens and laypeople, those with a professional background in journalism respondents were not included in the list for subsequent interviews. Second, we asked respondents about their digital news consumption behaviours and media usage preferences. In this step, we divided the respondents into news seekers and news avoiders. More specifically, the categorisation entirely depended on their replies—People who claimed to watch the news actively were considered news seekers; otherwise, they were considered news avoiders. Third, we questioned respondents about their opinions on the factors influencing trust in digital news, including recommendation algorithms, news sources, news forms, quality of information, individual stances, transparency in news production, and others. All interviews were conducted through the online chat software WeChat in April 2023. We used the social chat software to ask Chinese friends in the address book whether they actively obtained news to determine the initial respondents. We then commissioned initial respondents to recommend news seekers and avoiders in their network of friends to participate in the interviews. With this snowball sampling, we received 77 responses and finally identified 30 as our interviewees, including 17 Chinese urban residents and 13 rural residents, 18 news seekers and 12 news avoiders. Interviewees’ ages, education, occupation, region, knowledge of current events, and

perceptions of the authenticity of news were taken down alongside their nicknames to protect their privacy.

Theoretical discoveries emerge from open-ended problems by emergent coding (Young et al., 2023). The coding work completed by three authors involved two steps. Firstly, one coder read and labelled the responses into several categories, each with common properties and elements (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We analysed all 10 open-ended questions to determine the category list, which included views on factors influencing trust toward digital news. Secondly, the category list was shared with the other two coders to review the applicability of each code (Tracy, 2019). Some multi-category responses were aggregated to assess the frequency of various topics. Ultimately, we generalised folk theories on digital news trust, combining topics and specific texts.

4. Findings

4.1. Media Usage Preference and Digital News Consumption Behaviour

Most interviewees came from Beijing, Sichuan Province, and Guangdong Province in China, while a few came from Tianjin City, Henan Province, with an age range of 20 to 36 years old. As for the educational background, 12 had a bachelor's degree, 15 had a master's degree, and three had a junior college degree or below. Their occupations included students, civil servants, programmers, workers, farmers, freelancers, and job seekers. Overall, although the respondents came from different regions and had diverse occupations, they had a relatively good academic background with a certain level of knowledge and civic literacy. That facilitated our interviews to unearth folk theories of trust in digital news.

Regarding RQ1, we found that news seekers tended to watch the news frequently by using popular social media in China. WeChat was the platform they mentioned most, followed by the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. Many news seekers indicated that the short-video social media Bilibili was used to obtain information and news, followed by Douyin. In addition to social media platforms, news seekers used specialised news apps to watch news, such as mobile news clients (like Xuexi Qiangguo, People's Daily, CCTV News) and news aggregators (like Jinri Toutiao, called TopBuzz worldwide). Mobile news clients are news distribution platforms built by traditional media in the digital transformation, while news aggregators refer to apps that aggregate news from various sources. In addition, many news seekers chose search engines like Baidu to obtain news. A few declared they accessed news through Zhihu (similar to Quora) and Xiaohongshu (similar to Instagram), which are vertical social media dedicated to specific niche fields. An interesting finding was that several current students, regarded as news seekers, said they sometimes watched news through Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube. Furthermore, a news seeker mentioned using

a newsletter to obtain news of interest. As for news consumption time, most news seekers said that the average daily time spent on news in the past week was between 30 minutes and two hours, and half of them said that they watched the news for one hour or so.

For news avoiders, digital media was a communication and entertainment tool rather than a news source. There were four main folk theories regarding why they did not actively watch digital news. First, "fragmented information meets needs." News avoiders could see news when using digital media by accident and thought it satisfied their need to keep up with current affairs. Xiang Rong, a civil servant from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, candidly mentioned, "Fragmented information from Douyin can fulfil my news requirements, and there is no need to watch news deliberately." Secondly, some individuals asserted, "I don't have time." They were busy with work and family affairs without extra time to watch news. As Jia said, "I (recently) have been busy reading professional books and have no time to watch the news." Thirdly, "The news is too boring," many mentioned this reason. Fourthly, a few said, "I doubt the authenticity of the news." That was, their reluctance to watch the news stemmed from doubts about the authenticity of digital news. For example, Z explained, "On social media, some news comments contain fake content published by the cyber army. Negative news will affect my emotions." The differences in media use habits between news seekers and news avoiders can be seen in Table 1.

4.2. Folk Theories of Trust in Digital News

For RQ2 and RQ3, we conducted a qualitative content analysis on the interviewees' corpus and summarised the general folk theories on the influencing factors of digital news trust. We also analysed differences in perceptions of the factors between news seekers and news avoiders. Table 2 shows folk theories on factors influencing digital news trustworthiness among different identities.

Regarding recommendation algorithms, the most common folk theories were "it's more convenient" and "all kinds of news are worth watching." Most interviewees did not directly respond to the relationship between algorithms and news trust. They focused on the pros and cons of the algorithm itself and the trust in the algorithm. Fifteen believed in the proactive recommendation mechanism of the platform, and nine disagreed with it. At the same time, six held a neutral opinion and thought that the recommendation algorithms were worth further improvement to play a positive role effect. Supporters of algorithms believed that algorithmic recommendations could help them quickly get content of interest. Miles said: "This (the recommendation algorithm) allows me to get the content of my interest faster." Opponents of algorithms believed it would lead to an information cocoon effect, preventing users from paying attention to other types of news. As Ni said, "I still remember that after the China Eastern

Table 1. Differences in media use habits between news seekers and news avoiders.

Preferred platforms and consuming time	Identity category	
	News seekers	News avoiders
Relation-based social media	WeChat, Weibo	Tools for communication and entertainment rather than digital news
Short video social media	Bilibili, Douyin	
Mobile news clients	Xuexi Qiangguo, People’s Daily, CCTV News	
News aggregators	Jinri Toutiao	
Search engines	Baidu	
Vertical social media	Zhihu, Xiaohongshu	
Time length of news consumption	30 minutes to two hours, mostly	Very short

Airlines crashed a year ago, I saw a few pieces of related news on social media, and then I browsed all similar information. That made me feel very sad and irritable.” Regarding the information cocoon effect, some believed that “it does not actually restrict users from browsing dissimilar news” (Hai). The centrists put forward constructive suggestions for improving the algorithm. As Happy Free said, “The platforms can improve its algorithm and make it optional. They should add algorithmic mechanisms that can recommend multiple types of news and avoid the problem of information cocoons.” There were more news avoiders among those who favoured the algorithm, while there were more news seekers among those who were against the algorithm. In addition, the Chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.056, p = 0.358$) showed no significant difference in the attitude towards recommendation algorithms among respondents from rural or urban areas.

Both news seekers and news avoiders agreed that news sources affected the credibility of digital news. There were two prominent opinions: One was that news from official and mainstream media was more reliable; the other was that the entry threshold of self-media was low, which resulted in internet information being

too chaotic to be deemed credible. Take Mei’s reply as an example, “People generally think that official government news is more credible. Sometimes when a negative incident breaks out from the media or other platforms, everyone will wait for the official announcement.” Zhou analysed, “The news media you watch can sometimes be misleading. It is difficult for you to understand the ins and outs of things, and maybe what you see is just taken out of context.” Most people believed that the credibility of news in traditional media, such as TV and newspapers, was still higher than that of digital media. This is because, as stated by Xiang Rong, “the content in traditional media needs to be strictly checked and the responsibilities within media organisation are clear, compared with digital media.” Furthermore, views of news sources differed little between urban and rural Chinese residents.

As for news forms, both news seekers and news avoiders unanimously agreed that “combining pictures and texts is more reliable,” no matter whether they were urban or rural residents. Most agreed that news forms affected news credibility. The reliability of pictures and videos is higher than that of pure text, and combining multiple modalities can improve trust. For example, Hai

Table 2. Folk theories on factors influencing digital news trustworthiness among different identities.

Factors influencing trust in digital news	Identity category	
	News seekers	News avoiders
Recommendation algorithms	“All kinds of news are worth watching.”	“It’s more convenient.”
News sources	“Officials are more reliable” and “online information is too mixed.”	
News forms	“Combining pictures and texts is more reliable.”	
Quality of information	“Fuzziness is fake.”	
Individual stances	“Republicans don’t trust Democrats easily.”	
Transparency in news production	“I don’t care.”	“Transparency is good for supervision.”
Other folk theories	“I have a herd mentality.”	1. “Emotions resonate”; 2. “Preconceptions dominate”; 3. “Headlines are misleading.”

said: “Words are the most unreliable, and the combination of pictures and texts together with audio and video evidence will make news more reliable.” A few thought that news forms did not affect credibility, and they were all news seekers. A typical reason was “any form can be faked, so it doesn’t matter anymore” (Ni). Nevertheless, the opposite point of view was that multi-modal news was just a means for news publishers to confuse the audience. As Zhou said, “People are more easily confused by video news because it is more reliable. Furthermore, news producers use it to hypnotise audiences.”

News quality is also recognised as a factor affecting credibility, as most claimed that “fuzziness is fake.” The vague description of the story makes people doubt the writer’s intention and suspect that this kind of news is “concealing and misleading” (Z and Ni). Xiao Wan said: “High-quality news can enhance the audiences’ viewing experience and make it easier for people to believe it subjectively.” Lve said bluntly: “We-media news that cannot speak clearly would be directly treated as spam, and videos that are too vague can also be treated as fake.” In addition, some thought “the low quality of news content will make people doubt the website’s professionalism” (FQ). News seekers and news avoiders had similar views on how information quality affects trust in digital news, and the same was true for urban and rural residents.

Most people believed that “Republicans don’t trust Democrats easily.” Individual stances refer to the initial leanings and preferences of the audiences when watching news that includes several sides. Political partisans are one aspect of individual stances. Most believed that individual leanings would affect their judgment of news credibility. They would change their views on the authenticity of the news, drawing on whether they like the source and the protagonist of the news. Miles said: “Republicans (in the US) will never trust newspapers run by Democrats easily.” Chen Jieying’s reply is the most representative. She said: “If I have the same view as the news publisher, I will feel enlightened and think that the author is very reasonable. Otherwise, I will think that the author is talking nonsense.” A few believed that individual stances did not affect news trust. It only represented a personal attitude and had nothing to do with the facts” (Xiao Wan). There was no significant difference in views on individual stances between news seekers and news avoiders or between urban and rural residents.

Most respondents believed that transparency in news production is another critical factor affecting trust in digital news. As Wen said, “After all, the higher the transparency of news production, the stronger the monitoring, and the lower the possibility of news falsification.” However, there are also problems with the transparency of news production. As Xing said, “Although the opaque news production process will raise doubts in the audience, it is also difficult to completely make news production transparent because it will undoubtedly affect the efficiency of news production.” A few news seekers

said: “I don’t care about this. It is unnecessary to understand how news is produced; after all, the production process of reported news may not be true. I only believe what I actually see” (Xing Chen). It is worth mentioning that urban residents generally believed that transparency would affect the credibility of the news, but a higher proportion of rural residents expressed uncertainty about this.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, interviewees also raised other elements that impact trust in digital news, primarily at the psychological and news intention levels. The first discourse held by most news seekers is “I have a herd mentality,” reflecting an opinion market in the digital news environment. Other people’s evaluations could affect our judgment of news credibility, primarily influenced by majority opinion. Ni said: “There are various opinions in the comment area of Weibo. The more opinions there were, the more I thought. When I found someone doubting, I might also suspect the news.” Moreover, news seekers and rural residents showed a greater tendency to herd mentality. The second psychological factor affecting news credibility is “emotions resonate.” Individual emotions affect the judgment of news credibility. Xing Chen said that he “easily sympathised with some sensational and inspirational news at night,” and this empathy increased his trust in relevant news. Third, “preconceptions dominate.” The sequence in which news appears has a more significant impact on the credibility of digital news. This impact comes from preconceived stereotypes. Happy Free explained: “For the same event, the news we saw before will affect the judgment of the credibility of the news we see later. Often, the information obtained first will dominate.” Fourth, “headlines are misleading.” This theory reflected the seductive and induced nature of vulgar and novelty news. Some news producers using clickbait headlines deliberately amplified one side of the news facts, resulting in partial distortion. This method of naming news to defraud traffic made some interviewees dissatisfied. For example, Z pointed out:

In some self-media news headlines, women are the main objectives in negative events (such as domestic violence, car accidents). They (newsmakers) think it is more attractive than using the word “men,” but it neglects men’s mistakes and faults, only covering up part of the truth.

The last three folk theories were similar among urban and rural residents and were shared by a greater proportion of news avoiders.

5. Conclusions

We studied the issue of trust in digital news under the framework of folk theories and defined two types of audiences—news seekers and news avoiders. After comparing their differences in media usage preferences and

digital news consumption behaviour, our main conclusions are as follows.

First, ambient news thrives (Gorski & Thomas, 2022) in the digital context; the most critical channels for news seekers to obtain digital news include two categories: relationship-based social media and short video social media. WeChat and Weibo typify the former, while Bilibili and Douyin represent the latter. Other vertical social media (such as Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, etc.), mobile news clients, news aggregators, and search engines are supplementary channels for news seekers to watch news. In China's internet environment, both urban and rural residents use digital media giants, and people's media preferences show similarities.

Second, we find that scepticism (distrust) of digital news accounts for only a tiny fraction of the reasons held by news avoiders. News avoidance is not only associated with news trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022) but is also affected by other factors. We conclude three main explanations from the audiences: (a) "Fragmented information meets my needs," (b) "I don't have time," and (c) "the news is boring." Moreover, whether or not people actively watched the news had no relationship with their ability to judge its authenticity; even though news seekers came across more news, it did not improve their ability to judge it.

Third, regarding the influencing factors of the credibility of digital news, we find that news sources, news forms, quality of information, individual stances, and transparency in news production have been reflected in folk theories. As for the recommendation algorithms, most individuals do not directly respond to the relationship between the algorithm and news trust. They focus on the pros and cons of the algorithm itself and the trust in the algorithm. Satisfaction with the news recommendation system increases trust in the algorithm, making users more willing to use the system (Shin, 2020). This kind of discussion on algorithmic trust is to see whether the recommendation system can provide users with accurate and satisfactory news. However, establishing trust in news content through algorithms needs further research. It may be a feasible idea to use algorithmic ranking mechanisms to increase the priority of highly credible content (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Urban and rural residents in China have similar perceptions about the impact of news forms, quality of information, and individual stances on digital news. Rural residents display uncertainty regarding the transparency of news production, which we deduce could be linked to their lower average education level and media literacy compared to urban residents.

Fourth, regarding other potential factors affecting the credibility of digital news, most of them are elucidated through psychological aspects and news intent. We have identified four primary folk theories: (a) "I have a herd mentality," (b) "emotions resonate," (c) "preconceptions dominate," and (d) "headlines are misleading." Partisan consistency positively affects trust in the news

(Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), and our findings suggest that emotional consistency also affects judgments of news trust. Consistent with previous findings, others' comments impact news credibility under the model of participatory journalism (M. N. Nelson et al., 2021; Seckler et al., 2015). Furthermore, our findings reveal the influence of majority opinion on individual judgments of news trust. If the news or comments expressing opinions are obtained by users earlier, that earlier opinion will dominate the judgment of the credibility of subsequent news. This finding validates the psychological effect of preconceived ideas—Trust beliefs are initially formed based on first impressions and subsequently adjusted or confirmed through ongoing experiences (Yu et al., 2014). Finally, the prevalence of clickbait headlines in self-media significantly undermines news trust. In comparison, news seekers are more prone to display herd behaviour, which can potentially distort their assessments of news credibility. News avoiders may refrain from consuming news due to their aversion to the digital news environment in China, characterised by the pervasive presence of negative emotions, preconceived opinions, and attention-grabbing clickbait headlines.

This study has several limitations, primarily stemming from three aspects. Firstly, our interviews were only conducted with a limited number of individuals, and the folk theories about digital news trust should be further verified by follow-up research with larger sample sizes. Secondly, news avoidance may only be occasional for some people. News avoiders and news seekers can switch identities under certain conditions. Thirdly, although we redefined folk theories of digital news trust based on existing literature, some newly discovered theories concerning emotions, herd psychology, first impressions, and clickbait headlines may require additional methods to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Raquel Silva and Andreia Serra, academic editors Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (Arizona State University), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin), and the reviewers for their valuable support. This article has been supported by a Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Universities in Anhui Province, China (SK2020A0014) and by the Anhui Province University Collaborative Innovation Project (GXXT-2022-091).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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