

Investigating the Relationship between Media Misinformation Public Trust and Information Consumption in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Digital media has changed how people distribute and procure information. However, there has been a greater spread of media misinformation and fake news, leading to a general distrust of the media and changes in how the public processes information. This study focuses on the effect of media misinformation on trust and public behavior in information processing. The main goal of the study was to analyze changes in trust and the effects of misinformation on media use. This research is quantitative, which allowed the use of a structured, self-administered, digital questionnaire. The questionnaire sample was planned to include 250 university students with active social media accounts. The data were processed to the level of the means and analyzed using social and Pearson correlations and regression analysis in SPSS. It was found that 72% of the respondents have seen misleading information. Also, 64% of respondents have trouble finding trusted news sources. It was found that misinformation is inversely proportional to trust in the media ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Misinformation in the media is one of the main factors shaping the public's trust and information processing behavior, accounting for 46% of the change ($R^2 = 0.46$). It was found that 58% of people almost always verified information and sighted it, almost always fact-checked, and only then signed and shared it online. The research shows that public trust decreases and that people's online information consumption changes due to media misinformation. The results focus on improving people's media literacy and responsible journalism. In addition, the study found that to help people trust digital media more, effective fact-checking needs to be established, and misinformation needs to be reduced.

Keywords: Media Misinformation, Public Trust, Information Consumption, Digital Media, Fake News, Social Media, Media Literacy.

Introduction

Digital communication technologies have restructured how information is accessed and disseminated. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube dominate public communication and information dissemination. Users can receive and exchange information instantaneously and participate in almost all discussions regardless of geographic constraints (Firdaus et al., 2024). As digital media consumption escalates, information dissemination becomes more rapid and is successfully impacted by the algorithms and the multiplicity of user interactions. This puts young social media users at high risk due to their intensive online living and digital content exposure (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021; Lan & Tung, 2024). Despite these advantages, the digital era has also contributed to the rise of misinformation and fake news. Unverified content, manipulated narratives, and misleading headlines often circulate widely on social networking platforms (Hameleers et al., 2022). Continuous exposure to misinformation can influence audience perceptions and weaken trust in media institutions (Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023). Young adults and active social media users are particularly vulnerable because of their frequent engagement with online content (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021). The difficulty in identifying credible information has made misinformation a major concern in contemporary digital society (Aïmeur et al., 2023).

Media misinformation is critically undermining public trust and confidence not only in news houses but also in digital platforms. Users are profoundly confused by the airlines of misinformation and the impact of media (Melki et al., 2021). In many instances, users are unable to authenticate the information disseminated online and, in turn, become critical of any form of media, regardless of the source (Xiao et al., 2021). As a result, these users become critical of how they choose to read, understand, and disseminate information to others. Analyses devoted individually to fake news, digital literacy, and trust in media have been previously published, but little has been researched about the combination of all three when assessing how the media presents misinformation, how the public may trust the media, and how the public may behave when consuming information in this context (Dwivedi & Sen, 2025). The recent literature lacks the analysis of how misinformation may parasitically construct trust and change how people use digital media (Luo et al., 2023). This may be of interest because digital media remains the primary means of public communication and social interaction. This study aims to examine the impact of media misinformation on public trust and to analyze how misinformation influences information consumption behavior. It also explores the relationship between public trust and digital media usage patterns.

This study is investigating the phenomenon of misinformation and loss of trust in the media within the context of digital communication (and social sciences and humanities). This study has identified how the misinformation of media may have a negative effect on the public and how people respond to and behave when consuming information in this context. This study aims to answer how media misinformation relates to public trust and how people behave when consuming information in this context. The study aims to guide the advocacy of media literacy for the 'responsible use' of digital media.

Six sections comprise this paper. In Section I, the research problem along with the objectives and questions are laid out. Section II considers the literature regarding media misinformation, trust in the public, and behavior when consuming information. Section III describes the research method and the techniques of data analysis. In Section IV, the findings and statistical results of the study are reported. Section V interprets the findings and considers their implications. In Section VI, the study is concluded with recommendations, the study's limitations, and the proposals for future research.

Literature Review

The accurate portrayal of media misinformation involves the media's portrayal of false or misleading information that is reported without any fact-checking or scrutiny. Disinformation is the deliberate spread of false or misleading information to shape public perception. Conversely, the media may report on fabricated information in a sensational manner in order to spike engagement (Dabbous et al., 2022). Misinformation spreads fastest on social media, which is in large part due to media algorithms prioritizing engagement over truth (Shahzad et al., 2022). The dynamics of social media allow users to interact with and spread information across large user bases in minutes through shares, thumbs-up, and recommendations that show up in their feeds. In most cases, the misinformation spreads before a fact-checking service gets a chance to respond. Because of this, most users are exposed to misinformation (Stubenvoll et al., 2021). Misinformation also depends heavily on media literacy, peer, and social validations. Some users rely on the misinformation to the point that they ignore most of the false information (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). The challenges associated with fake news continue to grow, especially in the digital age. Misinformation was researched across multiple cultures and found that the spread of misinformation results in users losing trust in digital media,

specifically social media, and due to that, the credibility of information in the media (Dabbous et al., 2022). Misinformation was also found to be strongly dependent on the consumption patterns of digital news and reactions to misinformation social media (Sindermann et al., 2021).

The term public trust describes the belief that people have in the media, sources, and systems of communication. Media credibility is shaped by perceptions of accuracy, fairness, transparency, and reliability (Stubenvoll et al., 2021). Historically, the trustworthiness of the media relied on the perception of papers and TV news having journalistic integrity, recognized systems of journalistic ethics, and adherence to established systems of journalistic ethics. The digital age has impacted the way the audience views the media, as the incorporation of the ability to freely share information and/or content created by the public has altered the way audiences consume the media (Valenzuela et al., 2022). The diminishing of trust in media is of considerable concern in the field of communication. Research suggests repeated exposure to misinformation will eventually spread, ultimately misinforming and decreasing the public's trust in digital and traditional media alike (Van Zoonen et al., 2024). Theories regarding trust in media describe how audiences' beliefs and trust in the media are influenced by their experiences, social and intellectual interactions, and their media consumption (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Public trust is also significant in determining whether the online public verifies information before they believe and share it online (Wong et al., 2021). Media consumption describes how end-users' access, intuit, evaluate, and disseminate information, as well as how they use it to communicate through digital media. In this digital age, it is through social media that end-users find news of the day (Xiao et al., 2021). That use of media also accounts for how users respond to information for the various reasons of media engagement, trust in the media, and the information themselves. Some studies state that end-users of media who have higher media literacy are those who, before spreading information to others, take it upon themselves to assess the credibility of that information (Wei et al., 2023). On the contrary, end-users of media who heavily rely on social media for a long time have been found to be ill-informed, and to have been informed of, and misinformed by misinformation (Wong et al., 2021). From the information provided by other studies, it is trust in the media that alters the consumption of information and content on the web, as well as online engagement and participation (Valenzuela et al., 2022).

The analyzed research shows misinformation impacts trust and alters the behavior of users in the digital information space. Most common research demonstrates media literacy and information verification and therefore trust, which mitigate the effects of misinformation. Nevertheless, the association of media misinformation, public trust and information consumption have been studied from a largely vertical perspective, which this research concerns.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach to analyze the relation of media misinformation, public trust, and the consumption of information in the digital age. For this, a survey was chosen that enables data collection of a large sample in a relatively short period. Quantitative methods have the tendency to analyze the attitude and behavioral public data in the social sciences. The research design manifests descriptive and correlational aspects. The descriptive approach enables the identification of respondents' media exposure, misinformation, and level of trust, while the correlational aspect explores the relationship of the study variables. This design is optimal given the study aims to analyze the impact of misinformation on consuming digital information and public trust among social media users.

Table 1: Research Variables

Variable Type	Variables
Independent Variable	Media Misinformation
Dependent Variable	Public Trust
Dependent Variable	Information Consumption Behavior

In table 1 summarizes the basic variables of the study. Among the study variables, media misinformation is the independent variable, as it alters the behavior of respondents, while public trust and the behavior of information consumption are the dependent variables.

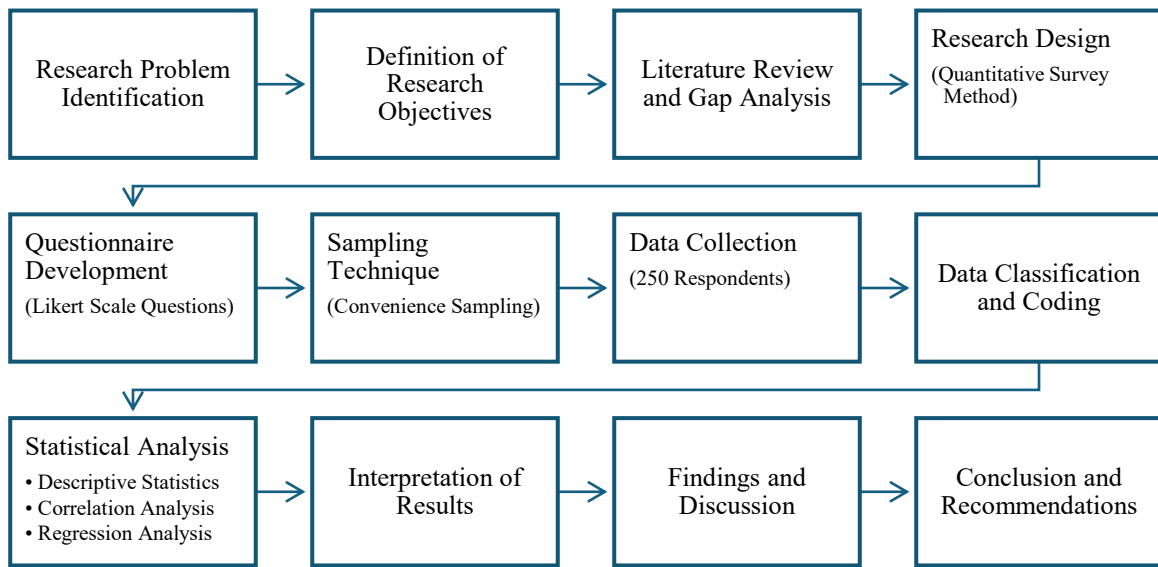


Fig. 1: Detailed Research Methodology Framework

Fig. 1 outlines the entire research methodology used in the current study. This research framework starts with a description of the problem followed by the establishment of research goals. It moves on to a review of related literature and gap recognition. It then describes the steps of designing a quantitative survey, formulating a questionnaire, developing a sampling strategy, and carrying out a survey with 250 participants. The framework explains the pathways of data organization, the application of descriptive, correlational, and regression statistics, and the synthesis of findings, including a discussion, and the study's implications.

Data Collection and Sampling

The sample of the study consisted of students, young adults, and social media users, as members of these aggregates accounted for the majority of the sample that is involved in the consumption of digital information. Participants targeted were users of online news and social media, to conveniently sample those that frequently engage with misinformation. Data were collected through an online questionnaire that was distributed on social media and created on Google Forms. The questionnaire asked multiple-choice questions that included items on a five-point Likert scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The survey was designed to investigate the respondent's exposure to misinformation, their trust in media, their behavior regarding checking facts, and their behavior about sharing information. Two hundred fifty responses were collected for analysis, and the sample size was deemed sufficient for discovering statistical relations of the variables.

Table 2: Sample Distribution

Respondent Category	Number of Respondents
University Students	140
Working Professionals	65
General Social Media Users	45
Total	250

In this table 2 demonstrates the sample frame of the respondents. With the respondents being a significant majority, university students were followed (in descending order of frequency) by employed persons and social media users.

Data Analysis Techniques

The gathered data were analyzed by SPSS and Excel. Descriptive statistics were calculated to draw the sample frame and to provide an overview of the media behavior of respondents. A correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between media misinformation and trust. A regression analysis was performed to determine the prediction of misinformation with the changes of public trust and the behavior of information consumption.

Table 3: Statistical Techniques Used

Statistical Tool	Purpose
Descriptive Statistics	Analyze respondent demographics and media usage
Correlation Analysis	Measure relationships between variables
Regression Analysis	Examine the influence of misinformation on trust and consumption

In this table 3 demonstrates the various statistical techniques that were leveraged in the study. Descriptive statistics served to summarize the responses, while correlation and regression analyses were employed to characterize relations between media misinformation and public trust, and behavior of information consumption.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Responses from 250 individuals, comprising of university students, working professionals, and general social media users, were analyzed for the study. Based on the demographics, the majority of respondents fell within the category of young adults, providing evidence for the intense involvement of younger populations in the field of digital media. It was gathered that the majority of the respondents were using social media on a nearly daily basis, for communication, entertainment, and news.

Table 4: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–25 Years	145	58%
	26–35 Years	72	29%
	Above 35 Years	33	13%
Gender	Male	132	53%
	Female	118	47%
Education	Undergraduate	138	55%
	Postgraduate	82	33%
	Others	30	12%
Social Media Usage	Less than 2 Hours	38	15%
	2–5 Hours	124	50%
	More than 5 Hours	88	35%

Presented in table 4 is an overview of the demographics of the respondents to the study. The age group 18–25 represented the largest number of respondents, and the respondent's reported usage of social media for 2 to 5 hours a day, demonstrating extensive usage of digital information environments.

Impact of Media Misinformation on Public Trust

The results indicated that participants' exposure to media misinformation had a significant overall effect on their trust of digital media. It was reported by a number of respondents that they experienced a challenge in differentiating the credible from the non-credible harmful information that was presented to them online. The reporting and sharing of fake news to these social media participants, and online news sources, resulted in a dwindling trust of these news sources.

Table 5: Respondents' Perception of Media Misinformation and Trust

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I frequently encounter fake news online	72%	16%	12%
Social media platforms spread misleading information	68%	18%	14%
Misinformation reduces my trust in online media	64%	20%	16%
I trust information shared on social media	29%	31%	40%

In table 5 illustrates that a sizable percentage of respondents reported that they are exposed to misinformation on a daily basis. The totality of these results would appear to suggest that exposure to fake news caused a decline in trust of media sources.

Information Consumption Patterns in the Digital Age

It was described by a number of respondents that more and more they are relying on media social platforms for news, and information that is of more public interest. It was reported by a number of respondents that they are

cross-confirming that information by checking multiple sources that are online and sharing that information. Regression analysis further indicated that media misinformation explained 46% of the variance in public trust and information consumption behavior ($R^2 = 0.46$).

Table 6: Information Consumption and Verification Behavior

Information Behavior	Percentage
Verify news before sharing	58%
Share information immediately without verification	24%
Depend mainly on social media for news	67%
Use fact-checking websites regularly	41%

In table 6 suggests the respondents' dependence on social media is high, as experiencing the respondents' tendency to verify content before sharing was prevalent. The analysis of correlations has revealed a significant relationship ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$) that shows contradictorily that greater exposure to misinformation decreases trust in digital media.

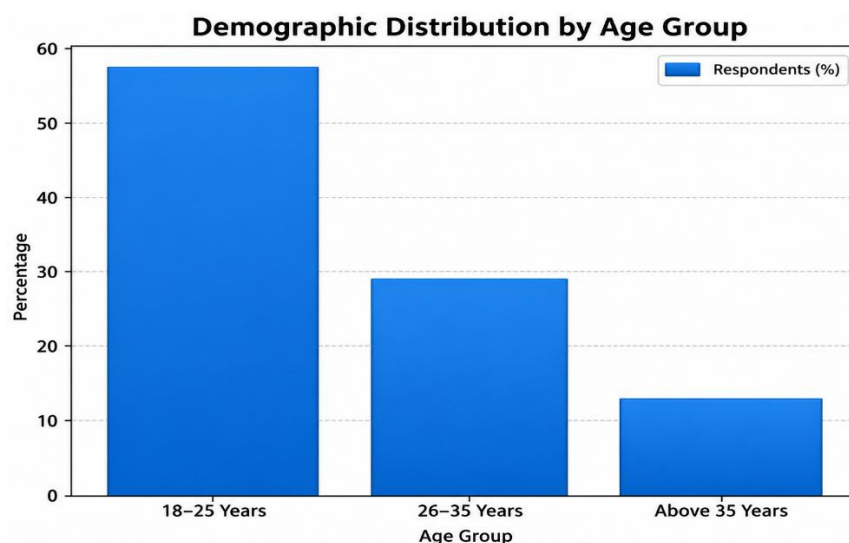


Fig. 2: Demographic Distribution by Age Group

In this fig. 2 shows the distribution of age groups of the respondents in the study. The data indicate that most of the respondents were in the age group of 18-25 years. It may be that a younger age group is found to be more involved with digital media and online information.

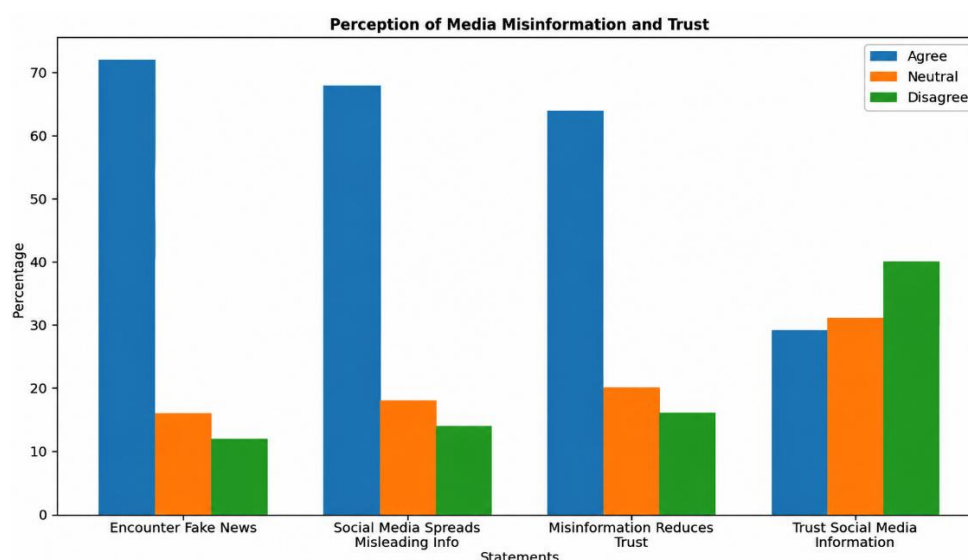


Fig. 3: Perception of Media Misinformation and Public Trust

In fig. 3 shows the respondents' views on digital media, misinformation, and trust. The data shows that a significant number of respondents indicated that they come across fake news on a daily basis, and they perceive misinformation as one of the factors that undermine trust in social media.

Discussion

Results from the research illustrate that public trust and information consumption behavior in the digital age are subjects to the dominating effects of media misinformation. Respondents reported that the exposure to misleading content and fake news has caused them to become somewhat distrustful of the digital media platforms. The findings provided evidence that exposure to misinformation and public trust has an inverse relationship. The hypothesis findings confirmed that misinformation dictates the manner in which respondents authenticate, analyze, and disseminate information through digital media. Respondents that were highly exposed to misinformation had media distrust and engaged in information consumption behavior that was more reserved. The study hypothesis was also supported in this respect. The findings are in agreement with previous research that documented that misinformation was the primary factor affecting public trust in digital media ecosystems. Earlier research has documented that public distrust of internet information has been aggravated by the misinformation that has been disseminated by social media. Like the previous research, the study found that digital media users practice information verification and fact-checking to a greater extent. The study also found agreement to previous research that supports the replication of misinformation as an effect of media literacy. The research also differed to other studies that have predominantly been centered on the identification of misinformation and fake news, by incorporating the effects of misinformation on trust and the behavior of information consumption. This research builds a solid basis for media agencies, policy legislators, learning institutions, and digital study frameworks. Media agencies may have to improve adherence to fact-checker units and practice transparency in reporting to rebuild public trust. Legislators may need to impose tougher legal frameworks to curb the dissemination of destructive advertising on digital media. Learners may have a role by introducing study frameworks that involve critical and media literacy education. Moreover, digital frameworks may adopt a more awareness-building approach on the need to encourage responsible sharing of information while addressing the growing concern of digital media misinformation.

Conclusion

This study investigated misinformation and public trust and how they determine the changing patterns of information consumption in the digital world. Misinformation on digital platforms and changing audience trust and information consumption patterns has become a major challenge for many. The study employed a quantitative survey instrument, and data were collected from 250 respondents, mainly university students and people who use social networks. The study found that 72% of the respondents came across confusing and misleading information, and 64% found it difficult to determine credible sources of news. Analysis of the gathered data found a confident yet negative relationship between misinformation and public trust ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Misinformation also contributed to 46% of the variance in trust and information consumption behavior ($R^2 = 0.46$). Misinformation and public trust explained, respectively, 46% of variance in the study. The findings of the study found that 58% of respondents stated that they considered the emotional tone and the meaning of the information stated in the message they wanted to share. They were worried about the potential risks of misinformation. The study stressed the importance of establishing well-defined structures to reduce the impacts of misinformation, and cited an environment of unethical practices. Lastly, the study pointed out the importance that educational institutes and the educational community of policymakers hold in establishing media literacy courses that are aimed at improving the educational framework. Although this study has major findings, it also has some limitations. The sample size was relatively small and respondents were geographically concentrated. Future research may concentrate on sociocultural studies, especially on the exploding potential of AI-generated misinformation and automated content manipulation in sociocultural digital communication.

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