



Audience perceptions of message credibility on social media platforms

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ABSTRACT (10 PT)

This study aims to explore audience perceptions of message credibility on social media platforms. This phenomenon is important to examine because social media has become a primary source of public information, yet it also serves as a space for the spread of misinformation and disinformation that influences how audiences assess the truthfulness of messages. This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand audiences' subjective experiences in evaluating, trusting, doubting, and verifying messages on social media. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, limited digital observation, and documentation of 12–20 active social media users selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data analysis was conducted thematically through the processes of data condensation, categorization, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study revealed four main themes: source credibility as the initial basis of trust, message packaging as an indicator of trustworthiness, digital social validation through user comments and interactions, and the audience's informal verification strategies. These findings indicate that the credibility of messages on social media is not only determined by the content of the message but is also shaped through interactions between the source, the presentation of the message, the platform, social responses, and the audience's personal experiences. This study contributes to digital communication research by positioning the audience as an active subject in the process of interpreting information credibility. The research implications emphasize the importance of digital literacy, which encompasses the ability to evaluate sources, interpret visual cues, understand the influence of social interactions, and critically verify information.



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1. Introduction

The rise of social media has transformed the way people access, evaluate, and disseminate information in their daily lives. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X/Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube no longer serve merely as spaces for entertainment and social interaction, but have also become primary channels for the dissemination of public messages,

news, and information on health, education, politics, the economy, and socio-cultural issues. In a global context, this shift presents serious challenges as audiences are confronted with a rapid, diverse, and often difficult-to-verify flow of information. Sathianathan and Mhd Ali (2025) note that people often evaluate information on social media based on seemingly convincing cues, such as professional visuals, assertive language, and the authoritative impression of the message source. This phenomenon demonstrates that the credibility of messages on social media is determined not only by the truth of the content but also by the audience's perception of the source, format, context, and the social responses accompanying the message.

In the national context, the Indonesian public also faces similar challenges because social media has become an integral part of daily communication practices across age groups, professions, educational levels, and social backgrounds. In practice, audiences do not always conduct formal verification when receiving messages but often rely on personal experience, the sender's reputation, relational closeness, or the message's alignment with values they hold. Chang et al. (2024) found that social media users, particularly certain age groups, assess the credibility of information through a combination of the source's identity, the clarity of the content, and their experience in comparing the message with other information. In everyday practice, messages sent by family, close friends, public figures, influencers, or accounts considered "usually reliable" are often more easily trusted even if they do not necessarily have a strong evidential basis. This situation indicates that the perception of a message's credibility is a social process involving trust, emotions, relationships, and digital communication culture.

The issue of audience perception regarding message credibility is important to study because it is directly related to the quality of the digital public sphere, media literacy, social behavior, and public decision-making. Information deemed credible can influence audience attitudes toward health, political, educational, consumption, and social issues. Mishra et al. (2024) explain that individual responses to misinformation are heavily influenced by motivation, the level of trust in the source, and how the message is framed in the digital space. From an educational perspective, the ability to assess message credibility is linked to digital literacy and critical thinking skills. From a socio-cultural perspective, perceptions of credibility reflect how society constructs meanings regarding truth, authority, and trust amidst the overwhelming flow of information. Thus, audiences cannot be understood as passive recipients of messages but rather as active subjects who interpret, negotiate, and make sense of messages based on their experiences and social environment.

A number of previous studies have discussed misinformation, disinformation, source credibility, and information-sharing behavior on social media. Kaur and Gupta (2023) emphasize that research on misinformation has largely focused on its spread, detection, and mitigation strategies. However, there remains a research gap in deeply exploring the audience's subjective experience in assessing message credibility as a process of meaning-making. Tong (2024) demonstrates that the context of information presentation can influence the audience's perception of a message's trustworthiness, meaning that credibility assessment cannot be separated from the communicative situation in which the message is received. Some previous studies tend to treat credibility as a variable measured through surveys or experiments, while narrative aspects—such as the reasons audiences trust a message, how they question information, and how they employ informal verification strategies—have not been extensively examined through qualitative approaches. This gap forms a crucial foundation for this study.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore audience perceptions of message credibility on social media platforms. The focus of the study is directed toward the audience's experiences in evaluating, trusting, doubting, verifying, and interpreting the messages they receive via social media. This study also examines the indicators audiences use to assess message credibility, such as the message source, message content, visual form, comments from other users, the number of interactions, and the message's alignment with personal experiences. Lawson et al. (2025) emphasize that trust in digital information is often influenced by social relationships and

perceptions of the party sharing the message. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich research on digital communication, message credibility, and media literacy by positioning the audience as active agents in the interpretation process. Practically, this study can serve as a foundation for the development of digital literacy education, public communication strategies, and the creation of social media messages that are more ethical, transparent, and trustworthy.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This design was chosen because the research aims to understand the audience's subjective experiences when assessing message credibility on social media. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore how audiences assign meaning to messages, how they determine which messages are trustworthy, and how social and digital experiences shape those judgments. Lim (2025) explains that qualitative research is appropriate when researchers wish to deeply understand meanings, experiences, and social processes. In the context of this study, message credibility is not treated merely as a number or a level of trust, but as an experience shaped by the audience's perceptions, relationships, emotions, media habits, and socio-cultural context.

This study is designed to be conducted in urban areas with high levels of social media usage, such as Yogyakarta, Makassar, Bandung, Surabaya, or Jakarta. The research period is planned to last three months, from January to March 2026. The research subjects are active social media users who have received, evaluated, or shared informational messages via platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X/Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, or YouTube. Informant criteria include being at least 18 years old, having actively used social media for at least the past year, using social media to obtain public information, and being willing to participate in the interview process voluntarily. Informants are selected using purposive sampling because the study requires participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. If expansion of data diversity is necessary, snowball sampling is used by requesting recommendations for other informants from previous participants. The number of informants is estimated to be 12 to 20 people, or until the data reaches saturation.

The primary data collection techniques in this study are semi-structured interviews, limited digital observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow the researcher to explore informants' experiences in depth while remaining within the study's focus. Bathran and Samuel (2024) note that semi-structured interviews are suitable for phenomenological research as they can flexibly capture participants' perceptions, experiences, barriers, and interpretations. The interview guidelines for this study covered the informants' experiences of receiving messages on social media, the indicators used to assess credibility, perceptions of the message source, the influence of comments and the number of interactions, experiences of trusting or doubting messages, and the verification strategies typically employed. Limited digital observation was conducted to understand how informants interact with messages, such as when reading comments, checking the sender's account, comparing information, or noting the number of likes and shares. Documentation was carried out through field notes, interview transcripts, and examples of messages or screenshots voluntarily provided by the informants.

The data collection procedure was carried out in several stages. The first stage involved developing interview guidelines based on the research focus and a literature review on message credibility, digital literacy, and audience behavior on social media. The second stage involved identifying potential informants based on established criteria. The third stage involved explaining the research objectives, data confidentiality, participant rights, and the use of research data to the informants. Interviews were conducted in person or online, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Lamba and Van Tonder (2022) emphasize the importance of transcription, researcher reflection, and process traceability in qualitative thematic analysis. Therefore, all data is securely

stored, informant names are anonymized, and information that could potentially reveal personal identities is removed from the research manuscript.

Data validation was conducted through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Source triangulation was performed by comparing information from informants with different backgrounds, such as students, workers, educators, community members, and general social media users. Method triangulation was performed by comparing the results of interviews, limited digital observations, and documentation. Member checking was conducted by sending summaries of interview results or preliminary interpretations to informants so they could confirm that the meanings captured by the researcher aligned with their intended experiences. Janis (2022) explains that an audit trail can strengthen dependability because the entire research process is documented in a sequential and traceable manner. In this study, the audit trail was maintained by documenting the informant selection process, changes to the interview guidelines, reflective notes, coding decisions, category grouping, and the formation of final themes.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis by adapting the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. During the data condensation stage, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to identify key statements related to perceptions of message credibility. Initial coding was applied to informants' statements such as "trusting because the source is known," "doubting because the headline is too provocative," "checking the comment section," "comparing with other media," or "evaluating the message based on personal experience." These codes are then grouped into categories, such as source credibility, message content quality, platform social cues, personal experience, emotions, relational closeness, and verification strategies. Salmona and Kaczynski (2024) explain that qualitative data analysis strategies must be conducted systematically so that the resulting themes are truly grounded in the data. In the final stage, the researcher compiles the main themes into an interpretive narrative explaining how audiences construct perceptions of message credibility on social media. Conclusions are repeatedly verified through re-reading transcripts, cross-referencing with field notes, and member checking results.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Source Credibility as the Initial Basis of Trust

The first theme indicates that the message source is the most frequently used initial indicator by audiences in assessing the credibility of information on social media. Participants tend to trust messages more when they come from official accounts, mainstream media, government institutions, experts, public figures, or people they know personally. Trust in a source is not based solely on formal status but also on social reputation, consistency of posts, and the audience's prior experience with that source. Thus, source credibility on social media is both institutional and relational.

One participant stated:

"If the message is shared by an official account or someone I know is knowledgeable in the field, I trust it more. But if the account is unclear, I'm usually skeptical even if the information is interesting."

(Informant 3, interview)

This statement indicates that audiences use the source's identity as an initial filtering mechanism. In limited digital observations, some participants were also seen checking the account profile, number of followers, posting history, and including links before trusting a message. This finding aligns with Chang et al. (2024), who showed that social media users assess the credibility of information based on a combination of source identity, sender reputation, and the clarity of the message content.

3.2. Message Presentation as a Trust Indicator

The second theme indicates that how a message is presented influences the audience's perception of its credibility. Messages featuring polished language, professional visuals, numerical data, infographics, institutional logos, or expert quotes tend to be perceived as more convincing. Participants believed that systematically structured messages indicate a more rigorous information-compilation process. However, this finding also highlights a risk, as a message that appears professional is not necessarily substantively accurate.

One participant explained:

"Sometimes I believe it because the infographic is good and there are numbers. But after encountering several hoaxes that also looked good, I'm now more cautious."

(Informant 7, interview)

This quote highlights a critical awareness that visual elements can create an impression of credibility while simultaneously being misleading. In the collected data, messages in the form of short videos and infographics attract attention more quickly than long text-based messages. This finding reinforces the perspective of Sathianathan and Mhd Ali (2025), who explain that the public often uses visual presentation, narrative structure, and a professional appearance as initial criteria for assessing the credibility of messages on social media.

3.3. Digital Social Validation in Shaping Perceptions of Credibility

The third theme indicates that a message's credibility is not only shaped by its source and content but also by the accompanying social responses. The number of likes, comments, shares, and other users' responses serve as social cues that participants use to assess whether a message is trustworthy. Some participants stated that they read the comment section before forming an opinion about a specific message. Supportive comments can reinforce trust, while comments containing rebuttals or clarification links can raise doubts.

One participant stated:

"I usually check the comments first. If there are many who refute it or provide clarification links, I don't immediately believe it. But if many confirm it, sometimes I end up feeling it's true."

(Informant 11, interview)

These findings indicate that perceptions of credibility are social and interactive. Audiences are not only confronted with the message itself but also with the digital conversations surrounding it. Within a communal communication culture, others' opinions often serve as a key reference in evaluating information. Lawson et al. (2025) explain that trust in digital information is frequently shaped by social reputation, relational closeness, and perceptions of the person sharing the message.

3.4. Audience Informal Verification Strategies

The fourth theme indicates that audiences employ informal verification strategies, though not always consistently. Participants typically verify information when a message is deemed important, sensitive, controversial, or has a direct impact on their lives. The strategies used include searching for information via search engines, comparing with mainstream media, checking official accounts, reading comments, or asking people considered more knowledgeable about the issue.

One participant said:

"If the information is just trivial, I rarely check it again. But when it comes to health, politics, or government aid, I usually search on Google or check the official account."

(Informant 5, interview)

This quote demonstrates that audience verification is situational. Audiences do not always verify all information but select specific messages deemed risky. This finding aligns with the study by Cai et al. (2025), which shows that the willingness to share information on social media is influenced by perceptions of credibility, personal relevance, and social pressure to engage in digital conversations.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that audience perceptions of message credibility on social media are a complex interpretive process. Audiences evaluate messages not only based on factual accuracy, but also on their trust in the source, the way the message is presented, digital social support, and personal experience. In source credibility theory, messages tend to be more readily accepted when the source is perceived as competent, honest, and having a good reputation. These findings expand upon that theory by demonstrating that, in the context of social media, credibility is not limited to formal institutions but also extends to informal actors such as family, friends, influencers, community leaders, and accounts perceived as consistent.

These findings align with those of Mishra et al. (2024), who found that individual responses to misinformation are influenced by personal motivation, perceptions of the source, and the construction of the message content. However, this study also indicates that emotional closeness to the source can weaken the audience's critical stance. Messages shared by close contacts are often more easily trusted due to a sense of security and relational trust. Thus, message credibility is not merely cognitive but also affective and social.

Findings regarding message packaging reveal that credibility on social media is increasingly influenced by digital aesthetics. Messages that appear professional, concise, visual, and backed by data are more readily perceived as credible. This indicates that audiences use the appearance of a message as a shortcut in evaluating information. Tong (2024) emphasizes that the context of information presentation can influence the audience's perception of a message's trustworthiness. In this study, such context is evident in the use of infographics, short videos, institutional logos, and numerical data as credibility markers.

Nevertheless, these findings also highlight a critical issue. Convincing visuals can increase audience trust in messages that may not necessarily be true. In other words, digital aesthetics can reinforce false credibility. This is important to note because social media is currently heavily dominated by visual and audiovisual content. Therefore, digital literacy is not sufficient if it only teaches how to verify sources; it must also develop visual literacy so that audiences can read, evaluate, and critique the presentation of messages.

Findings regarding digital social validation indicate that comment sections, the number of likes, and the number of shares are part of the credibility-building process. Audiences often use other users' responses as a reference to determine whether a message is trustworthy. These findings align with Sathianathan and Mhd Ali (2025), who state that people navigate information on social media through a combination of assessments of the source, content, and social responses. However, this study adds that social validation does not always lead to accurate judgments. If the majority of comments support a false message, the audience may be inclined to believe it.

In a socio-cultural context, these findings are relevant to societal communication patterns that tend to be communal. Trust is often built through social relationships and group recognition. Therefore, messages circulating within family groups, communities, or friendship networks are more likely to be trusted. This situation indicates that the issue of message credibility cannot be separated from the social structures within which the audience interacts. Consequently, efforts to combat misinformation must consider communication culture, not merely provide factual clarifications.

The informal verification strategies identified in this study indicate that audiences actually possess critical capacity, but its application is not always consistent. Verification is more

frequently conducted when a message is deemed important or risky. Conversely, messages considered trivial are often accepted without scrutiny. Kisa and Kisa (2024) emphasize that social media literacy is crucial in addressing misinformation because audiences need the ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible information. The findings of this study indicate that the audience's digital literacy is situational, depending on the urgency of the message, the relevance of the issue, and the potential consequences.

Theoretically, this study contributes by positioning message credibility as a result of social construction and digital experience. Credibility does not reside solely in the message but is formed through the interaction between the source, content, visuals, platform, social responses, and the audience's experience. This perspective enriches digital communication studies by positioning the audience as active subjects who interpret and negotiate the meaning of information.

Practically, the findings of this study imply the importance of strengthening more contextual digital literacy. Digital literacy programs need to teach audiences to verify sources, understand visual manipulation, critically analyze social responses, and exercise restraint before sharing messages. Public institutions also need to craft messages that are clear, consistent, easily verifiable, and responsive to public inquiries. MacKay et al. (2022) emphasize that effective public communication on social media requires message clarity, source consistency, and the ability to build trust.

This study has limitations due to its qualitative approach and limited number of participants; therefore, the results are not intended for statistical generalization. However, these findings provide deep insights into the process by which audiences assess the credibility of messages on social media. Future research could broaden its focus by comparing age groups, educational levels, geographic regions, or types of social media platforms. Further studies could also examine more specifically the influence of algorithms, influencers, and short-form video formats on perceptions of message credibility.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that audience perceptions of message credibility on social media are formed through a complex, multi-layered evaluation process. Audiences do not merely assess messages based on content or factual accuracy, but also consider the credibility of the source, visual presentation, digital social responses, personal experiences, and informal verification strategies. These findings confirm that the credibility of messages on social media is not merely an objective attribute of the message, but rather a social construction formed through the interaction between the message, the source, the platform, and the audience. Thus, this study contributes to the study of digital communication and media literacy by positioning the audience as active subjects who interpret, negotiate, and make sense of information based on their social experiences and digital culture.

The implications of this research highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy that focuses not only on fact-checking but also on the ability to evaluate sources, read visual cues, understand the influence of comments, and recognize relational biases in information reception. From a practical and policy perspective, public institutions, media outlets, educators, and digital communication managers need to convey messages clearly, transparently, consistently, verifiably, and responsively to public skepticism. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of participants based on age, educational background, geographic region, and type of social media platform, as well as to examine the influence of algorithms, influencers, short-form video formats, and communication within closed groups on perceptions of message credibility.

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