



Affective Trust and Social Media Literacy as Predictors of News Credibility Perception among University Students in China

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ABSTRACT

In the digital era, social media has become a powerful tool in higher education, influencing students' engagement with news and their ability to assess its credibility. This study aims to (1) identify key components of social media literacy, affective trust, and news credibility perception; (2) examine the predictive relationships among these variables; and (3) analyze the mediating role of affective trust between social media literacy and news perception. A mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase involved 375 international university students in China, using a structured questionnaire analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews with 20 students, analyzed thematically via NVivo. Findings revealed that social media literacy significantly predicted affective trust ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$), and both variables had significant positive effects on perceived news credibility ($\beta = 0.65$ and $\beta = 0.59$, respectively; $p < .001$). Affective trust partially mediated the relationship between social media literacy and news credibility (indirect effect = 0.043, 95% CI [.034, .040]). The model showed good fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.582$, TLI = 0.926). Demographic variables—gender ($r = .67^{**}$), age ($r = .67^{**}$), and education level ($r = .57^{**}$)—were positively correlated with trust and news perception. Qualitative findings further emphasized emotional elements such as empathy, consistency, and platform trustworthiness as crucial factors influencing how students assess online news. These results underscore the importance of integrating emotional and cognitive dimensions into media literacy education. Strengthening affective trust and digital competence may enhance students' critical engagement with online information in academic settings.

Keywords: Trust, Social Media Literacy, News Credibility Perception, Students in China

Introduction

In the current digital era, social media has become an essential component of higher education, not only facilitating communication and interactive learning but also enhancing institutional visibility and student engagement. Platforms such as TikTok, WeChat, and Sina Weibo are increasingly integrated into educational activities, ranging from virtual discussions and multimedia-based assignments to influencer-led digital campaigns (Groshek & Cutino, 2020; Li & Liu, 2021). These platforms also support educational marketing, enabling institutions to target prospective students through tailored content, chatbot assistance, and community engagement tools (Zhao et al., 2021).

Despite these benefits, social media is also a major channel for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, especially among youth populations. The rapid circulation of misleading content challenges students' ability to evaluate the credibility of news they encounter online (Islam et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). Studies have shown that students' perception of news credibility is shaped not only by content but also by platform dynamics, source trustworthiness, and the presence of emotionally manipulative elements (Kim et al., 2020; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). Moreover, political and ideological biases often embedded in social media posts can distort public opinion and fuel polarization.

To address these challenges, social media literacy has emerged as a critical competency in higher education. It encompasses the ability to interpret, analyze, and verify digital content, recognize bias, and engage responsibly with online media (Liu, 2020; Islam et al., 2023). Students with low digital literacy are more susceptible to false news and more likely to reside within algorithm-driven “echo chambers” that reinforce existing beliefs (Kim & Dennis, 2019). Affective trust—trust based on emotional perception rather than solely cognitive judgment—plays a mediating role in how individuals interpret news credibility. Factors such as empathy, consistency, and relational communication significantly influence how students evaluate and accept online information (Park et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023). In educational contexts, this emotional trust often determines whether students consider a piece of news credible or dismiss it as unreliable.

This study targets international students in Chinese universities, a demographic highly engaged with global and local social media ecosystems. It aims to: (1) identify the components of social media literacy, affective trust, and news credibility perception; (2) examine the relationships between these variables; and (3) analyze the mediating effect of affective trust between social media literacy and students' perception of news credibility. By investigating these relationships, the research provides theoretical insights into the psychological and digital mechanisms that shape students' interpretations of news. It also offers practical implications for educational policymakers, suggesting the need to strengthen digital literacy programs and build trust-enhancing communication strategies in academic environments.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the key components of affective trust, social media literacy, and news credibility perception among students in Chinese universities.
2. To examine the predictive relationships between social media literacy and affective trust on students' perception of news credibility.
3. To analyze the mediating role of affective trust in the relationship between social media literacy and perceived news credibility among university students.

Literature Review

In the digital information era, the relationship between social media literacy and affective trust has become central to understanding how students evaluate news credibility. Social media literacy, which includes the ability to critically assess sources, interpret algorithmic biases, and manage online engagement, is a foundational competence in combating misinformation (Liu, 2020). However, recent studies argue that technical skill alone is insufficient; the emotional dimension—namely, affective trust—plays an equally important role in shaping news perception (Islam et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). Affective trust is grounded in relational cues such as empathy, consistency, and emotional resonance, and it influences how students filter and accept information, particularly on platforms known for personalized content and emotional appeals.

This dual pathway—cognitive and affective—has been supported by empirical findings. Karlsen and Aalberg (2023) demonstrate that students' trust in news shared via platforms like TikTok and Weibo is shaped not only by source credibility but also by their emotional connection to the content. Likewise, Cheng and Shipman (2020) emphasize that students with higher self-efficacy in media literacy are more resilient to misinformation when trust is mediated by emotional factors. These findings underscore the importance of integrating both skill-based and affective strategies into digital literacy curricula in higher education. Theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky's mediational theory and Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory support this integration by highlighting how emotional engagement expands cognitive processing, leading to deeper, more critical engagement with information. Thus, the interplay of affective trust and social media literacy is not merely additive but synergistic in predicting how university students perceive the credibility of digital news content. (Wang et al., 2021)

In the context of higher education, social media literacy has emerged as a critical skill, enabling students to interpret, evaluate, and engage with digital content. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that media literacy is no longer solely about cognitive evaluation but also about understanding emotional and algorithmic influences on digital behavior (Liu, 2020). Research by Karlsen and Aalberg (2023) demonstrates that students' perception of news credibility is shaped by both source transparency and emotional resonance, especially on platforms such as TikTok and WeChat.

This supports the need for digital literacy programs that combine technical evaluation skills with emotional awareness. In particular, the ability to identify bias, verify content, and understand social media algorithms significantly contributes to critical news evaluation (Cheng & Shipman, 2020).

Affective trust—defined as trust shaped by consistency, empathy, and relational communication—has been found to mediate the impact of digital literacy on news perception (Islam et al., 2023). Students who emotionally relate to digital content are more likely to interpret it as credible, even if the source is unfamiliar. Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory suggests that such emotional responses can enhance cognitive processing, leading to deeper news comprehension. Studies also confirm that female students tend to show higher emotional engagement and trust in educational content on social platforms (Park et al., 2022). These insights highlight the synergistic interaction between digital competence and emotional trust, underscoring the need for integrated media literacy education that fosters critical thinking and ethical engagement in the digital age.

Table 1 Comparison of Theories and Research on News Credibility Perception

Source	Key Concepts	Components / Variables	Theoretical Foundation
Flanagin & Metzger (2020)	News Credibility, Information Processing	Source credibility, message credibility, medium credibility	Dual Processing Theory
Kim et al. (2020)	Emotional Manipulation, Social Media Bias	Emotional framing, platform algorithms, political bias	Framing Theory
Islam et al. (2023)	Affective Trust, Digital Competency	Empathy, consistency, digital skills, critical thinking	Mediational Theory (Vygotsky)
Park et al. (2022)	Emotional Trust, Media Literacy	Consistency, empathy, relational communication	Broaden-and-Build Theory
This Study	Social Media Literacy, Affective Trust, News Credibility	Algorithm awareness, source evaluation, trustworthiness, emotional engagement	Integrated Model: Vygotsky’s Mediational Theory + Digital Trust

This study underscores the integration of key theoretical and empirical components in the development of a coherent conceptual framework, particularly in the formulation of clearly defined hypotheses for the quantitative phase of the research. The comparative synthesis of relevant constructs and prior studies is systematically presented in Table 1.

H1: Social media literacy has a significant positive effect on students' perception of news credibility.

H2: Affective trust has a significant positive effect on students' perception of news credibility.

H3: Social media literacy has a significant positive effect on affective trust.

H4: Affective trust mediates the relationship between social media literacy and students' perception of news credibility.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate how social media literacy and affective trust influence the perception of news credibility among international students in Chinese universities. The quantitative component focuses on identifying the key components of the three core constructs—social media literacy, affective trust, and news credibility perception—and examines the predictive relationships among them. Meanwhile, the qualitative component enriches the understanding of how affective trust mediates the impact of social media literacy on students' evaluations of news credibility.

The target population consists of international students enrolled in both public and private Chinese universities. A probability-based random sampling method was employed to select 375 participants for the survey, ensuring statistical power for structural equation modeling (SEM). In parallel, 20 students were selected purposively for semi-structured interviews to provide qualitative insights. Data collection tools included a structured questionnaire (using a 5-point Likert scale) and an interview guide focused on emotional trust and digital behavior. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure reliability and content validity. The degree of variation in measured values caused by random mistakes during the measuring process is the core idea of dependability. Retest reliability, split reliability, and Cronbach's alpha are three popular reliability indices. (1) Test-retest reliability is also known as the coefficient of stability. It refers to the simple correlation coefficient R of the scale scores of the same set of respondents assessed twice before and after the same scale, indicating the measurement's consistency. In most circumstances, the correlation coefficient must exceed 0.7. The influence of retest interval time on the retest correlation coefficient should be considered. (2) Split-half reliability is defined as the simple correlation coefficient R , which demonstrates the internal consistency of the tested items. (3) Cronbach's alpha is the average correlation coefficient R between the scale's items, indicating the scale's internal consistency or reliability. Cronbach's coefficients greater than 0.7 imply that the scale is very reliable.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and SEM, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis using NVivo. The findings are expected to reveal how emotional trust interacts with digital competencies to shape news perception in online environments. This methodological design allows for both generalizable patterns and in-depth understanding, offering practical insights for educators and policymakers aiming to enhance media literacy and trust-building mechanisms in higher education contexts.

Research Results

From research objective 1: To identify the key components of affective trust, social media literacy, and news credibility perception among students in Chinese universities.

The study identified several core components contributing to students' perceptions of news credibility, with a strong emphasis on affective trust and social media literacy. Key emotional attributes such as consistency, compassion, communication, and empathy emerged as vital in building affective trust among students. These traits fostered open communication, loyalty, and respectful engagement in digital environments. The concept of "charity in communication," including nonjudgmental listening and emotional presence, also played a significant role in students' evaluation of news credibility. Statistical results confirmed that these affective dimensions—particularly compassion ($M = 3.972$) and communication ($M = 3.983$)—were strongly correlated with trust-building behaviors in educational settings. On the digital competency side, social media literacy was reflected in students' ability to understand algorithms, analyze audience engagement, manage digital identities, and utilize platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok for educational purposes. High-frequency users demonstrated better understanding of post timing, content trends, and interaction strategies. Moreover, collaboration through social platforms—such as news discussions and group assignments—enhanced students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and media awareness.

Table 2 Group Comparison of Variable Constructs (3 Decimal Places)

Group	Mean Average	Std. Dev. Average	Highest Mean	Lowest Mean
News Perception (NP)	3.920	1.023	3.990	3.810
Social Media (SM)	3.891	1.104	4.090	3.720
Trust (TR)	4.017	0.851	4.860	3.640

The study also found a positive correlation between education level and news perception dimensions (value, enjoyment, influence), indicating that more educated students tend to interpret news content more positively and critically. Ultimately, the results underscore that both emotional trust and digital literacy competencies are critical factors shaping how students perceive, trust, and engage with news in a university context.

According to the findings related to Research Objective 2: To examine the predictive relationships between social media literacy and affective trust on students' perception of news credibility, the study found that social media literacy and affective trust are significantly influenced by demographic factors such as gender, age, and education level, and these, in turn, affect students' perception of news credibility. Female students showed higher levels of trust and news perception scores, suggesting a gender-based difference in emotional trust and media engagement. The findings reveal that individual factors—namely gender, age, and education level—have significant and positive correlations with students' use of social media, development of trust, and perception of news. Notably, gender showed a strong association with trust ($r = .67$), while age correlated positively with both trust ($r = .67^{**}$) and news influence perception ($r = .62^{**}$). Education level was significantly linked to social media usage in the context of education marketing ($r = .57^{**}$). Furthermore, social media usage, particularly in educational and marketing contexts, was positively associated with students' perception of news credibility and enjoyment. Trust also played a crucial role in shaping news perception, as communication and competency dimensions of trust were strongly related to how students interpreted news content. These results support all three hypotheses and emphasize the interconnected influence of individual characteristics, social media engagement, and trust on students' media perception in Chinese universities.

Based on Research Objective 3, findings revealed that affective trust mediated the relationship between social media literacy and perceived news credibility among university students. The results indicated that students who possessed higher levels of social media literacy—such as the ability to evaluate news sources, understand algorithms, and critically assess content—were more likely to develop emotional trust in online communication. This affective trust, in turn, significantly enhanced their perception of news as credible and valuable. Among the dimensions of trust analyzed, compassion and consistency emerged as the most influential, suggesting that emotionally grounded relationships play a central role in shaping how students interpret and value online news content. The structural validity of the research model was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), with fit indices showing a good model fit (e.g., $\chi^2/df = 2.582$, TLI = 0.926). The trust scale demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity, affirming its reliability as a mediating construct. Statistical analysis showed that affective trust partially mediated the relationship between social media literacy and news credibility, indicating that while digital competencies directly influence students' perceptions, their emotional engagement and trust significantly amplify this effect.

Table 3 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Description	Path/Effect	Result
H1	Individual factors (gender, age, education level) positively affect social media usage, trust, and news perception.	Gender $\rightarrow$ Trust ($r = .67^{**}$), Age $\rightarrow$ Trust ($r = .67^{**}$), Education $\rightarrow$ SM4 ($r = .57^{**}$)	Supported
H2	Social media usage has a significant positive effect on students' news perception.	SM $\rightarrow$ NP ($\beta = .647$, C.R. = 4.650, $p < .001$)	Supported
H3	Trust has a significant positive effect on students' news perception.	TR $\rightarrow$ NP ($\beta = .589$, C.R. = 3.789, $p < .001$)	Supported
H4	Trust mediates the relationship between social media and students' news perception.	SM $\rightarrow$ TR $\rightarrow$ NP (Indirect effect = .043, 95% CI [.034, .040], $p < .001$)	Supported

These findings support international research (e.g., Islam et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022) and confirm that promoting trust-building behaviors—such as empathy, communication, and transparency—can strengthen students' ability to interpret news critically and confidently in social media environments.

Research results of Qualitative Research

The qualitative results identified three interrelated components shaping students' engagement with news on social media. First, affective trust was found to be influenced by emotional factors such as consistency, empathy, and perceived trustworthiness, which students viewed as essential for trusting online news sources. Second, in terms of social media literacy, students displayed differing levels of competence in evaluating source reliability, detecting bias, and understanding platform mechanisms—skills that are fundamental in navigating today's digital news landscape. Lastly, students expressed mixed feelings about news credibility, showing skepticism toward content on entertainment-driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram, while expressing relatively greater trust in more established platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These findings support Objective 1 by clearly identifying the core psychological, technical, and perceptual elements involved in how students process and evaluate online news.

The qualitative findings indicate that students with stronger social media literacy skills—such as the ability to critically assess sources, detect misinformation, and interpret digital content—were more likely to develop affective trust in reliable news sources.

This emotional trust, in turn, positively shaped how students perceived the credibility and value of the news they encountered. Students who trusted sources that demonstrated consistency and transparency reported greater confidence in the accuracy of the information. These patterns suggest a predictive relationship, wherein enhanced digital literacy fosters trust, which subsequently leads to more discerning and credible news perception—clearly supporting the aim of Objective 2.

The qualitative findings confirm that affective trust acts as a key mediator between students' social media literacy and their perception of news credibility. Students who demonstrated higher levels of digital literacy were not only more capable of identifying credible news sources but also more emotionally connected to content they perceived as trustworthy. This emotional engagement strengthened their belief in the credibility and value of the news they consumed. Affective trust demonstrably functions as a mediating mechanism that links digital competence to students' evaluation of news credibility, thereby offering empirical support for the theoretical framework underpinning Research Objective 3.

This table presents a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative research findings, supported by theoretical literature. It highlights how social media usage, trust, media literacy, and educational level influence news perception among university students in China.

Table 4 Summary of Mixed-Methods Findings

Quantitative Research Findings	Qualitative Research Findings	Supporting Theories and Literature
Social media platforms like WeChat, Sina Weibo, and TikTok are highly valued for educational communication and marketing.	Students use media literacy to distinguish credible vs. misleading content, prefer Facebook/Twitter for news credibility.	Zhang et al. (2022) – Trust in Chinese social media brands (WeChat, TikTok, Weibo).
Consistency, trust, empathy, and communication positively impact educational outcomes and news engagement.	Students emphasize importance of trust, consistency, and emotional connection to news.	Cheng & Shipman (2020) – Influence of misinformation and role of trust in social media.
Higher education levels improve students' ability to critically evaluate news.	Students express need for critical thinking skills to process news responsibly.	Lee & Lindsey (2017) – Education level and news perception via social media.
Strong correlation between social media use and educational outcomes; trust plays a key role.	Students view trust as essential to navigating news content online.	Zhang et al. (2022) – Trust, communication, competency affecting

Table 4 Summary of Mixed-Methods Findings

Quantitative Research Findings	Qualitative Research Findings	Supporting Theories and Literature
		educational environments.
Trust significantly influences social media and news perception in Chinese universities.	Students rely more on credible platforms and trust emotional connection with reliable sources.	Hatamleh et al. (2023) – Trust enhances social relationships and moderates social media use.
Trust mediates the relationship between social media usage and news perception.	Trust serves as an emotional and cognitive bridge shaping how students evaluate online news.	Karlsen & Aalberg (2023) – Facebook’s impact on perceived news credibility and trust.

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals that social media usage, trust, media literacy, and education level collectively influence how university students in China perceive news. While platforms like WeChat and TikTok are widely used for communication and marketing, students show greater trust in platforms like Facebook and Twitter due to their perceived credibility. Emotional and cognitive elements—such as consistency, empathy, and transparency—emerge as key components of affective trust, which mediates the relationship between digital literacy and news perception. The convergence of findings highlights the importance of fostering both technical and emotional aspects of media literacy in higher education, aligning with previous research that emphasizes trust’s critical role in navigating today’s complex information environment. The synthesis of the preceding research findings allows for the formulation of a coherent and structured model, as outlined below.

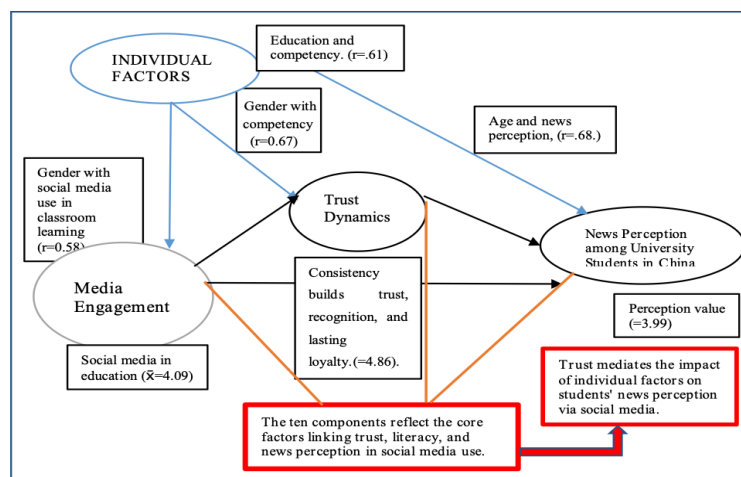


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Key insights into media engagement, trust dynamics, and news perception among university students in China

Research Discussion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive understanding of how social media literacy, affective trust, and news credibility perception interact within the context of Chinese universities. In alignment with Research Objective 1, the study identified key emotional and cognitive components that shape students' engagement with news on social media. Affective trust was strongly influenced by emotional traits such as consistency, empathy, compassion, and trustworthiness, which served as the foundation for students' confidence in online news sources. These findings are consistent with the study by Islam et al. (2023), which emphasizes the role of emotional trust in fostering stronger social connections in digital environments.

Regarding Research Objective 2, the study revealed that social media literacy significantly predicts affective trust and, in turn, influences students' perception of news credibility. Students with high media literacy skills—such as the ability to critically assess sources, recognize bias, and understand digital algorithms—tended to report higher levels of trust in news content. These students were also more capable of distinguishing between credible and misleading information. The findings reinforce the work of Cheng and Shipman (2020), who noted that users' trust in platforms like Facebook is shaped by their self-efficacy in detecting misinformation. Moreover, demographic variables such as gender, age, and education level were found to be significantly correlated with both trust and news perception, supporting the argument that individual factors contribute meaningfully to media engagement outcomes.

In accordance with Research Objective 3, the study confirms that affective trust serves as a mediating variable between social media literacy and perceived news credibility. Students who demonstrated stronger digital competencies were not only better at evaluating news content but also emotionally engaged with trusted sources, which enhanced their perception of the credibility and value of news. This mediating effect aligns with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, where emotional trust broadens cognitive processing and supports deeper news interpretation. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results further validated the structural model, with fit indices such as $TLI = 0.926$ and $\chi^2/df = 2.582$, indicating a good model fit.

Overall, the study emphasizes the interdependence between digital literacy and emotional trust, suggesting that fostering both skill sets is essential for cultivating critical news consumers. These insights are especially relevant in light of the growing influence of social media platforms like TikTok, Weibo, and WeChat in students' daily lives. The implications extend beyond theory into practical domains, where educators and policymakers are urged to design media literacy curricula that not only enhance cognitive skills but also promote emotional awareness and trust-building mechanisms in digital communication. As Karlsen & Aalberg (2023) caution, the erosion of news credibility on platforms like Facebook necessitates urgent educational interventions to equip students with tools for responsible digital citizenship.

Research suggestions

1. The findings confirm that age, gender, trust, and digital competency significantly influence students' news perception. Affective trust, in particular, plays a dual role as both a predictor and a mediator. Thus, educators should incorporate media literacy and critical thinking skills into curricula to help students critically evaluate online information, recognize bias, and differentiate between reliable and misleading sources.

2. A positive relationship was found between social media use and trust-building in educational marketing—especially among women and younger students with higher education levels. Institutions should use targeted social media strategies to enhance credibility, reach broader audiences, and foster meaningful engagement, thereby strengthening news perception and institutional reputation.

3. Students' ability to distinguish credible news is shaped not only by technical media literacy but also by affective trust. Media education should therefore include interpersonal and ethical dimensions—empathy, consistency, and respectful communication—empowering students to become responsible digital citizens who engage thoughtfully with online content.

4. Educational institutions should implement integrated media literacy programs that combine fact-checking skills, tailored instruction based on gender and generational differences, and sustained anti-fake news campaigns. These initiatives can be embedded into the formal curriculum or extracurricular activities to enhance students' critical thinking, promote ethical media use, and build a resilient academic environment against digital misinformation.

Further Research

1. Future studies should examine how evolving technologies—such as AI-driven content, decentralized news platforms, or immersive environments like the metaverse—reshape the dynamics of trust and credibility in digital news consumption, particularly among youth.

2. In addition to mixed methods, future research should adopt participatory action research (PAR) approaches that co-create innovative educational or media tools rooted in indigenous knowledge. Collaborating with local communities will ensure that research outcomes are both practical and sustainable in real-world contexts.

3. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of media literacy education on students' news perception and critical thinking across different social media platforms. By employing mixed-methods and experimental tools such as AI-generated content or chatbots, researchers can evaluate how trust, credibility assessment, and misinformation detection evolve over time—providing evidence to inform digital ethics policies and platform-specific media literacy strategies.

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